

Syndicalism: Its Strengths & Weaknesses

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SYNDICALISM is the largest organised tendency in the libertarian movement today. It has built large workers' unions, led major struggles, been the popular expression of anarchism in many countries. To understand the anarchist-communist view of syndicalism we have to look at its roots, its core beliefs and its record.

In the 1860s the modern socialist movement was beginning to take shape. The International Working Mens' Association, better known as the First International, was becoming a pole of attraction for militant workers. As the movement grew, points of agreement and of disagreement between the Marxists and the Anarchists about what socialism meant and how to achieve it were becoming clear. This led to the Marxists using less than democratic means to expel the anarchists.

In 1871 the Paris Commune came into being when the workers of Paris seized their city. When they were finally defeated seven thousand Communards were dead or about to be executed. A reign of terror against the Left swept Europe. The anarchists were driven underground in country after country. This did not auger well for a rapid growth of the movement. In response to the terror of the bosses, their shooting down of strikers and protesting peasants and their suppression of the anarchist movement a minority launched an armed campaign, known as *propaganda by deed*, and killed several kings, queens, aristocrats and senior politicians.

Though very understandable, this drove a further wedge between the bulk of the working class and the movement. Clandestine work became the norm in many countries. Mass work became increasingly difficult. The image of the madman with a bomb under his arm was born. The movement was making no significant gains.

By the turn of the century many anarchists were convinced that a new approach was needed. They called for a return to open and public militant activity among workers. The strategy they developed was syndicalism.

THE BASIC IDEA

Its basic ideas revolve around organising all workers into the *one big union*, keeping control in the hands of the rank & file, and opposing all attempts to create a bureaucracy of unaccountable full-time officials. Unlike other unions their belief is that the union can be used not only to win reforms from the bosses but also to overthrow the capitalist system. They hold that most workers are not revolutionaries because the structure of their unions is such that it takes the initiative away from the rank & file. Their alternative is to organise all workers into the *one big union* in preparation for a revolutionary general strike.

They established their own international organisation with the founding of the International Workers Association in Berlin in 1922. Present at that conference were the Argentine Workers Regional Organisation FORA representing 200,000 members, the Industrial Workers of the World in Chile representing 20,000, the Union for Syndicalist Propaganda in Denmark with 600, the Free Workers Union of Germany FAUD with 120,000, National Workers Secretariat of the Netherlands representing 22,500, the Italian Syndicalist Union with 500,000, the General Confederation of Workers in Portugal with 150,000, the Swedish Workers Central Organisation SAC with 32,000, the Committee for the Defence of Revolutionary Syndicalism in France [a breakaway from the CGT] with 100,000, the Federation du Battiment from Paris representing 32,000. The Spanish CNT was unable to send delegates due to the fierce class struggle being waged in their country under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. They did, however, join the following year.

During the 1920s the IWA expanded. More unions and propaganda groups entered into dialogue with the IWA secretariat. They were from Mexico, Uruguay, Bulgaria, Poland, Japan, Australia, South Africa, Paraguay and North Africa.

Syndicalist unions outside the IWA also existed in many countries such as the Brazilian Workers Regional Organisation and the Industrial Workers of the World in the USA (which soon spread to Canada, Sweden, Australia, South Africa, and Britain¹). The influence of its methods, if not necessarily of its anarchist origins, was even seen in Ireland where the ITGWU throughout its existence, until it merged into SIPTU a few years ago, carried the letters OBU on its badge. This OBU refers to the IWW slogan of One Big Union. And let us not forget that both Connolly and Larkin were influenced by the IWW. Connolly was an organiser for their building workers union in New York state and Larkin delivered the oration at Joe Hill's funeral.

DECLINE

The success of the Bolsheviks did great harm to the workers movement outside Russia. Many were impressed by what was happening in Russia, Communist Parties sprang up almost everywhere. The Bolshevik model appeared successful. Many sought to copy it. This was before the reality of the Soviet dictatorship became widely known.

Nevertheless the syndicalist movement still held on to most of its support. The real danger was the rise of fascism. With the rule of Mussolini, the Italian USI, the largest syndicalist union in the world, was driven underground and then out of existence. The German FAUD, Portuguese CGT, Dutch NSV, French CDSR and many more in Eastern Europe and Latin America were not able to survive the fascism and military dictatorships of the 1930s and 40s.²

It was at the same time that the Spanish revolution unfolded, which was to represent both the highest and lowest points of syndicalism³. More about this below.

The Polish syndicalist union with 130,000 workers, the ZZZ, was on the verge of applying for membership of the IWA when it was crushed by the Nazi invasion. But, as with syndicalists elsewhere, they did not go down without a fight. The Polish ZZZ along with the Polish Syndicalist Association took up arms against the nazis and in 1944 even managed to publish a paper called Syndicalista. In 1938, despite their country being under the Salazar dictatorship since the 1920s, the Portuguese CGT could still claim 50,000 members in their now completely illegal and underground union. In Germany, trials for high treason were carried out against militants of the FAUD. There were mass trials of members, many of whom didn't survive the concentration camps.

One point worthy of mention about the Spanish CNT shows the hypocrisy of the British government which called itself anti-fascist. Not only were Italian anti-fascist exiles interned on the Isle of Man but CNT members whose underground movement assisted British airmen, Jews and anti-fascists to escape through Spain to Britain were repaid at the end of the war when their names were handed over to Franco's secret police.

¹ It was known as the Industrial Workers of Great Britain.

² Some, like the Italian USI and German FAU, have been refounded but exist only as relatively small propaganda groups. Sometimes they are able to take on union functions in particular localities.

³ A good introduction to this period is Eddie Conlon's *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism in Action*.

THE RUMP

By the end of WWII, the European syndicalist movement and the IWA was almost destroyed. The CNT was now an exile organisation. In 1951 the IWA held their first post-war congress in Toulouse. This time they were a much smaller organisation than the great movement which existed at their first congress. Nevertheless they still represented something. Delegates attended, though mostly representing very small organisations, from Cuba, Argentina, Spain, Sweden, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, Norway, Britain, Bulgaria and Portugal. A message of support was received from Uruguay.

Things were not looking good for the re-emergence of anarcho-syndicalism. In Eastern Europe the Stalinists allowed no free discussion, strikes or free trade unions. Certainly not anarchist ones! In the West massive subsidies from the US and the Catholic church went to tame unions controlled by Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. Meanwhile Russia did the same for their allies who controlled the French CGT, the Italian CGIL and others. The IWA, in its weakened state couldn't compete for influence. In the late 1950s the Swedish SAC withdrew from the IWA. There was now not a single functioning union in its ranks.

It staggered on as a collection of small propaganda groups and exile organisations like the Spanish and Bulgarian CNTs. Some wondered would it live much longer. But suddenly in 1977 Franco died and his regime fell. The CNT blossomed. Within a matter of months its membership leaped from a few hundred activists to 150,000. [Problems later developed within the CNT and a split occurred which left us with two unions whose combined membership today probably does not reach 30,000, though this is still a significant number.] The growth of the CNT put syndicalism back on the anarchist agenda. The IWA now claims organisations which function at least partly as unions (in Italy, France and Spain) and propaganda groups in about another dozen countries.

Outside the IWA are syndicalist unions and organisations like the 16,000 strong SAC in Sweden, the OVB in the Netherlands, the Spanish CGT, the Solidarity-Unity-Democracy⁴ union in the French post office, the CRT in Switzerland, and others. Some are less anarchist and more reformist than others. Say what we will about them we must recognise that syndicalism is today the largest organised current in the international anarchist movement. This means it is especially important to understand them.

SOME PROBLEMS

Anarchist-Communists do have criticisms of their politics, or more accurately lack of politics. Judging from their own statements, methods and propaganda the syndicalists see the biggest problem in the structure of the existing unions rather than in the ideas that tie workers to authoritarian, capitalist views of the world.

Syndicalists do not create revolutionary political organisations. They want to create industrial unions. Their strategy is apolitical, in the sense that they argue that all that's essential to make the revolution is for workers to seize the factories and the land. After that it believes that the state and all the other institutions of the ruling class will come toppling down. They do not accept that

⁴ In workplace elections in Spring 1994 their vote in the post office rose from 4% to 18%, and in Telecom from 2.5% to 7.5%.

the working class must take political power. For them all power has to be immediately abolished on day one of the revolution.

Because the syndicalist organisation is the union, it organises all workers regardless of their politics. Historically many workers have joined, not because they were anarchists, but because the syndicalist union was the most militant and got the best results. Because of this tendencies always appeared that were reformist. This raises the question of the conflict between being a trade union or a revolutionary anarchist organisation.

Syndicalists are quite correct to emphasise the centrality of organising workers in the workplace. Critics who reject syndicalism on the grounds that it cannot organise those outside the workplace are wrong. Taking the example of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain it is clear that they could and did organise throughout the entire working class as was evidenced by the Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth, the 'Mujeras Libres' (Free Women), and the neighbourhood organisations.

SPAIN

The weakness of syndicalism is rooted in its view of why workers are tied to capitalism, and its view of what is necessary to make the revolution. Spain in 1936/7 represented the highest point in anarcho-syndicalist organisation and achievement. Because of their a-politicism they were unable to develop a programme for workers' power, to wage a political battle against other currents in the workers' movement (such as reformism and Stalinism). Indeed syndicalists seem to ignore other ideas more often than combating them. In Spain they were unable to give a lead to the entire class by fighting for complete workers' power.

Instead they got sucked into support for the Popular Front government, which in turn led to their silence and complicity when the Republican state moved against the collectives and militias. The minority in the CNT, organised around the Friends of Durruti, was expelled when they issued a proclamation calling for the workers to take absolute power (ie that they should refuse to share power with the bosses or the authoritarian parties).

The CNT believed that when the workers took over the means of production and distribution this would lead to *"the liquidation of the bourgeois state which would die of asphyxiation."* History teaches us a different lesson. In a situation of dual power it is very necessary to smash the state. No ruling class ever leaves the stage of history voluntarily.

In contrast to this the Friends of Durruti were clear that, and this is a quote from their programme 'Towards a Fresh Revolution', *"to beat Franco we need to crush the bourgeoisie and its Stalinist and Socialist allies. The capitalist state must be destroyed totally and there must be installed workers' power depending on rank & file committees. Apolitical anarchism has failed."* The political confusion of the CNT leadership was such that they attacked the idea of the workers siezing power as *"evil"* and leading to an *"anarchist dictatorship."*

The syndicalist movement, organised in the International Workers Association and outside it, still refuses to admit the CNT was wrong to *postpone* the revolution and enter the government. They attempt to explain away this whole episode as being due to *"exceptional circumstances"* that *"will not occur again."* Because they refuse to admit that a mistake of historic proportions was made, there is no reason to suppose that they would not repeat it (should they get a chance).

Despite our criticisms we should recognise that the syndicalist unions, where they still exist, are far more progressive than any other union. Not only do they create democratic unions and create an atmosphere where anarchist ideas are listened to with respect but they also organise and fight in a way that breaks down the divisions into leaders and led, doers and watchers. On its own this is very good but not good enough. The missing element is an organisation winning support for anarchist ideas and anarchist methods both within revolutionary unions and everywhere else workers are brought together. That is the task of the anarchist-communists.

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