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Trade Unions and Revolution

A Position Paper of the Zabalaza Anarchist
Communist Front

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2000

Retrieved on 2nd April 2021 from www.struggle.ws and
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2. We are opposed to the existence of a union bureaucracy and reformist ideas that hamper the ability of the unions to defend and advance the conditions of their membership
3. We call for the withdrawal of the unions from participation in schemes for “social partnership” between the unions, the bosses and the State as these structures hide the rule of the bosses and undermine the unions
4. We call on the unions to become wholly independent of all parliamentary parties
5. The unions have the potential to overthrow capitalism and to lay the basis for an Anarchist society, but in order for this to take place we must secure maximum union democracy, and the leadership of the Anarchist idea amongst the rank-and-file of the existing unions
6. The precondition for revolutionising the unions is the construction of an Anarchist organisation with ideological and tactical unity that will fight to popularise the Anarchist idea
7. We do not restrict our activities to the unions but organise throughout the entire working class. We do not just focus on those workers already in unions, but strive to organise the entire working class into one big union.

NOTES

“It is necessary to never forget that if trade unionism does not find in libertarian communist theory a support in opportune times it will turn, whether we like it or not, to the ideology of a political statist party”.

Nestor Makhno, Peter Archinov, Ida Mett et al,
The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists

“...according to the Syndicalist view, the trade union, the syndicate, is the unified organisation of labour and has for its purpose the defence of the interests of the producers in the existing society and the preparing for and the practical carrying out of the reconstruction of social life after the pattern of [libertarian] Socialism. It has, therefore, a double purpose...”

Rudolph Rocker,
Anarcho-syndicalism

THE WORKPLACE STRUGGLE

The working class creates all wealth under capitalism.¹

Because of our position in society only we, as the producers of all wealth, are capable of destroying the class system and other forms of oppression and creating a free, stateless, classless society based on direct democracy, and distribution according to need.²

¹ see, among others, Makhno, Archinov et al, [1926], *The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists*, reprinted by Workers Solidarity Movement. Ireland. p14,16; R. Rocker, (1948), “Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism”; A. Berkman, (1989), *What is Communist Anarchism ?* Phoenix Press. London. pp3,5–6,72–4; A. Berkman, (1964), *ABC of Anarchism*. Freedom Press. London. p50.

² 2. “Any class may be revolutionary in its day and time; only a productive class may be libertarian in nature, because it does not need to exploit” (A. Meltzer, *Anarchism: Arguments For And Against*, pp14-15).

As the producers of wealth, only we, through workplace action are a force capable of powerful mass actions against the present set-up even in the pre-revolutionary period.³

So why don't we use our numbers and power and recreate society in our own interests? The main reason is that we are told that we are not capable of doing so, by the schools, media etc. These teach us that the workers can only follow orders and that this is the natural order of things.

However, this pro-capitalist propaganda that teaches us to feel powerless and that hides the truth of class rule is challenged by the experiences of the masses when we struggle to force the capitalist system to meet our needs for education, housing, jobs, wages, freedom from racism etc. In particular, workplace action, the use of our collective power that runs the factories, offices, mines, schools etc. to stop them gives us a glimpse of our potential power.⁴

THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Trade unions are one of the most important mass movements of the working class and one of the main focuses of our activity as Anarchists. We take this position for a number of reasons.

The trade unions are organisations based on the specific class interests of the workers. There is no other way to explain the formation of trade union movements except by the need of workers to organise on class lines to defend and advance their own particular interests in opposition to those of the bosses.⁵ No amount of bu-

³ see A. Berkman, (1989), *What is Communist Anarchism?* Phoenix Press. London. chapter 12; R. Rocker, (1948), *Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism*.

⁴ Rocker makes a similar point when he says: "Only as a producer and creator of social wealth does the worker become aware of his strength" (1948: 371).

⁵ Berkman, (1989), pp63-4.

We are for direct elections to all committees, conference delegations and national offices, subject to mandating and recall.

All strikes should automatically be made official so long as they do not contradict union principles. There must be support for all disputes, official or unofficial, in pursuit of higher wages, better conditions, union rights, or any other issue in the interest of the working class.

We call for the publication of the minutes of all union meetings.

Where revolutionaries can gain enough support to win election to a national office in a large union, or even a small one, they should not use this support just to win an election. Instead they should use it to fundamentally change the structure of the union in such a way that will return power to the rank and file and turn the officers into administrators and resource persons rather than decision makers.

– Solidarity Work by Anarchists

Because we recognise the need for solidarity, the Anarchist organisation will, within the bounds of its resources, offer aid to workers involved in a dispute. But we will do this solidarity work WITH the workers, not FOR them. We are not aiming to "provide a service" but to encourage self-activity among the strikers. We push them to pressure the union for material help, and only when this fails will we provide leaflets etc. We will help with fundraising, collections, publicity and contacts for solidarity actions.

Our immediate aim in any strike is to win a victory. But this is not our only aim. We are also Anarchist militants and we argue our ideas. We aim to spread our ideas and to win members for our organisation.

TO SUM UP

1. We defend, support and work within, the unions. We are for a revolutionary class struggle approach to unionism.

We are for equal rights and benefits for all members of the unions, regardless of sex, age, or whether they are full- time or part- time workers.

We are for six months paid maternity/ paternity leave. We are opposed to the use of maternity leave by the bosses to disentitle workers to pay- related benefits.

In order to enable women to attend union meetings, we call for the unions to provide childcare provision at their own expense.

To defend women's right to work outside the home we call for childcare provision at the expense of the bosses, and under the supervision of the workers using it.

We support "flexitime" arrangements where workers with children desire it.

We aim to commit the unions to support a women's right to control her own fertility, including the right to access to contraception and abortion, and to give moral and material support to campaigns seeking to achieve this aim.

We call on the unions to support the rights of gay and lesbian people to live their personal lives as they see fit, free from discrimination or harassment by workers or the employers.

– Union Democracy

We fight to change the role of the full-time officials, and not just the people sitting in these posts. Their decision-making powers have to be removed and returned to the rank-and-file. The number of full-time officials should be reduced to the absolute minimum possible. The officials should earn no more than an ordinary salary and should, after a fixed period, step down and return to ordinary work. All positions need to be made elected and genuinely accountable to (and mandated by) the rank-and-file membership. Our ultimate aim is the restructuring of the unions on revolutionary (Syndicalist) lines.

We are for regular branch and workplace meetings, in working hours where this is possible.

reaucracy, reformism or backwardness in the unions can remove this essential fact.

Because of this fundamental feature of the trade union movement, it forms an organisational stronghold of a specific class-consciousness that to some extent cuts across race, gender, religion etc.

The trade unions are based at the point of production and hence wield the strongest weapon of the workers under capitalism: the withdrawal of their labour. They therefore allow the workers to injure the bosses and they give the workers an idea of their potential power and ability to run their own lives.

We stand in solidarity with the mass organisations and progressive struggles of the working class. We must take up Anarchist arguments throughout the working class and its structures. We oppose all oppression; we stand in solidarity with our class. We believe that mass struggle is the best strategy for social change, gives the class confidence in its own abilities, and provides the best forum to win Anarchist ideas. Therefore we engage in grassroots union work.

We reject the argument that all unions inevitably end up "selling out" the working class.

Workers would not support the unions if the unions did not to some extent defend and advance their class interests. Even the most bureaucratic and deformed union must ultimately respond to the needs of the rank-and-file membership if it is to retain their support.

Not all reformist demands can be won in the framework of capitalism. Therefore even the most bureaucratic union will in some circumstances clash with the imperatives of capital and the State. In other words the unions can never be totally "integrated" into capitalism.

All unions depend in the final analysis on their ability to mobilise their members in direct action against the bosses. It is the threat of a withdrawal of labour power that gets the bosses to recognise the

demands of the workers and not some sort of devious plot to co-opt the working class. Therefore we say that unions are mass combat organisations of the working class.

The bosses do not set up or support the unions as a means of fooling the workers. The bosses will attack and if possible destroy even the most moderate unions if they have the opportunity (e.g. the recent attacks on Trades Union Congress (TUC) in Britain; on AFL-CIO in the USA).⁶ It is nonsense to say that capitalism “needs” the unions for stability, social peace or somesuch. The bosses will only grant some sort of recognition to unions if there is mass struggle. The bosses cannot always give in to workers demands to “buy off” struggle.

The existence of a union bureaucracy is not inevitable. The Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist union the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) had more than a million members in the early 1930s but at no point had more than two paid officials. Union work was done as much as possible by activists during work hours, and leadership posts were regularly rotated.⁷

It is not true that a bureaucracy always develops in the unions because the bosses will only deal with “respectable” leaders who can be relied on to get the membership to accept and abide by the deals negotiated after mass actions. The bosses negotiate because

⁶ see H. Pelling, (1992), *A History of British Trade Unionism*. Penguin Books. chapter 15, for a discussion of the bosses assault on the British unions in the 1980s; see M. Davis, (1986), *Prisoners Of The American Dream: Politics And Economy In The History Of The US Working Class*. Verso. London for the American unions.

⁷ M. Breitbart, (1979), “Spanish Anarchism : an introductory essay,” in *Antipode: A Radical Journal Of Geography*. 10 (3) & 11 (1). p65. This is a good article but is very seriously marred by the author’s totally inaccurate assumption that “Spain is the only country in the twentieth century where Anarchist-Communism and Anarcho-Syndicalism were adopted extensively as revolutionary theories and practices” (p60). Anarchism has been the dominant influence on the revolutionary left and union movements of many countries in the twentieth century e.g. Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Argentine, France, Mexico, Uruguay, China. It formed a powerful Left and union current in others e.g. Italy, Britain, the United States, Japan, Germany, Bulgaria, Australia.

maximum possible solidarity action throughout the union movement. All closures should be met with the demand for continued employment with no reduction in pay, or worsening of conditions and union rights. We are not concerned whether this is done by nationalisation or by bringing in a new owner.

We point out that nationalisation is not a cure-all, and that State ownership does not bring us one step nearer to socialism (given the nature of the State, and our conception of grassroots socialism from below). We are, however, totally opposed to the job losses associated with the privatisation and “restructuring” of State assets.

We are opposed to all productivity deals that bring job losses.

We are opposed to forced early retirement, attacks on women’s right to work outside the home, and the “natural wastage” of jobs.

We are for full membership rights in the unions for the unemployed, and for unemployed sections within branches. Where possible, organisations for the unemployed should be set up. These should keep in close contact with those still in work by helping on picket lines and building links with unions. The unemployed organisations should also build closer links with genuine civic and tenants organisations. We call for union support for the unemployed (e.g.) providing facilities, refusing to cut off services like water etc.

We are for putting pressure on the State to inject money into industry that is both labour-intensive and socially useful. We call for a crash program of house building that uses direct labour employed by the local authorities.

Women’s Rights

We are for the positive encouragement of women to participate in the unions, and to take elected office. We oppose the idea of “reserved places” on union committees for women. It is undemocratic and tokenistic and it fails to address the real issue: getting the unions to take up women’s issues seriously.

State Interference

We are opposed to all laws that restrict the right to strike, and all laws that aim to interfere in the internal affairs of the union. We are opposed to “union bashing” by the State and bosses.

We are opposed to all schemes for “workers directors” and “workers participation”. We call for the withdrawal of the unions from all macro- economic policy forums such as NEDLAC. These schemes are a confidence trick that hides the rule of the bosses and the fact that the workers and the bosses have absolutely different interests. We are against participation in all bodies that try to destroy the independence of the unions by involving them in “social partnership.” We are opposed to the unions buying stock in any company, no matter how this is justified.

Where possible, we encourage the workers not to use the Industrial Court and other supposedly “impartial” institutions. Instead we call for solidarity action.

Police Unions

The police and prison warders are part of the repressive apparatus of the State, exist to protect the ruling class from the workers and the poor. We stand in opposition to this “army of the rich” and will therefore not in any way support or do solidarity work with the police unions. We are opposed to the presence of the Police and Prisons Civil Rights Union in COSATU.

Wages, Jobs, the Unemployed, Nationalisation

We are for a national minimum wage.

We are opposed to the idea that the unemployed should be thankful for any job that they are offered. Instead we call for decent jobs (i.e.) ones that are well paid and socially useful.

We oppose all job losses and believe that these must be fought through workplace occupations and strike action backed up by the

they are forced to, not because they “like” or “approve” of the union leadership. In addition, if the union is democratic, the negotiators represent the interests of the membership, and are not prefects or policemen for management.

THE TRADE UNION BUREAUCRACY AND REFORMISM

Unions have taken different ideological and organisational approaches in different times and places. They have varied from revolutionary Anarcho-syndicalist unions aiming at destroying capitalism, to sweetheart bureaucratic unions.

At present most unions in South Africa are characterised by the dominance of reformist ideas. These hold that the bosses and the workers must co-operate to “save the economy”, “reconstruct and develop the country” etc. It is generally held that capitalism can be made into something more humane. It is believed that unions must reach some sort of accommodation with capitalism, rather than overthrow it.⁸

A bureaucracy of full-time, often unelected, officials increasingly dominates the actions of the unions. At the same time, the unions, particularly COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), have strong tradition of grassroots democracy and accountability e.g. the shop steward system. This leads to serious contradictions, as when the leadership condemns the strike actions and ignores

⁸ For a critical look at the shift to accommodation with capitalism by the Left in South Africa Harris, L., (1993), “South Africa’s Economic and Social Transformation: from ‘No Middle Road’ to ‘No Alternative’” in *Review of African Political Economy*, no. 57. For an example of the type of arguments that are being used to justify the collaboration of the unions with the bosses and the State see Joffe, A., Maller, J. and E. Webster, (1993), “South Africa’s Industrialisation: the challenge facing labour,” *History Workshop and Sociology of Work Unit Symposium*. University of the Witwatersrand.

the concerns of the union membership (e.g.) the truckers strike of 1994, and the nurse's strike of 1995.⁹

The union bureaucracy is not responsible to the membership in any real sense except in the most formal way. They have far too much power and influence. On top of this they earn much more than the rank-and-file, they are able to avoid overtime and are also protected from short-time and retrenchments in a way that ordinary workers are not. In addition, they may sit on company boards, government commissions, high-level negotiating structures such as NEDLAC (National Economic, Development and Labour Council), and may enjoy a variety of perks.

The privileges of the bureaucracy may even be set to increase in the larger unions, as concern grows with preventing leaders from being lost to the bosses and the government, both of whom are willing and able to offer very attractive employment opportunities to skilled negotiators with some sort of working class background.¹⁰

In short the union bureaucracy enjoys a way of life that is quite different from the people that they are supposed to be working for. Some of them have never even worked in an ordinary job.

As a result of its privileges and power the union bureaucracy develops a distinct set of interests.¹¹ They generally put their own special interests before those of the workers as a whole.

Because the bureaucrats privileges depend on their role as full-time negotiators and mediators who can help the bosses avoid industrial conflict they will rarely initiate or lead strikes. Instead they are ready to negotiate until the cows come home to reach a so-

⁹ The growing power of the union bureaucracy is discussed in D. Collins, (July 1994), "Worker Control," in *South African Labour Bulletin*. 18 (3); D. Keet, (May/ June 1992), "Shop stewards and Worker Control," *South African Labour Bulletin*. 16 (5); B. Marie, (May/ June 1992), "COSATU faces crisis," *South African Labour Bulletin*. 16 (5).

¹⁰ This problem is discussed in S. Buhlungu, (July 1994), "The Big Brain Drain," *South African Labour Bulletin*, 18 (3).

¹¹ On the union bureaucracy see Berkman (1989). pp64-5.

Guidelines for day-to-day activities

The following points serve as guidelines for our day-to-day activity and link it to our goal of Anarchism, because of the method that lies behind them.

Party Politics

In South Africa, like in other countries, there are formal links between political parties and the unions (i.e.) the Tripartite Alliance between COSATU, the African National Congress and the South African Communist Party.

We are opposed to this, firstly, because it places the workers in a formal alliance with capitalist and State interests (e.g. in the ANC) which compromises their ability to fight. We must be independent from the class enemy, particularly in our key class organisations.

Secondly, it has the effect of encouraging workers to look to politicians ("our comrades in government") to solve their political issues, rather than relying on their own strength.

Thirdly, it ties workers into the elections for parliament, which is a futile strategy given the nature of the State. We unconditionally support and defend the right to vote, and the other civil and political rights that go alongside it in a bourgeois/capitalist democracy. Rights and gains are not won by participation in Parliament, they are forced on Parliament by mass actions. But the State is not some neutral tool at the disposal of the majority, but a weapon of the bosses and rulers.

We are opposed to the call for the unions to establish a Mass Workers Party. This is partly because of the futility of parliamentary politics. It is also because history has shown that participation in Parliament turns worker leaders into a conservative, privileged and elitist stratum with its own sectional interests, and because any socialist politics that workers parties have is generally toned down so that the party can attract the majority of the electorate.

the trade unions we will work to build a section of the Anarchist organisation within the existing unions.

A crucial activity of this group will be the struggle to win as many workers as possible to an Anarchist position. This will include the following: aiming to unify different sectional struggles into an awareness of the overall struggle between classes; to explain the lessons of past struggles; to take on the politics of Marxism and reformism in the movement; and to spread the Anarchist idea, including the view that the unions can become the battering ram that destroys capitalism, and that the unions need to be restructured in a decentralised and anti-bureaucratic manner.

A second crucial activity will be to fight for union democracy. By this we do not mean that we want to elect new individuals to the same bureaucratic posts. We want more accountability, mandating, elections, information for members etc. Our long-term goal is the restructuring of the unions on Anarcho-Syndicalist lines. SEE BELOW.

In general, we aim to encourage the workers themselves to take up the fight against the State, bosses, and union bureaucrats. Our focus of activity is the shopfloor.

We are in favour of 100% union membership and all Anarchist organisation members must belong to their appropriate union.

No member of the Anarchist organisation will accept an unelected post in the unions that gives power over the membership.

Members elected as shop stewards are to consider their position as that of a delegate accountable to and mandated by the members rather than a “representative” who can act over the heads of the membership.

When going forward for elective positions we make it clear that we are not accepting the union structure as it now exists. We will fight for more accountability, mandating, information for members etc.

called “reasonable” solution. They prefer conciliation to class warfare. Their lack of accountability reinforces their tendency to negotiate rather than pull out all the stops to secure the maximum benefit for the union rank and file.

The full-time officials do not usually lead strikes but they sometimes will, such as when employers are refusing to negotiate or when negotiating procedures are threatened. Generally however they will go to almost any length and accept almost any deal in place of industrial action. They will not hesitate to condemn unofficial and illegal strikes (strikes that are not approved of by themselves).

It is important to remember that the bureaucracy behaves as it does because of its privileges and power, and not because its individual members are “sell-outs”, “bad people” etc. The bureaucracy is by its very nature authoritarian and opposed to workers self-activity on most occasions.

The opposition of the bureaucracy to mass actions, except in extreme circumstances has many negative consequences. It dampens the fighting spirit of the membership and leads to demobilisation, and it reduces the extent of gains that could have been won if mass action was used.

However, as we pointed out above, the bureaucracy in the unions can never become totally unresponsive to the demands of the membership. This would result in the end of their power, privileges and careers, as ordinary people would leave the unions. Within this constraint, however, the bureaucrats will still swing between the role of mediator for workers, and defender of the existing order.

It is self-evident that the more power, initiative and control that lies with the full-time officials, the less that lies with the rank-and-file membership on the shop floor.

CORPORATISM, TRIPARTISM AND “STRATEGIC UNIONISM”

We are totally opposed to the current drift of the unions into collaboration with the bosses and the State (e.g.) forums such as NEDLAC that deals with macro-economic policy. We believe that tripartite and bipartite arrangements will not bring any real benefits to the workers and the poor. Instead they will serve to demobilise and weaken the unions.¹²

This trend towards collaboration with the bosses and the rulers is most noticeable in the growing involvement of the unions in a variety of policy negotiation forums.

Involvement of the unions in “policy- making”: Basically this means that the unions draw up complex proposals as the basis for negotiations with the bosses and the State in order to formulate long-term policies binding on all parties. In practice these are drawn up by experts with no real worker input. Because of the domination of nationalist ideas in the unions, these proposals also tend to be reformist and aimed at creating a better capitalism.

Sitting in policy forums: The unions try to get these policies accepted by the bosses and the State, and as a result participate in various forums, both at national level (NEDLAC- which deals with labour law and macro- economic policy- e.g. tariffs, training, taxation), and at sub- national forums (like “participatory management” schemes and “workplace forums”).

These forums are nothing but a trap for the working class, even though unions (like COSATU) may see these forums as a way of gradually winning control away from the boss and moving to socialism.

¹² A helpful summary of the problems that corporatist and tripartite arrangements create for the unions is provided in B. Vally, (1992), *A Social Contract: The Way Forward?* Taj Printers. pp46-67.

effective they are, as these unions usually bear the brunt of State and boss repression as compared to moderate unions (e.g.) repeated banning of CNT in Spain. Committed reformist workers will find a more comfortable, safer environment in moderate unions.

We reject the argument that the rank-and-file of historically existing revolutionary (Syndicalist) unions were not Anarchist. If internal democracy existed, then a union that is openly revolutionary in policies and structure could only be one where most members do agree with Anarchist ideas; if reformist tendencies in the union involved more than a minority this would be reflected in the union’s activities, statements and structure (e.g.) the French CGT, once the most famous Anarcho-Syndicalist union, was taken over by Marxist and Social Democrat elements soon after World War I.

We reject the argument that Anarcho-syndicalism is inherently “a-political”. Organisations such as the Anarcho-syndicalist International Workers Association (IWA) explicitly recognise “violence as a means of defence against the violent methods of the ruling classes in the struggle for the possession of the factories and the fields by the revolutionary people... the defence of the revolution [must] be entrusted to the masses themselves and their economic organisations”.²⁶

ANARCHIST ACTIVITY IN THE UNIONS

General perspectives

The major obstacles to the unions playing a revolutionary role have already been indicated above: the dominance of reformist ideas and the trade union bureaucracy. In order to revolutionise

²⁶ The quote is from the *Declaration of the Principles of Revolutionary Syndicalism*, adopted by the founding congress of the IWA. See Thorpe, (1989), Appendix D.

dicalist League of North America); the Labour Chambers and workers schools associated with revolutionary unions (for example in the Spanish case); the press of revolutionary Syndicalist unions (e.g. the Spanish CNT controlled thirty-six daily papers, including *Solidaridad Obrera*, the largest of any paper in Spain, and published millions of books and pamphlets).²⁴ In other words, the revolutionary (Syndicalist) union once established can aid the Anarchist organisation in its propaganda work.

We reject the argument that revolutionary (Syndicalist) unions, when established, are always compromised by their method of organising (i.e.) as unions they must organise all workers regardless of ideological affiliation because this is necessary to be effective in the workplace.

We do not deny that this opens the door to reformist currents. Such currents, sometimes calling themselves “pure syndicalists”, emerged in anarcho-syndicalist unions in Italy, France and Spain.

This situation, however, only points to the need to keep up the battle of ideas in the union. These reformist groups can be stopped. The Anarchist organisation will clearly play a central role here. We are opposed to the merger of Anarchist groups into revolutionary (Syndicalist) unions once the latter have been established because it is necessary to have an organised force to battle reformist tendencies. This has a precedent: the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), set up in 1927 with the aim of safeguarding the Spanish CNT’s commitment to Anarchist principle.²⁵

We do not expect revolutionary (Syndicalist) unions to attract large numbers of reformist elements, no matter how militant and

²⁴ For example, Foner, (1965), pp147-157 for an extensive discussion of the propaganda work of the US Anarcho-Syndicalist organisation, the Industrial Workers of the World; see Foster, (1936), chapter 6 for a discussion of the propaganda work of the Syndicalist League of North America; on workers education centres in Spain, see Acklesberg (1985); the figures for the Spanish press come from Rocker (1948), p384.

²⁵ Bookchin, (1977), p213.

These forums create a pretence of democracy that ignores the massive and systematic inequality between the bosses (who own everything and control the State) and the workers (who have nothing but their numbers, fighting spirit and ability to disrupt production). These forums do not challenge this class inequality because they are based on the idea the bosses and the workers are partners in development and economic growth and that both are legitimate interest groups. As a result they cannot fundamentally change the balance of power between bosses and workers that exists under capitalism.

The forums are a threat to the unions because they take control out of the hands of ordinary members and place it in the hands of the full-time leaders and “experts” who sit in the forums and draft “policy”. By focussing on policy they shift the focus of union activity from grassroots action and workers self-activity against the bosses (the real source of workers power) to high-level negotiations, and elite bargaining.

These various forums also promote the false idea that the bosses and the workers share the same interests as each other, and that the bosses are a good and necessary part of society. In this way the forums help to teach workers to accept capitalism in the name of “democracy”.

While there is an appearance that the agenda for negotiation is open and democratic, in reality all that is discussed is how to make capitalism run more smoothly. Lower level forums like “participatory management” do not give the workers power over the bigger capitalist economy; at most they give a little bit of a say in hiring and firing, working conditions and improving the efficiency and competitiveness of the firm in the capitalist economy. Higher level forums like NEDLAC only deal with improving the broader framework in which capitalism operates. e.g. protection on imports, worker training, improving productivity; because agreement must be reached in order for policy to be implemented (usually on the basis of consensus), anything that threatened the State

and capital would be rejected out of hand by the representatives of these groups and will thus always be vetoed.

This is not to say that we are opposed to the struggle of workers to win economic improvements in their lives and more control over their work and the economy. The point is that these gains must be won through mass actions organised through a democratic, grassroots, militant and independent/ autonomous union movement, and not through collaborating with the enemy in the naive belief that we can be “partners in reconstruction and development”.

THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF TRADE UNIONS

We stand within that tendency within class struggle Anarchism that believes that the unions can perform a double role of firstly, mobilising workers for mass action on day-to-day issues; and, secondly, providing the organisational structure through which workers can collectively seize and self-manage the means of production. Work in the union movement is not only important as a means of winning workers to Anarchism, but also as a means of laying the organisational basis for the new society in the shell of the old.¹³

This tendency (which accepts revolutionary unionism) originated with the Anarchist-aligned Spanish, Swiss and other sections of the First International Workingmen’s Association (in the 1860s and 1870s), and the International Working Peoples Association in the USA in the 1880s.¹⁴

¹³ Basic statements of this idea are R. Rocker, (1948), “Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism”; A. Berkman, (1964), *ABC of Anarchism*. Freedom Press. London. chapter 10–14.

¹⁴ For overviews of the history of revolutionary (Syndicalist) unionism, see Rocker, (1948), pp363-70, 381–6; W. Thorpe, (1989), *The Workers Themselves: Rev-*

We reject the argument that revolutionary unionism (Syndicalism) believes that workers are tied to capitalism solely by bureaucratic union structures that remove all initiative from the rank-and-file, and that all that is needed to change this is to restructure the unions. It does not neglect the role of ideas in revolutionary change.

Revolutionary unionism (Syndicalism) is correct in pointing to the importance of a democratic, non-bureaucratic and decentralised union structure in preparing workers for revolution. Democratic participation in struggle is an essential part of changing people’s consciousness of their capabilities.²³ The call to return power to the union rank-and-file is also an implicit critique of the capitalist- pro-State ideology of leaders, centralisation, control from the top down.

However, revolutionary unionism (Syndicalism) also takes up the battle of ideas, making revolutionary propaganda that links a criticism of this society to a vision of how a future society could be organised. This propaganda has been spread in a variety of ways e.g. propaganda leagues inside the existing unions (such as the Syn-

chism: History, Theory And Practice. Routledge. London and New York. On *Mujeres Libres* Anarchist womens group in Spain) see M.A. Ackelsberg, (1993), “Models of Revolution: Rural Women And Anarchist Collectivisation In Spain,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 20 (3); P. Carpena, (1986), “Spain 1936: Free Women – A Feminist, Proletarian And Anarchist Movement,” in M. Gadant (ed.), *Women of the Mediterranean*. Zed Books. London and New Jersey; V. Ortiz, (1979), “Mujeres Libres: Anarchist Women in the Spanish Civil War,” in *Antipode: A Radical Journal Of Geography* 10 (3) & 11 (1). On storefront schools and cultural centres, see M.A. Acklesberg, (1985), “Revolution and Community: mobilisation, de-politicisation and perceptions of change in Civil War Spain,” in S.C. Bourque et al. (eds.), *Women Living Change*. Temple University Press. Philadelphia.

²³ For a defence of the idea that participation and self-activity in struggle and social change (such as is made possible by decentralised and anti-bureaucratic union structures) is an essential part of preparation for the revolution, see M.A. Acklesberg, (1985), “Revolution and Community: mobilisation, de-politicisation and perceptions of change in Civil War Spain,” in S.C. Bourque et al. (eds.), *Women Living Change*. Temple University Press. Philadelphia.

peasantry, although the union form of organisation can often be applied to this sector with ease.

However, we always seek to bring the power of the unions to the aid of other progressive struggles. The workplace is a repository of great power, and it is invaluable in aiding other struggles. We must link the workplace struggle of trade unions to the rural struggle of the exploited masses (peasants, sharecroppers etc.).

The future Anarchist society will not be based purely on union structures (syndicates). There will, in addition, be community committees, which together with the syndicates will make up the free self-governing city (commune). The communes and syndicates will be federated together, along industrial, bioregional and inter-regional lines. There will also be a democratic workers militia to defend the revolutionary society.²¹

IN DEFENSE OF ANARCHIST UNIONISM (ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM)

We reject the argument that revolutionary unionism (Syndicalism) is flawed because it can supposedly only organise in the workplace. The Spanish movement organised rent strike committees, the libertarian Youth as well as community schools and centres.²²

²¹ On the theory of the syndicates, communes and regions as developed by classical Anarchism, see Guerin, Daniel, (1970), *Anarchism : From Theory To Practice*. Monthly Review Press. New York and London. Chapter 2, esp. pp56-60. See also G.P. Maximov, (1985), *The Program of Anarcho- syndicalism*. Monty Miller Press. Australia. pp42-8. The addition of the bio-regional dimension is found in Purchase, Graham, (1991), *Anarchist Organisation: Suggestions And Possibilities*. Black Rose. and Purchase, Graham, (1990), *Anarchist Society and its Practical Realisation*. San Francisco. See Sharp Press. On the defence of the revolution, see Makhno et al, [1927], pp29-31; Berkman, (1964), chapter 14; Maximov, (1985), pp 49-55.

²² On Anarchist community organising, see N. Rider, (1989), "The Practice of Direct Action: the Barcelona rent strike of 1931," in D. Goodway (ed.), *For Anar-*

It underwent a massive revival from the late nineteenth century. Not only did it come to dominate the revolutionary left, but in a number of countries, it became the dominant influence on the union movement e.g. Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Argentine, France, Mexico, Uruguay. In others it formed a substantial minority current e.g. Italy, Britain, the United States, Japan, Germany, Bulgaria, Australia.

We reject the idea that trade unions can only become revolutionary in "**revolutionary conditions**". This is a one-sided and deterministic view. Revolutionary conditions are not just something that happen to workers. They are the result of the actions of the workers themselves, and in turn these actions are influenced by the strength of revolutionary ideology and the level of self-activity that the workers engage in. Therefore we say that revolutionary unions can themselves directly contribute to the creation of revolutionary conditions.

We reject the claim that unions only exist to improve the conditions under which workers are exploited, rather than put an end to the system of exploitation itself. In other words, we are opposed to the idea that the unions always and everywhere cannot go beyond "**partial struggles**" within capitalism and must always compromise with the bosses at "the end of the day".

This view is totally unhistorical. Just because the balance of forces under capitalism generally favours the bosses and the rulers, with the effect that many struggles (by unions as well as other progressive formations) are only "partial" does not mean that the

olutionary Syndicalism And International Labour 1913-23. Kulwer Academic Pubs (Dordrecht, Boston, London) & International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam); M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe (eds.), (1990), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*. Scholar Press (England). These histories are marred by their incomplete focus, and by their occasional failure to draw a sharp enough distinction between Anarcho-Syndicalism in the true sense of the word, and reformist/revisionist forms of syndicalism (sometimes called "pure" syndicalism). An excellent history of the International Working People's Association is P. Avrich, 1984, *The Haymarket Tragedy*. Princeton University.

unions will always be forced to compromise with capitalism. It is necessary to examine both the objective and subjective factors in existence at a particular time e.g. strength of revolutionary ideology amongst the workers, existence of a crisis in ruling circles etc. The logic of the “partial struggle” position is that any fighting organisation that is unable to overthrow capitalism whenever it feels like it is inherently reformist.

This view is inaccurate. In response to an attempted fascist coup in Spain in 1936, the Anarcho-Syndicalist union the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) successfully spearheaded the formation of workers militias that halted the fascist coup, and led the movement by up to nine million workers and peasants to seize and self-administer the land and factories. The rank-and-file of the CNT literally tore down the capitalist system.¹⁵

It is wrong to see the outcome of every day workers struggle as a “compromise”. Many such struggles are an unconditional victory for the working masses in that they forced totally obstinate bosses to give in against their will and lose a bit of their power and wealth. Such struggles may be limited in their effect but they are a direct and successful attack on the rule of the bosses.

Finally, a compromise cannot always be reached. In a number of circumstances, such as economic downturn, the bosses may be unable to concede on the workers demands. In these cases even a “partial struggle” brings the workers into conflict with the very fabric of the capitalist system and moves their demands from “partial” ones to objectively revolutionary ones. It is not, however, inevitable that such situations will have a revolutionary outcome.

The existence of a union **bureaucracy** is not inevitable. The Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalist union the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) had more than a million members in the early

¹⁵ see E. Conlon, (1993), *The Spanish Civil War: Anarchism In Action*. Workers Solidarity Movement. Dublin; D. Geurin, (1971), *Anarchism : From Theory To Practice*. Monthly Review Press. pp114-143; Direct Action Movement. *Anarchism in Action: the Spanish Revolution*. Aldgate Press. London. Also see Breitbart (1979).

This organising work must be done on conjunction with revolutionary propaganda work in the new unions with the aim of genuinely winning the membership over to an Anarchist perspective. Unless this is done, we can end up with a membership that disagrees with Anarchism but joins the union anyway because it has no real alternative if it wants to organise.

Attempts to establish a full-time bureaucracy in new unions must be opposed.

ORGANISING BEYOND THE WORKPLACE

It is not enough to organise revolutionary unions in the workplace. We need to organise throughout the working class, poor and working peasantry. Anarchists have almost always recognised the need to organise both within and outside the workplace.

It is necessary to organise throughout the whole working class (including women, youth etc.) and to build an Anarchist organisation that will fight for the leadership of the Anarchist idea throughout the working class. We need to be active in community-based campaigns such as rent strikes, always bearing in mind the need for class struggle and for vigilance against middle class opportunists posing as “community leaders”; we do not hide, but highlight, the class differences in residential areas, addressing ourselves to the exploited and the poor (the working class community) rather than to shopkeepers, priests, businessmen, politicians. We support struggles in the education sector. We need to work out ways of organising amongst the poor in the “informal sector” (the self-employed who do not employ others).²⁰ We need to organise amongst the

²⁰ Some interesting initiatives in this area have been taking place in west Africa, where the unions have begun to help organise the informal sector. See P. Horn, February 1997, “The Informal sector: West African Women Organise”, in *South African Labour Bulletin*, vol. 21, no.1.

rank and file movement that basically brings out almost all union members (excluding the bureaucracy) into a new union federation may be acceptable. This is a very serious decision and must not be taken lightly. The rank-and-file movement and existing grassroots union structures would in this case provide the nucleus of a new union federation.

If in a **revolutionary situation** the bureaucracy is still in place, then the rank-and-file movement and existing grassroots union structures will themselves undertake the task of the revolutionary general strike in defiance of the union bureaucracy to take over the means of production and institute workers self-management.

These are tactical issues that will have to be dealt with when they arise; they are *not* and should not be interpreted as a principled adoption of Break-aways, which is a strategy that we argue cannot work (see elsewhere in this paper).

Organising the Unorganised

If the existing unions do not organise sectors of the workforce, then we should match our work within existing unions with organising drives amongst the unorganised. These drives should whenever possible get support from existing unions.

If possible, the newly organised workers should be incorporated into the existing unions. Otherwise, separate unions will have to be established. In such cases, however, there must be a consistent promotion of united front action (co-operation on specific issues) between the established unions and the new unions. This unity in action can serve as a basis for the unification of the old and new unions. Such unity must be a principled basis that opposes racism, sexism etc. **We should always hold the “unification” of all unions into “One Big Union” as an end goal, a goal as important as the work of “education” (ideas) and “organisation” (restructuring the unions).**

1930s but at no point had more than two paid officials. Union work was done as much as possible by activists during work hours, and leadership posts were regularly rotated.

BASIC PRINCIPLES ON THE UNIONS

As Anarchists we believe that the unions can not only defend the workers in the existing capitalist society, but prepare them for, and practically carry out the reconstruction of society in the direction of Stateless Socialism.¹⁶

In practical terms, this means that the role of the unions must be expanded from that of simply defending and advancing the interests of the workers in the daily struggle, to preparing the workers to take control of the economy by informing them about the technical management of production and distribution, and by spreading among them the revolutionary ideas needed to create a free, stateless, libertarian socialist society.

The unions are more suited to accomplishing these tasks than political parties. They organise the workers to use their economic power to fight injustice and help to make the workers aware of their strength. They help to create a spirit of solidarity and combativeness. They can give the workers the ideological and organisational preparation needed to reconstruct society.

In accordance with this outlook we emphasise mass/ direct actions by the workers as a means of defending and advancing their political and economic rights. Examples of these immediate methods of struggle are boycotts, go- slows, strikes, and work- to- rule.

It is not true that Anarchists believe that all that is necessary to make a revolution is a General Strike lasting for a few days. The

¹⁶ This section is based on Rucker (1948), pp370-81. See also Berkman, (1964), esp. chapter 10; G.P. Maximov, (1985), *The Program of Anarcho- syndicalism*. Monty Miller Press. Australia.

General Strike is the strongest weapon of the workers and is used in a variety of situations. In some circumstances, it may be the prelude to the revolutionary uprising of the working class.

Our tasks regarding the unions are thus two-fold.

On the one hand, we devote ourselves to the Anarchist education of the masses: that is, revolutionary propaganda work that links a criticism of capitalist society to a vision of how society can be reorganised in the interests of the masses. Such work is of course aided by the experience of struggle at the workplace.

On the other hand, as opponents of centralisation and supporters of the maximum self-activity of the masses, we oppose the existence of bureaucratic and undemocratic structures in the union movement. The unions should be structured as follows. The basic unit of the union is the workplace section (made up of a general assembly of all workers in a particular part of a workplace); these sections each elect a mandated delegate, together making up the factory committee.

The different plants are then federated with each other in two directions. Firstly, with all equivalent organisations in the same industry and related trades (to form industrial and agricultural alliances e.g. in transport). These industrial unions are in turn federated into a Federation of Industrial Alliances. Secondly, with all such union structures in a given district or town (to form a Local Chamber of Labour). These are joined in a Federation of Labour Chambers. Taken together, these federations constitute the General Confederation of Labour. All these structures are linked by mandated delegates and not by a bureaucracy.

The point of this union structure is to unify the workers in a structure that makes possible common action, keep initiative with the rank and file, and lay the basis for the future economic order. In addition, the Labour Chambers also act as centres for local propaganda and education.

unions must be decentralised and restructured in accordance with our ideas, and different unions in the same sector should be amalgamated together where possible.

We are more than willing to work alongside other rank and file members to build a *rank-and-file movement* of militant workers who are prepared to fight independently of the bureaucracy, and against it where necessary.

This type of movement arises when workers go into struggle and are attacked not only by the bosses but also by their own union officials. A program or set of demands for such a movement should be broad enough to attract workers who are militant but would not see themselves as having a particular political outlook. A general guide could be (i) for union democracy (ii) for women's rights in the workplace and the union (iii) against wage restraint (iv) for jobs (v) support for strikes (vi) fighting racial discrimination.

While we will fight for our ideas in this movement, we want the movement (if it arises) to be independent of any one political organisation. We want to win as many workers as possible to our position but we will not do so in an opportunist manner at the expense of the growth of the movement. The role of a rank-and-file movement is to provide a focus for workers moving to the left and wanting to fight; it should never become a front for the revolutionary organisation.

In the same way as the specific Anarchist organisation is vital to the victory of revolutionary ideas in the unions, so too is the rank-and-file movement a key force in the battle against the union bureaucracy and for full union democracy.

What should we do if we prove unable to remove the entrenched union bureaucracy? Two scenarios present themselves.

If it proves impossible to dislodge the bureaucracy in a **pre-revolutionary** situation *despite consistent and sincere efforts* by the rank-and-file movement, despite the actions of the Anarchist organisation, and despite the support of the ordinary union members themselves, the call for a massive majority split-off by the

The existing unions also tend to attract a lower degree of hostility and attacks from the bosses and the State than radical dual unions. It is therefore easier to establish a basis for the initial revolutionary work by action in the existing unions than by setting up small dual unions.

Most importantly, the history of the union movement shows that small groups of revolutionaries can achieve impressive results by working in and building up the existing unions (e.g.) the Haymarket/Chicago Anarchist International Working Peoples Association was able to help launch the great 8 hour day movement in 1886 on this basis; the victory of the Anarchists in the Argentinean Regional Workers Federation (FORA) in 1904; the victory in the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in France by 1906; the rise of the Spanish Anarcho-Syndicalists to pre-eminence in *Solidaridad Obrera*, the predecessor of the CNT, in the 1910s.¹⁹

While we oppose attempts to set up dual unions, we ultimately defend the right of the workers themselves to make this decision. Where dual unions are created, we will attempt to set up Anarchist sections in both unions. The Anarchist organisation will organise wherever workers are organised.

Rank-and-File Movements

It is important to emphasise that **work in the existing unions, based on a militant fight for daily demands, does not mean taking over the unions with an unchanged structure.** The privileges and undue power of the union leaders must be removed, the

¹⁹ For the Haymarket/Chicago Anarchists see P. Avrich, (1984), *The Haymarket Tragedy*. Princeton. esp. pp72-3 and John R. Commons et al. (1918), *The History of Labour in the United States*, vol. 2. New York. pp290-300. On the FORA see R. Munck et al. (1987), *Argentina: from Anarchism to Peronism*. Zed Books. London and New Jersey. chapters 4-6. On the CGT see Thorpe, (1989), chapter 1 and Foner, (1965), p417. On *Solidaridad Obrera*, see Thorpe, (1989), chapter 1, and M. Bookchin, (1977), *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936*. Harper Colophon Books. New York. Hagerstown. San Francisco. London. chapters 7&8.

We reject the “a-political” version of Anarcho-Syndicalism that argues that State and other institutions of the ruling class will automatically collapse after the unions seize the means of production.¹⁷

The State will not simply disappear following the revolutionary seizure of the means of production. It will actively organise counter-revolutionary activity in order to repress the gains of the workers. The working class must take power in its own name, and smash the State from day one of the revolution.

The State must be smashed and power based on rank and file committees, in the unions, the militias and the communities. There must be no power centres in society other than the mass organisations of the working class. The mass organisations must be integrated and co-ordinated in a “social power” or revolutionary committee at the national and international level in a revolutionary situation.

THE WAY FORWARD IN THE UNIONS

The Need For a Specific Anarchist Organisation

The question naturally arises at this point as to how we set about imbuing the union movement with a revolutionary spirit and building in it a decentralised structure.

In our view the precondition for such work is the creation of an Anarchist organisation on the lines suggested by the *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* by Makhno and others. The Workers Solidarity Movement in Ireland is an example of this type of political organisation.

The *Platform* argues that Anarchism needs to become the “theoretical driving force” of the revolution of the working class. In other

¹⁷ For example, the Spanish CNT is reported to have argued that the seizure of the means of production would automatically lead to the “liquidation of the bourgeois State, which would die of asphyxiation” (in D. Geurin, (1971), p128).

words the masses must make the revolution by and for themselves, on the basis of a clear criticism of this society and a clear idea on what sort of society should replace it.

In order for this to occur it is necessary to build a large and effective Anarchist organisation that will spread Anarchist ideas through the working class and its organisations. This organisation must be based on shared ideological and tactical positions and be organised on a federal basis.

The *Platform* explicitly endorses revolutionary unionism, writing that “the ways and means of Anarchist attitudes *vis-a-vis* trade unionism” are “groups of Anarchists in companies, factories and workshops, preoccupied in creating Anarcho-Syndicalist unions, leading the struggle in revolutionary unions for the domination of libertarian ideas in unionism, groups organised in their action by a general Anarchist organisation” (p25).

Endorsement for revolutionary unionism is implicit in the arguments of the *Platform*. If Anarchist propaganda work wins over the majority of union members, the unions will necessarily have been restructured on Anarchist principles. What can this mean but a union movement organised in a democratic and anti-bureaucratic manner and filled with revolutionary purpose (i.e.) revolutionary unionism?

We agree with the *Platform* that Anarchist activists in the unions need to be united with each other in, and co-ordinated with each other by the Anarchist organisation, that the Anarchist organisation must retain its organisational independence from the union, and that the Anarchists do not restrict their activities to the unions (pp24-5).

To sum up, the first step towards creating revolutionary unions is to build an Anarchist organisation that aims to spread Anarchist ideas as far and wide as possible in the working class and its structures. Such an organisation will obviously also take up the battle against the power and privilege of the union bureaucracy.

Why We Need To Work Inside Existing Trade Unions

We believe that the Anarchist organisation should aim to revolutionise the *existing* union movement. We are totally opposed to the idea of breaking away from the existing unions and setting up new unions, or in the form of setting up new unions on purely revolutionary principles to compete with the established unions.¹⁸ We take this position for the following reasons.

A basic problem of breaking away to form new radical unions is that it has the effect of taking the minority of fighting and radical workers out of the old union, thus leaving it at the mercy of the bureaucracy and reformist orientation that provoked the split in the first place. We urge the militants to stay in the union and fight to win over the membership.

In addition, the effect of a radical breakaway is often to create a small sectarian breakaway that is isolated from the masses. The masses, knowing the merit of a large and powerful organisation, generally prefer to gravitate to the large established unions rather than the small dual unions and breakaways.

The working masses often lack a revolutionary political consciousness and are thus not readily attracted to the radical slogans of dual unions. In fact they may even be alienated by the rhetoric of these unions. The workers also trust and look to the established unions. It is important that we organise wherever workers are organised, and that we relate workers everyday concerns to the goal of Anarchism. For these reasons, also, we work in the existing unions.

¹⁸ The tactical issue of how Anarchists should relate to the existing unions has historically been a point of contention. See P.S. Foner, (1965), “The Debate over ‘Boring-from-Within’” in his *The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–17* (International Pubs. New York. chapter 18) and William Z. Foster, (1936), *From Bryan to Stalin* (Lawrence and Wishart. London) for an example of how this issue split the US Anarcho-Syndicalists. Foster, the author of the second book, later became a Marxist and the reader of his book is advised to keep this in mind.