

Not the book of revelations: No, anarcho-syndicalism is not a new religion

Solidarity Federation

A viewpoint on personal power, control and responsibility

“You only say that ‘cause you are an anarcho-syndicalist.” I get this or a variant on the theme all the time, and I assume I am not the only one. Apparently everything I say and do is because I am an anarcho-syndicalist, I have an agenda! There is some innate part of me that makes me this entity called “an anarcho-syndicalist”. Either I caught it, like a virus, or some internal alarm clock went off and “hey, I am an anarcho-syndicalist – cool. I wonder what it means?”. If only it was that easy. It would have saved me all those years in the back of beyond (figurative and literally) being a confused and ignorant sod. At least I am not so confused now. To put it a bit more formally, I am an anarcho-syndicalist, a term I choose to apply to myself, because it is a political position that satisfies my desire for a coherent critique of the current society, and also offers ideas on how to change society for the better. These ideas are based both in the here and now and in the longer term. Ideas based in the thoughts and practical experience of numerous people, not just a few isolated great minds.

Admittedly I am now influenced by the reactions and interpretations of other anarcho-syndicalists, we have so much in common already. Given that we share basic understandings such as that we oppose all forms of hierarchical power structures, it is perhaps not surprising I take note of their views. This opposition is to coercive relationships and hierarchical power structures and the rejection of a society organised on systems where people do as others say based on their superior position socially, economically, institutionally, and so on. It is recognising that control and power are not solely or purely based on economic power that is vital. I acknowledge that, in a capitalist society, economic power is the dominant and most prevalent force, either on its own or in conjunction with other forms, and that a critique of economic oppression and control is still essential and central to any critique of the current society. However, due to the dominance of economic oppression, other forms are often neglected or dismissed as barely relevant.

Anarcho-syndicalism involves recognising the essential need to remove all forms of hierarchical power relationship in order to create a better society. The call for the Social General Strike/Social Revolution has to be more than a call for the end of capitalism. It cannot be limited to workers only opting out of the capitalist system and economic control; either because other oppressive

control is not recognised, or because ‘the end of capitalism means the end to all oppression’. Neither should it be the overthrowing of capitalism and then it is time to get on with all those other problems. Those ‘other problems’ need to be addressed (along with economic control) both now, at the time of the social revolution, and no doubt afterwards as well.

It is through awareness of these issues, through confronting them sensibly and with understanding, that we can begin to address them. Local Councils and many employers have anti-discrimination policies, but still inequalities in access to employment and services exist. All too often these policies are part of a quality management process, as long as you tick the box and balance the figures you don’t need to address the issues as to why they are needed in the first place. It’s no good just sticking a bit about equal opportunities in every now and then if the whole atmosphere is uncondusive to change and development. When looking at problems and solutions that may seem to be purely an economic issue (or indeed purely a disability, sexuality, gender or race issue), it is crucial that other inequalities are not ignored. I am not suggesting that at every point somebody says “and what are the issues on this one?”, — that is a sure way to alienate people. What I as an anarcho-syndicalist, (and many others, self-labelled or not) see is that social control cannot be just tick-boxed away by following the right procedure, by noting the correct points.

Social control can only be eliminated by two things; one, those who suffer from it being strong enough to reject it and fight back; two, everyone else to seek to ensure that they don’t contribute to it but do give support and fight along side those who are fighting back. That is to promote the libertarian principles of self-organisation, mutual aid, co-operation and direct action. It is anarcho-syndicalist practice to work with such things in mind: structures have hierarchy removed from them; there is direct democracy, where power is decentralised; mandates and mandated representatives are recallable; there is minimal structure to seek to ensure that small groups and individuals do not gain excessive influence; everyone has a say and an input. Anarcho-syndicalism seeks to organise now in broad terms in the same manner as it would as we enter a libertarian society. With minimum control, with maximum accountability and with the most decentralised of approaches. This puts a lot of pressure on those involved to take responsibility for their actions, to follow the mandates they are given. Then again if you are not prepared to take on the responsibility for things you’ve agreed to do now how can a libertarian society work? It is through practice and thought, ideas and action, that we learn how to move forward, how to create and how to succeed.

These other forms of oppression are much harder to fully acknowledge and address than institutionalised and overt discrimination. The mechanisms of control are socialised to such an extent that each and everyone of us has to address them personally. Whilst seeking to rid society of social forms of oppression, we have to recognise and address the roots within. This is not a call for navel gazing, or for people to wander off and admire their aura in place of activity. Anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism, just as they do not suddenly infect one, also do not wash all our sins away once we’ve paid our first dues. It is not a new religion. Social control relies on people’s tacit support. It is this recognition that it is not really enough just addressing the big picture, fighting the big ogres of government and multinationals, whilst ignoring the day to day detail. It is the difference between waiting for the day of revelations (sorry — the revolution) when the fully conscious working class en masse will magically put everything right; and the willingness to work day to day building (for) the future (socially and economically) now.

We must simultaneously look to ourselves and seek to raise awareness that people can and should work together to take control of their own lives. Recognising times when we use our own positions to manipulate, where our own prejudices are not challenged. People can and should be able to live without prejudice and oppression. Power does not only lie in the hands of the bosses and the politicians and police who they pay to defend them. It also lies with the experts, such as doctors who ignore the wishes of their patient and bully and cajole them. It lies with the partner who abuses mentally and physically the one they claim to love. It lies with adults who undermine and humiliate children, and perpetuate the cycle of social control. Social control relies on us all knowing our place. Standing out can be scary, unless everyone stands out, then it is unifying and empowering. It is much easier to have a society of scared isolated individuals all putting each other down than to have a society of strong unified individuals which have to be put down by force. It is always time to undermine our own role in social control. It is continually necessary to remind people that coercive relationships do not rely on money, and that yes anarchists do behave in coercive ways. I am not calling for anarcho-saints (heaven forbid). It is about the way we behave in meetings and in discussions, in our personal relations, with friends and colleagues. Anarcho-syndicalism is not about being 'Nice', it is about having respect for other people and ourselves.

Perhaps just for an example I can use the term 'free love'. It isn't lots of people in beads and kaftans running around trying to get their notches into triple figures. Free love has nothing to do with "its my/your fault for not addressing my/your own insecurities and jealousies". Free love is where people are free to find their own sexuality (without coercing anyone else with force, money or guilt) and being free to be honest without the fear of persecution, but also being relied upon to respect others' wishes and desires. People are monogamous, promiscuous, celibate or whatever as they wish.

So the term free society does not just refer to being free from financial control. It is also a society where everyone is free to find their own identity, free to be honest and free from fear of persecution, but also being relied upon to respect others' wishes and desires (again). A free society is where people co-operate and practice mutual aid to achieve these ends. (I note here that 'free' is a relative term, I use it to denote more 'with the minimum of coercion' or something like that.)

Why I am an anarcho-syndicalist is that I see it as the best method to get to such a society. Not by miracles, not overnight, but starting now, starting at work, in the community and in our day to day relationships. I've had no sudden revelation, I've never been to Syria, I've never been further south than Madrid (the anarcho-syndicalist mecca? — ed) and even then I went by train. Being an anarcho-syndicalist is not a medical condition, even if the name is long enough to be one. It is not a hereditary thing. Not until they find the gene it isn't.

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