

Syndicalism — what is it?

Britta Gröndahl

1996

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Syndicalism is a trade union movement that differs from others in several ways.

Syndicalism distances itself from party politics and parliamentarism. They prioritize trade unions and claim to want to improve the conditions of wage earners in the present through economic struggle but also in the long term to change the whole of society, break down the capitalist system and realize a free socialism.

Syndicalism arose in France at the end of the 19th century, but the direction within the labor movement that syndicalism is a part of was already formed during the time when the peoples of Europe rose up against royal autocracy and against social systems that kept the majority of people down in poverty and slavery.

Syndicalism in Sweden

As is well known, the unique thing about Swedish syndicalism has been that the movement has been decimated but that it still exists. Quote from “Men in the Dark” by Eva Blomberg, academic thesis 1995. The Central Organization of Swedish Workers (SAC) was formed in 1910 after the French model. The actors at the time of its formation were:

1. Opposition groups within the reformist national organization (LO) formed in 1890.
2. Organized workers who had left LO out of dissatisfaction with the management’s handling of the Great Strike of 1909.
3. Anarchists and revolutionary socialists in the Socialist Youth League, called Young Socialists. These had long propagated syndicalism and informed about it in brochures and magazines.

The great interest in syndicalism that had been aroused in the Swedish labor movement did not have its full impact when SAC was formed. LO was and remained the large organization and SAC the small organization, although the difference was initially evened out by SAC’s rapid growth until 1924.

The differences between these two organizations were — apart from size — the following:

The organizational form. The reformists are organized in branch unions with local “departments”.

SAC is based on local joint organizations (LS). Only after 1922 did SAC expand its organizational plan and create federations (unions).

The struggle. Syndicalists are for a more offensive struggle. They do not expect support from any party or from laws. The struggle, which concerns the conditions of existence of wage earners, is waged directly between workers and employers.

Strikes, boycotts and blockades were the usual means of struggle, the syndicalists added obstruction (working slowly) and depopulation (emptying the workplaces).

Since the syndicalists did not have fighting funds or strike funds, the strikes had to be short and therefore hard. In addition, the syndicalists introduced a more constructive way of waging the struggle, the so-called register, which meant that the workers gained control over their working situation by setting the price of their work themselves.

The goal. The syndicalists say that in the long run the workers will take over production and through their trade unions create a new society. LO supports itself against the party and hopes for reforms through parliamentary means.

Industry affiliation. Someone has said that the typical reformist was a factory worker and the typical syndicalist a construction worker. So you don't see the syndicalist standing at an assembly line, but rather imagine him laying rails together with the work team at a railway construction site.

During the twenties, when the SAC was at its strongest, the syndicalists were often in the majority or alone in workplaces such as construction, mining, logging, stone cutting, peat extraction.

The difference between LO and SAC is therefore great. But in order to assess the situation, one must take into account that not everything always works as intended.

After the split in 1910, there was certainly some syndicalism left in LO, while some reformism happened to come into SAC. The difference in organizational form and ideas evidently did not prevent the LS and the local "department" from cooperating.

At LO congresses, there were motions to introduce syndicalist methods of struggle, including the register. Not all LS members were conscious syndicalists with revolutionary goals and not all in the departments of the LO unions were pure reformists.

Sweden was spared both fascism and world war. Instead, the rivalry between the two trade unions developed into a power struggle that marginalized the syndicalist movement.

The LO leadership viewed the syndicalists as divisive and considered themselves morally entitled to use all means to bring the wage earners back to LO and destroy SAC.

The struggle intensified after the Social Democrats pushed through a collective agreement law (1928) that forced employers to conclude agreements with their employees if they requested it.

The syndicalists were against agreements in principle, but many LS accepted them over time. Some LO unions introduced monopoly clauses in the agreements, i.e. they arbitrarily decided that only LO members were covered by the agreements, and employers in certain industries supported LO's monopoly efforts and decided that syndicalists and unorganized workers would not receive wage increases.

This was illegal and the newly established labour court ruled that the agreement would apply to all employed workers. The employers were therefore forced to back down, but the LO unions instead urged employers not to employ syndicalists and they continued with their monopoly clauses until 1940, when LO's actions were declared illegal by the labour court with reference to an association law act.

The syndicalists were thus, paradoxically, supported by laws in their resistance to the reformist attacks. SAC survived, but weakened. Of course, SAC's membership growth was also affected by factors other than LO's "dirty war": mechanisation and rationalisation in the workplace meant that jobs became fewer and fewer and some professions disappeared.

Specific events and phenomena affected the situation of syndicalists.

The Spanish Civil War in 1936 brought an enormous boost to syndicalist ideas. International issues came to the fore when the secretariat of the Syndicalist International was moved to Stockholm in 1938 and even more so when German syndicalists came from Spain to Sweden and were integrated into the Swedish movement.

Supporting the Spanish syndicalists became a task for the SAC from then on.

As the possibilities for economic struggle weakened, ideology became more prominent. The SAC carried out outward propaganda for syndicalism in the newspaper *Arbetaren* and through the Federative book publishing house.

A revision of principles and tactics in a reformist direction was carried out in 1953 when a new declaration of principles was adopted. In recent decades, however, trade union activity within the SAC has been activated, but the actors are not the same as in the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s. Over half of the SAC members are women.

The youth dominate. Many are low-paid, some are students, the element of academics is much greater than in the “good old days”. The movement has lost part of its workers’ identity, but this can be said of the entire workers’ movement. The will to fight and ideological awareness are there.

The fact that anarchist and syndicalist ideas and concepts of a free socialist society, where the ideal is equality and the guiding principles are decentralization, self-government, self-sufficiency and cooperation, have now spread to all strata of the population and even into certain political parties, raises hopes that the insight that existed in the early labor movement, that “the liberation of the working people must be their own work” can once again become a guiding star in the social transformation that seems to be inevitable.

Britta Gröndahl — Stockholm 1996

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