International Secretariat of the Free Workers' Union (FAU)
FAU and IWA — looking back to look ahead
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which are upon us, it's no use for us to keep flogging a dead horse out of nostalgia.

A new project in difficult times

If we see the signs right, we're about to live through a stage of populism unparalleled in recent decades. The aim is to divide workers and the oppressed by nationalist and racist rhetoric. Against the project of a world full of new walls running along borders and through our minds, we need a project to tear down all walls and instead connect workers to organize solidarity and mutual aid. We have no more time to cultivate differences — let's instead search for what connects our struggles for better living conditions and for a world without exploitation and oppression.

The Spanish CNT, the USI and the FAU have therefore decided to jump-start a new international project. An initial conference with unions and affiliated groups from eleven regions on two continents took place in the Basque city of Barakaldo. We hope this will be a new beginning for the small but radical part of the international workers' movement. Today, more than ever, we insist that the working classes and their exploiters have nothing in common and any hope in states and political parties is not part of the solution, but part of the problem.

ZSP as a Polish section, which had been founded by former IP members. The ZSP considered the FAU's contacts with this supposed "competitor" a breach of solidarity, although the FAU's primary support still went to the ZSP and their joint actions. One reason why the FAU maintained contact with the IP was that they were involved in labour conflicts with multinational corporations in the German-Polish border region, and the FAU wanted to learn about organizing in large companies. The FAU therefore stated that it needed no permission to make contacts, because it had not accepted this particular IWA resolution.

After a member of the ZSP was elected as IWA Secretary in 2013 and the FAU formalized its links with the SAC, the CNT-F and the IP, the new IWA Secretariat immediately suspended the FAU in September 2014 and cited the "FAU Act" of 2004 as justification. This meant in effect that the FAU was barred from all internal communication in the IWA and lost its right to vote — although it stayed a member section of the IWA until the congress of December 2016 in Warsaw (where it was officially disaffiliated, along with the Spanish CNT and the USI). This meant the IWA Secretariat acted with executive powers, which it should never have had under its federalist principles, which were also thrown overboard in 2004.

The fact that the "majority" of all IWA sections (which represents barely 10% of the members) confirmed the suspension at an extraordinary congress in 2014 in Porto was the last straw for the Spanish CNT and the USI. At its 2015 congress, the Spanish CNT pushed the reboot button and invited all IWA sections to build a new foundation for the International and begin an international project to revive the IWA's founding principles.

Of course, solidarity with the FAU wasn't the only reason for the Spanish CNT's break with the IWA, as is currently claimed. The USI, the CNT and the FAU had to accept that the IWA in its current shape serves only itself, but not as a driver for self-organised class struggle on the basis of revolutionary syndicalism. This might be painful to realize, but in the difficult times

Introduction

In December 2016, the IWA, formerly the International of revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, expelled its sections in Spain (CNT), Italy (USI) and Germany (FAU), thereby losing at least 90% of its members. The decision at the IWA congress in Warsaw came as no surprise. It concludes at least 20 years of agony for an IWA which has gradually abandoned its roots and the principles of its foundation in December 1922.

This text represents the view of the International Secretariat of the Free Workers' Union of Germany (FAU) on the development of the IWA and the fault lines of the past decades. We relied several times on two current posts on the blog "Amor y Rabia," because we couldn't have said it better.

Although we are sad about this break in our history with the IWA, we still hope that new opportunities for a more open project will arise. A project with a new outlook connecting — or even uniting — revolutionary syndicalists, anarcho-syndicalists and unionists worldwide. This might help overcome old divisions and this momentary split.

Formation of the IWA in 1922 and rebirth in the 1970s

The IWA was founded as the International of all revolutionary-syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist unions in Berlin in 1922. In the early years, some of its member organizations had hundreds of thousands of members and very different approaches to unionizing. The organization was held together by mutual aid, a commitment to the "principles of revolutionary syndicalism" and trying to evade the influence of the emerging Leninist parties, who aimed to convert unions across the world into pawns of their party politics.

Still the IWA's influence on the history of the workers' movement remained limited. During the Spanish revolution of 1936, the CNT — the largest IWA section with more than half a million members — did play a decisive role. But the defeat of all revolutionary hopes for a liberated society in Spain also accelerated the decline of the IWA. Many national sections had already been smashed during the rise of fascism throughout Europe and Latin America. The brutal hegemony of Leninism, followed by Stalinism, throughout labor unions worldwide increased the pressure. By the start of World War II, all IWA sections had been destroyed, save the Swedish SAC.

The SAC also faced pressure in the early 1940s, but not from fascism, as in Germany, Italy and Spain. The Swedish government decided to task labor unions with managing pension and unemployment claims. The tacit goal was to force all workers into the toothless social-democratic union and to marginalize the SAC. Fearing this development, the SAC made a U-turn in 1942 and began to participate in managing the government's social security funds. This included the creation of an official apparatus. It was not until 2009 that the SAC decided to re-radicalize most of its strategies.

This was the backdrop for the 7th IWA Congress in 1951, the first one in thirteen years and after WW II. The SAC's strategic turn was heavily criticized for weakening revolutionary syndicalism by making the union an extended arm of government and as a pacification strategy against workers. As a result, the SAC stopped its membership payments to the IWA and opted to leave the International in 1957.

The IWA thereby lost its last member to be an actual union. It began transforming into a federation of mere propaganda groups with no tangible influence on class struggles. The peak of the Cold War was a "march through the desert" for the anarcho-syndicalist movement. It also had to endure a series of strenuous conflicts within the Spanish CNT. The members of this largest IWA section were either exiled or lived under

fore was not covered by the mandate of the attending section representatives. What had begun in 1996 as a vicious, manipulative exception was now developing into a real method.

Should we stay or should we go now?

Facing the developments after the 1996 IWA Congress, the FAU discussed for many years whether it made any sense to remain in this self-isolating International. Several exit motions at FAU congresses failed, such as the first one in 2001 or later ones in 2005 and 2014. Either the majority opinion was that the FAU should not leave on its own, or there was a clear exit majority, which failed to reach the three-quarters majority required for such fundamental decisions, because some syndicates still hoped that the IWA might change its self-destructive course and return to its founding principles.

Final act of the tragedy

In the years following the congress in Manchester (2006), the situation inside the IWA calmed down somewhat: The French section stopped denouncing the FAU for its links to the CNT-F — or was rather busy dealing with its own upcoming split. Criticism of the FAU's casual contact with the SAC became quieter. In Spain, the tables had started to turn, and the part of the CNT which emphasized collective action over ideological debates was about to put the dogmatists in their place. The Spanish CNT and the USI tried limiting the dominance of micro unions within the IWA by proposing a minimum size for unions and voting rights proportional to membership. As expected, the proposal was denied.

The FAU's wish to establish connections to the Polish "Workers' Initiative" (IP) — a spin-off of the local anarchist federation — led to an escalation, as the IWA had already taken in the

the German city of Essen in 2002. The conference aimed to follow in the footsteps of the i99, which had just taken place in San Francisco.

i2002 deliberately avoided sending formal invitations to unions or other organizations or their official representatives. Instead, the invitation went to all members and activists of all revolutionary syndicalist, anarcho-syndicalist and unionist organizations, who were looking to discuss, socialize and make plans for a few days. For the small FAU, this successful conference was also an enormous effort, a milestone in its development and a confirmation of its assumption that beyond all the divisiveness and distrust there is space for ideas, our experiences and common projects.

But not everyone was happy about the conference and the exchange it enabled and promoted, or about the FAU's insistence on freely choosing its forms of action, in line with the principles of revolutionary syndicalism. In the run-up to the i2002, the IWA Secretariat and a majority of its sections had heavily attacked the FAU's presentation of i2002 at an IWA general meeting and countered it with all sorts of verbal abuse.

The "FAU Act" — dictatorial powers for the IWA Secretariat

It came as no surprise that the IWA's most dogmatic members now saw the FAU as their main adversary. At the 2004 IWA Congress in Granada, it was once more the former IWA General Secretary García Rúa who brought a motion by the CNT for an "FAU Act," a unique provision in the history of the IWA. It gave the IWA Secretariat exclusive power to dismiss the FAU with immediate effect, if ever it should find that the FAU continued to disregard the principles and resolutions of the IWA. Almost needless to point out that this motion again was not listed on the previously published agenda, and there-

the constant threat of being persecuted, killed or locked up by Spanish authorities.

In the 1970s finally some hope began to reappear. The student movement, wildcat strikes, the crisis of 1973 and the resurrection of the CNT starting in late 1975 paved the way for several new anarcho-syndicalist organizations, such as the FAU in Germany (1977) or the Direct Action Movement (today called Solidarity Federation), founded in 1979 in Britain. The revived USI, the historic Italian IWA section, held its first congress in 1978. In the late 1980s the CNT-F in France caused a stir with its first collective actions. Small groups of unionized activists from other countries also began joining the IWA. So the 16th IWA Congress in 1979 was the first in a long time to see the admission of several new organizations. Many were still small, but very motivated to join the class struggles in their regions.

The split in the Spanish CNT and the works council question

The first throwback came soon, once again from Spain. Here the CNT had risen like a Phoenix from the ashes after the death of the dictator in 1975. Hundreds of thousands of workers joined within a few months and celebrated their new confidence in July 1977 with a meeting hosting nearly 100,000 at Montjuïc in Barcelona. Parts of the Spanish government began seeing the CNT as the greatest threat to the country's development towards capitalism, so the "Democratic Transitional Government" did everything to keep the CNT out. For example it closed the Moncloa Pact, which promised legally guaranteed participation through works councils plus subsidies to unions. In return the participating unions had to accept severe restrictions, on the right to strike for example.

A bitter conflict broke out within the CNT on whether to join this Moncloa Pact. One side argued that being the only

labor union to factually slide back into illegality would weaken workplace organizing efforts. The other side, with a view on Swedish experiences, warned that joining the Pact would tame the revolutionary union for the benefit of the capitalists.

As a result of this conflict and a number of other factors, such as workers' disillusionment and depoliticization caused by the "democratic transition," the CNT's inability to integrate such masses of new members in such a short period, and attacks by the secret police on the CNT's reputation, membership figures crashed. At the fifth union congress in 1979, the first one after the dictatorship, the delegates represented just 30,000 members, while two years earlier, the CNT hat still counted around 200,000.

At this 5th Congress a majority of CNT syndicates decided not to join the Moncloa Pact and not to participate in works council elections. As a result, several syndicates left the union and founded their own organization in 1979, which today is the CGT.

The conflict in Spain affected the IWA as a whole. More importantly, however, the bitter, sometimes even judicial dispute in Spain made it impossible to openly discuss the underlying problem: How can a revolutionary-syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist strategy on the company level be successful, without being pacified by the works council model or becoming irrelevant in the workplace? Because this question was not openly discussed within the IWA in the early 1980s, many new sections had to tackle the same Sisyphean task which had plagued Spain and Sweden.

Crisis in the CNT-F — good-time problems

It began with the French CNT in the early 1990s. The union had succeeded in founding a large and very rebellious branch within the Paris Metro cleaning company COMATEC.

CNT-F and various other syndicalist organizations outside the IWA. And of course also among those within the IWA, who saw the "enemies" elsewhere.

Starting a witch hunt instead of using the opportunities would not have been possible without the tacit or active support by a majority of IWA sections. In this respect, it became striking that starting from the mid-1990s more and more small groups were given full IWA membership, without actually having the chance to develop any unionizing experience. Many of these very young organizations proved to be very volatile and prone to dogmatism. Combined with the practice that IWA resolutions are passed by one vote per section, regardless of size, groups began to dominate who had a firmer grasp of history books than of the reality of class struggle.

The FAU and i2002

The turn of the millennium saw heavy internal hostilities, not just against the USI, who was heavily attacked by the new Russian and Czech sections (and others) because it dared participate occasionally in the umbrella organization Rappresentanze Sindacali Unitarie (RSU).

Just after the 1996 Congress in Madrid, FAU delegates had warned that the Congress would trigger a long phase of division and sectarianism, instead of building bridges between the various revolutionary syndicalist, anarcho-syndicalist and unionist organizations and currents. In the following years, the FAU tried to oppose all tendencies which threatened to turn the IWA into an exclusive debating circle without contact to social struggles. This included making use of its statutory right to reject IWA congress resolutions, which promoted division instead of understanding.

To offer a positive alternative to the IWA's growing paranoia, the FAU held an International Solidarity Conference (i2002) in

threatened with penalties whenever this seemed necessary or appropriate.

A resolution at the 21st Congress (Granada, 2000) upheld this logic. A procedure euphemized as "contact rule" and passed upon the initiative of the Norwegian NSF now requires that in countries with existing IWA sections, all contacts with other organizations must go exclusively through this IWA section. This logic, which aimed to replace federalism with a sort of confederate feudalism, had dire consequences. Just as in the manipulative expulsion of the CNT-F, the FAU made use of its right to reject this IWA resolution as non-binding.

The sorcerer's apprentice

The poisoned atmosphere and the increasing self-isolation of the IWA were aggravated by the nomination of the new IWA Secretariat in 1996. What would have been needed was a balancing leadership to calm things down and build bridges. Instead, the Spanish CNT nominated its former general secretary, José Luis García Rúa as the IWA General Secretary. Over the three years of his mandate, he managed to pour fuel into the fire at every occasion.

Starting in the late 1990s, transnational movements sprang up, many involving workers, which mobilized against capitalist globalization and its strategies of exploitation without borders. These movements mobilized large and militant demonstrations against the summits of the ruling classes, where we often joined unionists on the street, whose syndicalist organizations did not or no longer belonged to the IWA.

Instead of leveraging the new situation and the great demand for a transnational response to exploitation and domination, the IWA General Secretary started searching for "enemies of the IWA." And he found them everywhere! Not among governments or capitalists, though, but in the IWA, SAC, CGT,

The workers, mostly from North and Sub-Saharan Africa, had very precarious contracts, but promptly organized a first successful strike. To shield its members against the heavy conflicts with management, the CNT-F participated in employee delegate elections in 1991. The same happened at SPES, another cleaning company, where the CNT-F had built a strong branch.

This tactical participation in union elections to protect threatened members was approved retroactively at a CNT-F congress, but still caused heavy tensions, leading up to a split in November 1992. One part founded a union comprising nearly all branches — originally named CNT-Vignoles after its Paris headquarters — which supported occasional tactical participation in works council elections. The much smaller part held its founding congress in May 1993, was named CNT-Bordeaux after the seat of its coordinating committee and strictly opposed any kind of participation in workplace elections. Both organizations claimed to be members of the IWA.

This was the beginning of a sweltering conflict for the IWA because, for one thing, the "French problem" also affected the Spanish CNT. The children and grandchildren of Spanish exiles in France had helped make the CNT-F successful and mostly supported the CNT-Vignoles. However, a dominant sector in Spain fully supported the CNT-Bordeaux, This led to heavy quarrels within the Spanish CNT and finally to the resignation of the Spanish IWA General Secretary, who had tried to negotiate instead of choosing a side.

What made the conflict permanent, however, was how the 20th Congress of the IWA (Madrid, 1996) finally dealt with the situation. The only agenda topic was an "open debate about the situation in France." Therefore, most sections, whether attending with delegates or only by written mandate, had not made any particular resolutions. At the congress, the Spanish CNT and the tiny Norwegian NSF then suddenly made a motion —

under breach of IWA procedures — to expel the CNT-Vignoles and recognize the CNT-Bordeaux as the only French section. The motion was actually voted on, in a very heated atmosphere, and so it happened that the majority of French IWA members were expelled through an unworthy and unprecedented maneuver, supported by only three sections and against the vote of the FAU. The vast majority of sections present abstained, since they could have no mandate for motions they had not been informed of in advance.

This slammed the door on any amicable solution for the French situation. Another result of the Madrid Congress was, that the decades-old option of recognizing multiple sections in one country was struck from the IWA Statutes.

The crisis in Italy

In parallel with the split in France, a conflict also developed in the Italian section, the Unione Sindacale Italiana (USI-AIT). Here too, the challenge was finding a suitable strategy for workplace unionizing. However, the question in Italy was not whether to participate in works councils, but about its relationship to the other Italian grassroots unions, which were mushrooming since the early 1980s. One part of the USI (called USI Rome due to its regional focus) supported dissolving their union into alliances with other grassroots unions. The other part wanted to maintain the USI as an independent union with its own profile. The conflict led to a split in May 1996, where the pro-independence part held a congress without the USI Rome in Prato Carnico.

At first, delegates of both organizations attended the 1996 IWA Congress. After the USI Rome delegation left the general meeting in vocal protest, the Congress declared that this meant the withdrawal of the USI Rome from the IWA, and that the USI-AIT was the legitimate Italian section.

The USI Rome never accepted this decision and calls itself USI-AIT to this day, causing frequent confusion. They have even taken advantage of this situation to torpedo numerous collective actions of the real USI-AIT. Italian legislation requires that strikes be declared to the authorities in advance. The USI Rome has used this to call off strikes started by the real USI-AIT by sending letters to the authorities and has thereby effectively broken these strikes.

Prohibitions and distrust instead of cooperation

As described, the conflicts within the CNT-F and the USI, the two largest sections after the Spanish CNT, peaked just before the IWA congress in 1996 and were decided here. Originally, the 20th IWA Congress intended to fortify the reborn IWA by adding many new members. But since the agenda was manipulated and the Congress was troubled by the unworthy behavior of several delegates and visitors, it actually triggered a fatal internal dynamic in which the Spanish CNT played a crucial role.

The first step had been taken several years earlier — at the 1984 IWA Congress in Madrid, a motion by the Spanish CNT (which had just experienced the worst split in its history) was passed, which prohibited formal relations between IWA sections and the Swedish SAC. The reason for the motion was the SAC's financial support for the CNT splinter group in Spain, the later CGT. The resolution left room for interpretation, which led to future conflicts.

The mentality expressed in this motion soon began to poison the atmosphere throughout the IWA. Seeing splits in its largest sections, the International started acting like a wounded animal and no longer trusted anyone. Trust, the basis for any federalism, was therefore replaced by control. Sections were