

Review: Anarcho-Syndicalism – Theory and Practice

Review of Rudolf Rocker's classic

Anarcho

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Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice, Rudolf Rocker, AK Press, ISBN: 1902593928

I once gave a copy of this book to a friend to read on his journey home. He was so engrossed by it he missed his stop and had to spend an hour in a small station waiting for the next train to North Wales. Fortunately, he had a good book to read!

And what a book it is. This little classic is essential reading for any anarchist or someone interesting in anarchism or anarcho-syndicalism. Written in 1937, at the behest of Emma Goldman, it was an attempt to explain the ideas inspiring the Spanish social revolution and resistance to Franco. In this he succeeded – and little wonder. Rocker was no academic. He was a long standing anarchist militant in the labour movement in both the UK and Germany. A German gentile, he played a leading role in the Jewish labour movement in the East End of London before the First World War. After that conflict ended, he returned to Germany and played a key role in the anarcho-syndicalist movement which blossomed there during the revolutionary events of that time. He took part in founding the syndicalist International Workers Association and wrote its aims and principles, a succinct re-statement of syndicalist ideas (it is a shame that these were not included in this edition – a *“Rudolf Rocker Reader”* is well overdue!). As such, his book was informed by experience and practice.

Rocker's work has five chapters. The first chapter covers the basic ideas and development of anarchism, stressing the openness and flexibility of anarchist theory in its pursuit of a society fit for humans. As such, he shows its opposition to both capitalism and the state in the name of individual liberty. As Rocker puts it: *“For the anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capacities, and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account.”* He covers all the famous anarchist thinkers, including Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin.

Rocker then moves on to a history of the international workers' movement, starting with creation of capitalism and the modern working class and its struggles and organisation. He then moves on to forerunners of syndicalism, which includes the early British trade union movement and in those sections of the First International influenced by Bakunin. At the core of this discussion is the idea workers' councils as both a means of fighting capitalism and as the framework

of the new society which will replace it. Rocker then summarises the strategies, organisations and tactics anarcho-syndicalism embraced at the time (such as direct action, sabotage and the general strike). Lastly, he discusses the history fate of syndicalist movements across the world, starting with revolutionary syndicalism in France (where the term “syndicalism” is derived – it is simply the French for “trade unionism”).

Along the way Rocker’s short introduction destroys most of the common misconceptions about anarchism and syndicalism. His description of how a syndicalist union is run refutes claims that anarchism rejects organisation. His account of the revolution in Catalonia destroys the claim that anarchism cannot be applied to a “complex” (i.e. industrial) society. His account of anarchist ideas and the roots of anarcho-syndicalism in the ideas and practice of the libertarian wing of the First International around Bakunin effectively refutes any claim that anarchism and syndicalism are fundamentally different ideas or movements. His discussion of how unions can use direct action to win political struggles will enlighten any Marxist who asserts that anarcho-syndicalism rejects “politics” or “political struggles.”

Rocker also effectively refutes mainstream Marxism. His account of the development of the labour movement and the disastrous effects of parliamentarianism and centralism on it should be mandatory reading for any would-be radical. If a radical urges you to vote in the next election, show them his devastating summation of the results of socialists doing so in the past (the fate of the German Greens in the 1980s would not have surprised Rocker in the slightest). As far as state socialism goes, Rocker uses the example of Leninism to show the impossibility of using centralised state power to achieve socialism. As he continually stresses, only the direct participation of the working classes in constructing socialism can make it work. Socialism, as he put it, must be free or it will not be. Rocker contrasts the essential libertarian nature of genuine workers’ councils to the reality of Lenin’s and Stalin’s Russia.

As this edition is identical to the 1989 Pluto Press one, it also contains Rocker’s appendix on the state of the syndicalist movement after the Second World War (this was added for a new edition in 1947). It also has an excellent preface by Noam Chomsky (who is a big fan of Rocker’s work) and an informative introduction by Nicholas Walter to the book and its history.

The book is not perfect, of course. Some may find it dated. Most obviously, there is no discussion of ecology, sexism or racism. His concentration on the labour movement while understandable could lead the casual reader to think that work was the main, if not only, preoccupation of anarcho-syndicalism. Similarly, while he is right to stress that self-managed workers organisations will be the building block of a libertarian socialist economy, he fails to stress that the nature and structure of both work and industry will be transformed after a revolution. Perhaps he simply took it for granted that workers would be unlikely to simply do things the same way as capitalists used to and that workplaces which serve no purpose in a free society or where unhealthy or dangerous would be closed down or put to other, better, uses under workers’ self-management? Either way, it is an absence that should not be made today.

Sadly, Rocker fails to discuss the necessity of community organisations to complement workplace ones (a failure which modern day anarcho-syndicalists rarely make). Another absence is any attempt to address the tendency of syndicalist unions to adjust themselves to the system they are fighting and becomes reformist. Given that numerous revolutionary unions had done this (most famously, the French CGT) it seems strange that Rocker fails to discuss it. Any account of anarcho-syndicalism really needs to address this issue if it is to convince other revolutionary anarchists of its merits. After all, the sort of unions he discusses were hardly the dominant type

when he was alive and are few and far between these days. The current trade unions bear little resemblance to the syndicalist unions he outlines which suggests that the labour movement is not inherently revolutionary and, as a consequence, there is a need for libertarians to organise as libertarians to influence it.

Similarly, while he is rightly proud of the revolutionary accomplishments of the CNT and FAI during the Spanish Civil War, he fails to account for their disastrous decision to collaborate with the Republican state until Franco was defeated (nor what it means for anarcho-syndicalism and what lessons we should draw from it). Such a silence, while perhaps understandable at the time as an unwillingness to criticise comrades in difficult circumstances, would need to be addressed by any new primer on anarcho-syndicalism.

Saying all that should not detract from the importance of this work. The ideas and tactics Rocker advocates in his book are still fresh and valid today – and not only in the labour movement. Direct action, for example, has been successfully applied by numerous groups of people in many different locations, as has the idea of self-managed organisations run from the bottom-up. As such, concentrate on the ideas being discussed rather than the specific context the anarcho-syndicalists of Rocker's time applied them in. That time, as Rocker would be the first to point out, has past.

To conclude, if you are interested in the labour movement, socialism or anarchism you will not regret picking up this book. It presents a concise history of a socialism based on the constructive self-activity and self-organisation of working class people, a libertarian socialism that is run from below by its participants. Rocker presents anarchist thought in a clear, compassionate, and contagious manner. It is enlightening and inspiring and should be considered essential reading for anyone seeking an alternative to capitalism which is based on liberty, equality and solidarity.

In a nutshell, Rudolf Rocks!

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