

The CNT's Revolutionary Principles

CNT

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Contents

Affiliation	3
The Principles of Anarcho-Syndicalism	3
Direct Action: The Tactics of Anarcho-Syndicalism	3
The Final Goal of Anarcho-Syndicalism	4
Voting in the Anarcho-Union	6
Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism	7
Translator's Comments	8

(This is the third and last installment of a three-part series about the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo, the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union. It is translated from the pamphlet Anarcosindicalismo, Basico. The CNT presently has about 35,000 members.)

Affiliation

Anyone can voluntarily belong to the anarcho-union, with the exception of police, soldiers and members of security forces. No ideological qualification is necessary to be in the CNT. This is because the CNT is anarcho-syndicalist, that is, it is an organization in which decisions are made in assembly, from the base. It is an autonomous, federalist structure independent of political parties, of government agencies, of professional bureaucracies, etc. The anarcho-union only requires a respect for its rules, and from this point of view people of different opinions, tendencies and ideologies can live together within it. Ecologists, pacifists, members of political parties ... can be part of the CNT. There will always be different opinions, priorities and points of view about concrete problems. What everyone has in common within the anarcho-union is its unique way of functioning, its anti-authoritarian structure.

Revolutionary syndicalism defends itself against the maneuvers which would convert the union into a tool of the political parties, or profit-making enterprise for some individuals, or a platform for leaders, or a personality cult, or a rigid ideological structure. Because of this the CNT usually repels hierarchical or authoritarian personalities. The CNT is an open structure, but its members have to know where it stands and for what.

The Principles of Anarcho-Syndicalism

The anarcho-union is based on three fundamental principles: Self-Management, Federalism and Mutual Aid.

Self-management means self-government. The anarcho-union desires that individuals, workplaces, villages, cities and all other entities, manage their own affairs, without the interference of any authority.

Federalism presupposes autonomy, and is the bond which joins in free union all groups, as much economic as social. Federalism is the basic principal that prevails within the structure of the CNT, which is nothing but a confederation of sovereign organizations, not subject to a central power.

Mutual Aid is seen as a better system of development, in contrast to the competition which exists in the capitalist system. Mutual Aid sees the world as a whole, in spite of different races, languages and cultures.

In consequence, anarcho-syndicalism is anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, anti-militarist, anti-centralist, anti-theocratic, anti-nationalist... Or if you prefer, libertarian, communists, pacifist, secular, internationalist...

Direct Action: The Tactics of Anarcho-Syndicalism

The word tactic signifies action taken on the terrain of concrete situations. Direct action presupposes action without intermediaries, the direct solution of problems by the interested parties.

Direct Action is a rejection at the same time of the activities of parliaments, magistrates, [bureaucratic] committees, governments, etc. in the affairs of the people.

Example:

- You decide one month to go on strike requesting improvements in the terms of employment and to stop implementation of management's production plan. The same strike with the same strike call can be carried forth by means of Direct Action, made in an assembly of all the workers and their delegates elected from the different departments of the workplace; or by Mediated Action, in which the strike is called by the [official] enterprise committee, which negotiates without informing nor asking the opinion of the assembly, and with the intervention of the [government] labor authorities who can dictate a settlement.
- You have been fired. Direct Action means that your problem is taken up as the problem of the anarcho-union and by your fellow workers, who spread the word, exert pressure, job actions, sabotage, etc. in order to get your reinstatement. Mediated Action goes directly to a lawyer and awaits the action of a magistrate.

The only type of action approved by the anarcho-union is the tactic of Direct Action, in all its congresses since 1910.

Nevertheless, and to be frank, it is necessary to consider the times and our [meager] forces. We have to resort at times to a type of mediated action by way of our legal offices and the labor magistrates. We always prefer to solve our problems without resort to lawyers, who tend to put our sovereignty into the hands of the judicial system, prolonging processes which could be more quickly resolved without it, and spending a great deal of money to maintain an expensive, parasitical, pernicious and useless legal system.

But there are times in which for lack of a resolution, or support from the people... there remains no other remedy than to resort to a lawyer, or else do nothing. For this reason on occasion it has been proposed to accept into the accords of congresses, the use of direct action preferably, but mediated action when other remedies don't exist. It has not been done, because as long as Direct Action is held to be the only tactic acceptable to anarcho-syndicalist militants, we will maintain a commitment to it, and every time that we act contrary to Direct Action, we are aware that we are breaking an accord. If we admit a type of tactics against our structure and we swallow the indigestible, it is possible that when we have enough strength and enough people to carry out our point of view without supporting legal norms, we will not be able to see it and will routinely appeal to the tribunals. [It might make more sense to adopt a clearly defined and more consistent policy on when legal means may be used, and set some limits, than to officially denounce such tactics but pretend not to notice that the union is using them. – Translator's note]

Direct Action is always quicker, cheaper and more effective than recourse to mediation. It has the disadvantage of requiring more energy and courage to carry out.

The Final Goal of Anarcho-Syndicalism

Anarcho-syndicalism wants to transform society. It wants to abolish the capitalist system and the state. It believes that no one has the right to impose their will on others in order to rob and exploit their labor, and to maintain this system supported by an apparatus of organized violence

and terror which is the state and its police system. There exists a large quantity of literature dedicated to a critique of the capitalist system, and we are not going to dwell much on this theme.

In order to arrive at this transformation, the anarcho-union affirms that there exists no other means than the Social Revolution, an abrupt change by which the authoritarian structures are demolished. It is the end of a process and the beginning of something new. The revolution occurs when the people collectively see it as necessary, when the moral, ethical, philosophical and economic basis of the system is seen as bankrupt. It is not a predictable phenomenon, nor realized by a minority, but you prepare for it, then there comes a moment when it is possible, something breaks loose, and it happens. The role of the anarcho-union is to build upon the contradictions of the system, to make clear to the people the falsehood, the deception, the exploitation committed by a ruling minority, and to be present during the revolutionary process to incite it if possible, and to avoid on the side of the revolution the self-seeking benefit of minorities, vanguards, parties, etc., and on the other, when the counter-revolution comes, that the people lose as little as possible of what they gained. The revolution must abolish property, the state, governments, police, the army, universities, churches, banks, industries, the competitive and individualist mentality... and establish new structures and forms of life.

The revolution is thought, liberty and desire in action. People who have lived through revolutionary times describe them as a festival of lights, sounds and joy. It is not a bath of blood and violence such as they show on television. The people stop in the street and talk, this happens always and is very important. They talk about everything, they talk with people of other languages and they understand them because they want to communicate with you. They talk about things that nobody before had ever said and that now comes out naturally, without effort. They accomplish things which days before would have been inconceivable... Whoever has seen such moments on any occasion will never forget them.

The revolutionary act is an act of the people. It is realized by the existing people with all their defects. There has been a debate over the centuries whether the revolution could be brought about through normal beings, who are more or less as forceful, authoritarian, violent as is this sick society, or by people who are better formed and who carry within them the form of future behavior and have been changed by education and other methods. In general, although there are as many opinions in the anarcho-union as there are persons, the CNT holds the opinion that the revolution will be realized by the people as they are today, and that the way to form persons in liberty and responsibility is first to have a social transformation. That is to say that it is first necessary to change the social structure and the people will change afterward. It likewise happens that the revolution purifies people, at least until the time in which the counter-revolution comes, and the longer the revolution lasts, the better they become.

In spite of this idea, the anarcho-union makes an effort to turn the union into a school of the people, transmitting through it by means of constant debate with other schools of thought, and foreshadowing the future society by creating here and now, a structure similar to that which we hope to substitute to authoritarian society, a new moral and ethical way of life.

The capitalist state has taken on the responsibility over the decades, with the valued aid of the establishment unions and political parties, of inculcating us with the idea that revolution doesn't bring anything more than disasters, and that in our developed western civilizations, democracy is the only viable invention. The CNT is certain that the social revolution is the only worthwhile, sincere and realistic future for the human species, that the revolution is not the bloodbath de-

picted in films and history books. The revolution must be treated as a process that is gestating now, that will arrive, as it always arrives, and we should be prepared to meet it without fear, and add fuel to the blaze. Whether it will be provoked by a strike, by a military coup, by a crash in the stock market, by the refusal to pay taxes, by a capitalist war, by factory occupations, by an invasion of immigrants, is something that we can't know. That which is certain is that a large CNT, merged with the people, will be the revolution's best guarantee of triumph, and that what has happened in previous attempts, in which the state has reasserted itself and the same conditions in a different guise, does not happen again.

The structure that society will take once the revolution is carried out, is that which the confederation calls, *Comunismo Libertario* [Libertarian Communism], an economic system in which each person will take from society what they need, and will give in exchange what they are able.

The CNT and the Spanish people had the opportunity of developing the most profound and beautiful revolution in human history, during the period of social war from 1936 to 1939. They put into practice the ideas which have been expressed above, and demonstrated that a free life and equality doesn't depend on anything more than free will. For capitalism it was necessary to wage a war of extermination, in order to destroy Utopia for the moment.

Voting in the Anarcho-Union

In the CNT voting is avoided and agreements are reached by consensus. Unfortunately when there are large numbers of people involved in the discussion it is more difficult to reach agreement and there comes a time when it is necessary to take a vote.

In local union assemblies this problem is resolved with ease. Normally votes are not taken because people within the union know each other directly and from their daily contact they are accustomed to having more or less the same ideas, and if it becomes necessary to vote by the number of those agreeing, each one gets a vote.

The problem arises when decisions have to be made in local or regional plenaries or congresses. It is already been explained that the basic structure of the CNT is the industrial union branch, or where these do not exist, the union of various occupations [SOV – *Sindicato de Oficios Varios*]. Well then, there is no completely fair method for making decisions through voting.

- If each union gets one vote, a union of 1,000 members would have the same voice in decisions as a union of 50. Two unions of 25 (2 votes) could impose their opinion onto a union of 1,000 (1 vote).
- If votes are by the number of members, a union of 2,000 members would have 2,000 votes, and 100 unions of 20 members would have the same voice in decisions as just one union. The geographical distribution of 100 unions is wider than that of just one, but an agreement obligates all unions equally even though a small union would have the same responsibility to enforce it as a big union, in spite of the greater difficulty for the small one.
- We find besides the problem of minorities. For example, union A decides to go on strike by 400 votes against 350, and would have to support its decision to strike, since that was the outcome of its assembly. Union B of the same local federation says no to the strike by 100 votes to 25. Union C of the local federation says yes by a unanimous 15 votes. There are

thus two unions in favor of the strike and one against, so a strike would be called if based on one vote per union. But adding the negative votes together, 450 voted against the strike, leaving 440 in favor. In order to avoid these possible inequalities in the anarcho-union, when a vote is needed a proportional system is called upon, which bases the decision on the number of people voting one way or the other according to the following table:

- From 1 to 50 adherents – 1 vote
- From 51 to 100 – 2 votes
- From 101 to 300 – 3 votes
- From 301 to 600 – 4 votes
- From 601 to 1000 – 5 votes
- From 1001 to 1500 – 6 votes
- From 1501 to 2500 – 7 votes
- From 2501 and beyond – 8 votes

This system benefits minorities, but its results may be disputable. For example, ten unions with 25 adherents would total 250 members having 10 votes. This would be more votes than a union of 2,500, which with 10 times more members, would only have the right to 7 votes. As you can see it is a mess. [Although perhaps no more so than in a representative body like the U.S. Congress in which tiny states like Rhode Island have proportionally more representation per citizen than populous states like California. – translator’s note]

The reason the CNT does not look for another system is because in the present day it is not necessary. The agreements consented to after discussions can seem absurd to those who started with something else in mind in the anarcho-union, but they are extremely important for the union or region which defends their position. What one thinks about the outcome of all forms depends on your frame of reference.

Whenever there is voting, one has to recognize that what is being discussed is a problem of power, and in the anarcho-union therefore one must try to vote as little as possible, and reach agreement by consensus. All our votes are open, and with raised hands. They are never secret.

Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism

The CNT is not an anarchist organization. This is something which must be made clear. The CNT is an anarcho-syndicalist union. Although there are many similarities between both things, there are also differences.

Anarchism is by definition illegal, a negation of the state which cannot give it permission to live. Anarcho-syndicalism moves within legality: it legalizes its union sections and federations in order to function more easily. Anarcho-syndicalism operates inside of major contradictions.

The base of anarchism is the affinity group, a group of close friends, without regard to jobs, or geographic location. The base of anarcho-syndicalism is the [local] union of various occupations or the industrial union branch.

Anarchist action is theoretically more revolutionary than that of the anarcho-syndicalist. Anarcho-syndicalism struggles for immediate demands, a reformist activity, even if it is outside [capitalist] institutions and based upon its own forces.

Anarcho-syndicalism permits the coexistence within it of people of various ideologies: marxists, christians, anarchists... it only requires that they be workers. Anarchist organizations are necessarily formed only of anarchists.

Anarchism functions more on the ideological level, in education, propaganda, information, cultural activity, as well as within anarcho-syndicalist unions... The union acts above all within the places of work.

Anarchism is more than an idea. Anarcho-syndicalism is more than a structure. Anarchists are supposed to be better persons than the social average, with better ethics and less egocentrism. Anarcho-syndicalism expects nothing more from its members than that they are workers and respect its structure.

Anarchism does not direct anarcho-syndicalism. For the latter it is more than enough to push forward its own projects. Besides, in Spain it has been anarcho-syndicalism which on more than one occasion has carried along, directed and employed for different purposes the anarchist organizations which supported it.

There exist good relations, fraternal, between the CNT and the different libertarian organizations on a national scale, which are in Spain, the FAI [Spanish Anarchist Federation], the FIJL [Spanish Anarchist Youth Federation], and Mujeres Libres [Anarchist Women's organization], as well as with clubs, groups and individual anarchists. The vast majority of anarchists work within the CNT, and their organizations generally help the anarcho-union without conditions.

Translator's Comments

The three parts of this series were excerpted from a longer pamphlet. I dropped the historical quotations which accompanied the original to concentrate on the contemporary material as well as to save space and translation time. I also did not include the material concerning CNT positions on various bargaining topics like salaries, hours, redundancies, etc., as well as social issues like militarism, ecology, gay rights, etc. This material would have added little to the text since CNT positions on these issues do not differ from standard left-wing socialist and labor positions. What is unique about the CNT, and separates it from other Spanish unions, is its anarcho-syndicalist structure and practice.

What is important about this look into the CNT is it shows the similarity between the CNT and the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). Although the IWW is not officially an anarcho-syndicalist union, it functions in much the same way. Like the CNT, the IWW emphasizes building worker-run industrial union branches at the point of production. In geographical areas where this is not immediately possible, the IWW allows its members to organize into General Membership Branches, similar to the SOVs (Sindicatos de Oficios Varios) of the CNT. Like the CNT, the IWW maintains that direct action is the most effective form of worker resistance to employers, but also like the CNT the IWW is ready to use whatever legal recourse it can to protect its members when direct action is not possible.

There are differences between the CNT and the IWW, of course. Unlike the CNT, the IWW is not federalist. The branches and industrial unions of the IWW are self-governing, but the IWW

has a mass elected General Executive Board with policy-making powers, although the Executive Board's actions can be overridden by member referendum. The IWW also gives its members an appeal process whereby union disciplinary actions or constitutional violations by local unions can be overturned by higher bodies. These elected central bodies and powers give individual members in the IWW more protection from arbitrary actions by local unions than in the CNT, but it is at the expense of diminishing local authority. Neither the CNT's federalism nor the IWW's elected representation is a perfect system, and both depend on their membership's vigilance and common sense to see that their system is not abused.

The CNT may have some lessons for the IWW. In the coming months, the financial crisis within the IWW may force it to reevaluate the way it is structured. Maintaining a central office with a paid General Secretary Treasurer and paid office helper may no longer be affordable. If the IWW can't straighten out its finances, a shutdown of its central office or a shift to an all-volunteer staff might be necessary. If this happens how will the IWW function as a centralized organization? Can its General Executive Board direct a non-existent or part-time General Headquarters? Perhaps adopting a more federalist structure with a General Secretariat composed of volunteers from the same or nearby General Membership Branches could be a solution. What this would mean for IWW members living in areas where there are not enough Wobblies to form a branch, is unclear. Would these individuals be forgotten by a decentralized IWW? Would a Secretariat based upon a single branch or region, serve the whole union's interest or just a local one? If the CNT is to be used as a model, we need to look at both its faults as well as its benefits.

In a forth coming issue, I would like to see a study of the SAC, the Swedish syndicalist union. The SAC may have its own answers to how to maintain a labor organization with workers' control. Stay tuned.

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