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Exploring Alternative Forms Of Workers' Organization
Anarchist Communists and the Italian 'Base Union' Movement
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Written by Donato Romito, a member of the National Secretariat of the Federazione dei Communisti Anarchici (FdCA), lives and works in Pesaro, in the Marches region of Italy. He is an elected union delegate in the school where he teaches and is a member of the grassroots union Unicobas. He participates in the activities of workers' associations and in coordinating groups between various grassroots unions in the town and region where he lives.
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- CUB: Confederazione Unitaria di Base (Unitary Base Confederation)
- RdB: Rappresentanze Sindacali di Base (Base Syndical Representation)
- SLAI Cobas: Sindacato Lavoratori Auto-organizzato Intercategoriale (Self-organized Inter-category Syndicate of Workers)
- S.in.Cobas: Sindacato Intercategoriale Cobas (Inter-category Syndicate)
- FULT: Federazione Unitaria Lavoratori Trasporti (Unitary Federation of Transport Workers)
- SNATER: Sindacato NAzionale TElecomunicazioni (National Telecommunications Syndicate)

and to "[...] enable the general union action in the wider struggle to become more efficient, to rebuild the unity of workers, to re-establish class solidarity, to regain union democracy and autonomy with the aim of a more egalitarian, more libertarian society" (from the "Appeal to Anarchist and Libertarian Union Activists", FdCA 2001).

Index of Acronyms

- COBAS: COmitato di BASe (Base Committee)
- CGdL: Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (General Labour Confederation)
- USI: Unione Sindacale Italiana (Italian Syndical Union)
- CGL: Confederazione Generale Lavoratori (General Confeferation of Workers)
- CLN: Comitato di Liberazione Nazionale (National Liberation Committee)
- CGIL: Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (General Italian Confederation of Labour)
- CISL: Confederazione Italiana Sindacale dei Lavoratori (Italian Syndical Workers' Confederation)
- UIL: Unione Italiana Lavoratori (Italian Union of Workers)
- COMU: COordinamento Macchinisti Uniti (Co-ordination of United Engine Drivers)
- CIB UNICOBAS: Confederazione Italiana di Base UNIcobas (Italian Base Confederation Unicobas)

Contents

The Syndicalist Tactics of Anarchist Communists

The highest level of exploitation and confrontation is found in the workplace and in the various sectors: this is where we need to rebuild the unity of interests between workers with different types of work contract and take back the right of decentralized bargaining, safeguard the right to health, manage working hours in order to be able to manage our lives, separate wages from productivity and reject the blackmail of overtime. Coordinating groups composed of rsu delegates from the various sectors, workers on permanent contracts and temporary contracts and migrants could represent sound forms of cooperation, unity and struggle.

Within the community, it is the task of anarchist communists to build spaces and situations where we can promote relationships and develop syndicalist theory irrespective of union or party membership. This is where we can see the richness of the various union experiences, of self-managed organizations and unions, of those activists who pursue certain struggles (both partial and more general) upon which we can federate the workers from different unions. Chambers of Labor connecting the various unions, popular labor forums, regional co-ordinating groups of grassroots unions — these can all be places where we can work towards the effective defence of the class interests of all workers and migrants.

On a national level, it falls to anarchist union activists to ensure that it is possible to federate class sectors, union activists and the various grassroots unions on a platform within unavailable objectives and principles regarding wages, work hours, rights, services and union democracy.

It was for this reason that the FdCA launched an Appeal to Anarchist and Libertarian Union Activists in 2001, irrespective of the union they were members of, which sought to co-ordinate their action (with full regard for the libertarian praxis of free agreement),

We choose the workers over any particular union. We choose the unity of the workers over any particular union. We support the struggles of the workers for the defence of their interests, irrespective of the form or union involved or of the type of syndicalism involved, provided it can lead to an improvement in the living conditions of the proletariat, and to the creation of freer spaces within society. And if, in these struggles and/or unions, we are able to bring our ideas, to influence through our ideas, we will have contributed to strengthening the autonomy of the workers and promoting the role of class-struggle anarchism. In other words, we will have engaged in real revolutionary syndicalism, real anarcho-syndicalism, real libertarian syndicalism, real… syndicalism.

It is the material situation of labour which determines the organizational possibilities of one union over another, rather than our revolutionary wishes. It is the actual condition of the relationships of power which widen the possibilities of radical syndicalism with a libertarian praxis, rather than our simply being anarchists.

We are materialists, after all, aren't we? Well then, let the advanced elements and sectors of the working class who are part of the internal opposition in the CGIL or in the many alternative unions be seen as an objective fact. Whether we like it or not. A strategy can be built on what is possible and not only on what is right. But radical syndicalism based on a libertarian praxis cannot be achieved with the following three elements:

- autonomy from party and political domination;
- unity of the workers, reached through the definition of a general platform of radical syndicalism wherever and however it appears; unity of objectives and methods of struggle;
- revolutionary strength, through libertarian praxis in the internal organization of whatever type of union; this applies equally both when developing the general platform and during the phase of bargaining.

> "The unions were born, historically speaking, in the workplace as a result of precise material needs of the working masses who made up its membership and under whose control they operated."
>
> — Anarchist Communists and the Mass Organization (UCAT, 1984)

Since its beginnings, the Italian workers' movement has expressed two trends: one bureaucratic and tending towards reformist, the other self-organized and tendentially more radical or revolutionary. These two trends have often cohabited within the same mass organization while at other times they have given rise to different organizations. In the first decade of the 20th century, the two trends in fact corresponded to two different labour organizations — the reformist CGdL and the revolutionary syndicalist USI (a split from the CGdL), while there were also radical unions among the railway and marine workers. Anarchist workers were members of these unions, and even occupied positions of great responsibility within them.

During the famous Biennio Rosso ("Two Red Years"), from 1919 to 1921, which preceded the advent of fascism, Factory Councils were formed in the occupied factories, in which anarchist workers played a determining role. This was the first example in Italy of grassroots labour organizations in the workplace.

The Fascist regime then instituted its own syndicates, within which recent historiography has recognized the role of those ex-USI syndicalists who did not go into exile, but stayed in Italy at the side of the workers. It was certainly a difficult choice given the risk of compromise with the Fascist regime, but it also helped in the survival of "red" ideas which later led to the factory revolts of 1938 and the General Strike of 1943.

In the same year, the attempt on the part of anarchists and radical communists in the newly-liberated South to build the CGL was smothered by the government, the Allies and the parties in the CLN

and led to the creation of the CGIL after the war. In this, the anarchist current was so active that it was offered the position of general secretary alongside a communist, a socialist and a catholic. The offer was rejected.

But there had already begun a progressive distancing of the Italian anarchist movement from union work and the attempt at reconstituting the USI failed.

The CGIL then suffered two splits: the catholic area left in order to create today's CISL which then itself split, when the non-religious social-democratic part withdrew to create today's UIL. Only the communist and socialist areas remained within the CGIL.

The reformist drive which affected the country from the mid '60s to the early '70s was responsible for a rebirth of the Factory Councils with different structural characteristics to those of the '20s, but basically establishing themselves as organs of autonomous self-organized workers' power. The first grassroots labour collectives known as cub ("comitati unitari di base," or unitary grassroots committees) were also founded throughout the country. This corresponded to the emergence of political formations to the left of the PCI and of a radical syndicalist left within the CGIL.

During this decade, the confederal unions, CGIL-CISL-UIL, were able to re-absorb and defuse the autonomy of the Factory Councils, but the grassroots, self-organized syndicalist option had by that stage reached the point of becoming ingrained on the collective union memory, thanks to its forms and content. This is the climate in which the category of "syndical base" was born, an area which is opposed to the bureaucracy of management and fed by the ethos and experiences of struggle and organization from below and which pervaded Italy throughout the '70s. In the anarchist movement, only the young anarchist communist organizations understood what was happening and they created national structures for the coordination of anarchist workers.

Many militants entered the confederal unions, which they considered mass organizations where it was possible to meet large

Without the history behind it of anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism, Italian grassroots syndicalism remains trapped between the radicalism of its platforms and the need for bargaining, between its criticism of bureaucratism and the inevitable formation of a leadership class — but always providing each tiny union survives.

We anarchist communists place ourselves wherever the class consciousness organizes itself in any given historical period, in the forms laid out by the social conflict and the subjectivity of the workers. We do not have any pre-defined boxes nor do we follow any particular form of syndicalism: the FORA in Argentina and the Spanish CNT, the IWW and the USI from the '10s to the '20s — can all provide useful teachings, as can the French Labour Exchanges, the anarchist elements of the Italian CGdL in the '10s and '20s and the CGIL in the fifties.

However, over and above the defined mass organizations, we must carefully watch the forms of self-organization of the working class in the workplaces and in the community because that is where the mass organizations are built. There, where anarchist union activists are on the inside of that organized expression of the working class, encouraging its growth. We also observe the evolution of capitalism and the working class answer to it, so that the ideas of the anarchist communists, developed within our specific political organizations, can become a leadership of ideas in the definition of the objectives and forms of struggle within the mass organization or organization in which they are members.

This is what unites us as anarchist communists. This is what unites me with other members of my organization who are members of a different union than mine. If, instead, we had to do all this from the starting point of the union we were members of or through a particular form of syndicalism, we might perhaps be reduced only to being a limited coordinating group of union activists seeking to protect our own little union.

only too well that unity and revolutionary strength lie in practices (struggles and organization) and statutes. It is for this reason that we reject the conception of a mass organization founded on spontaneism and on ideologism. The former deprives the class of the possibility to establish an organization over time and over wide areas while the latter bases its unity on a shared ideology, thereby separating the workers and breaking that unity which is the basis of the defence of class interests.

We therefore believe that if a mass organization declares itslf to be anarcho-syndicalist, if it is composed only of anarchists and is based on a shared anarchist ideology, it falls within the conception of ideologism. It is of course a different matter if it is anarcho-syndicalism that characterizes the forms of struggle and the internal structure of the mass organization or its representatives, that is to say if anarcho-syndicalism is practiced as a tendency/development/result of the unity and the revolutionary strength of the mass organization, and not as a foregoing requirement. An anarcho-syndicalist mass organization is not the most maximalist one, but the one which breaks the pattern of reaching agreements, which creates room for conflict, which seeks advanced, practicable objectives and which uses direct democracy in its bargaining.

The same is true for revolutionary syndicalism. If a revolutionary syndicalist mass organization is just that by reason of its members being ideologically revolutionary, then it does not matter which anti-capitalist ideology they believe in and if revolutionary syndicalism is an a priori component of this mass organization, then we fall back once again into ideologism. The revolutionary level should not be measured by the revolutionary beliefs of the members, by the maximalism of its platform, by the harshness of its forms of struggle. It should refer to the capacity of the mass organization to represent a credible reference point for the workers — revolutionary or otherwise — in the defence of their interests.

numbers of workers and where, through a process of direct democracy, they could work from a grassroots level towards the defence of the immediate interests of the class and for the historical interests of the proletariat.

The economic crisis of the late ‘70s and the pincer effect on the mass struggle created by political terrorism and State repression opened the doors to the labour defeats of the early ‘80s, together with an abandonment of reformist policies by the confederal unions. In 1984, the movement of the “self-convening factory councils” tried to revive the expectations of the “syndical base” regarding questions such as the autonomy of workplace councils and wages which, thanks to the CGIL’s strategy, had lost their characteristic of “independent variable” in the productive cycle. It was the last attempt within the factories to rebel against the cruel destiny which over 15 years had transformed the Councils from autonomous agents in the class struggle into cogs in the machine of the unions. The structural changes in the productive cycle were by that stage taking place against the backdrop of a weakening of workers’ organizations in the factories, in tune with the political choices of the union bureaucracies outside the factories.

In fact, it was in the state sector, which had avoided the structural changes affecting the factories, that the struggle from below was to take off again: there had already been skirmishes in the areas of transport, health and education in the late ‘70s, but 1986 was to see the explosion of the COBAS in the schools and railway sectors. Their principal demands were large pay increases for everyone, an end to wage incentives, permanent contracts for those on temporary contracts and union rights for all workers. As these demands were in direct contrast to those of the confederal unions, the latter were seen as a counterpart to the COBAS movement. The “syndical base” awoke again, this time in sectors which were not a traditional part of the council tradition, to shake up the union bureaucracies or try new methods. Soon, in fact, the widescale dis-

agreement among train drivers with the confederal unions' policies led to the creation of a strong new union, the COMU.

The COBAS in the schools created for themselves an organization of school delegates, later provincial delegates who participated in the national assembly. Being a mass movement, they included tens of thousands of teachers who were already members of unions, and some who weren't. Also in the schools, the confederal unions were unable to re-absorb the COBAS who, however, quickly became bogged down in sterile debate about whether or not to remain as a mass movement or to set themselves up as a new union in the sector, something which led to them almost disappearing altogether from the scene.

In 1988, we wrote: "Both as a result of the pulverization of labour structures (in schools as in the railways) and due to the absence of alternative proposals, the problematic re-growth of models such as councilism has forced the movements into an exasperated "assemblyism" which only serves to favour political rather than direct representation [...]. So while recent phases of the social conflicts have seen a renewed need for the direct involvement of large sectors of employed workers — which could be described as a strong drive towards the self-management of the struggle — there has also been a notable absence of an organizational model which would be able to respond satisfactorily to the formation of organisms which can effectively and definitively break with the bureaucratic and institutionalised syndicalism of the confederal unions." (Saverio Craparo, "La democrazia di base nel movimento dei lavoratori" [Grassroots Democracy in the Workers' Movements], FdCA 1988)

But by this stage, the banks had burst. The first anti-strike laws directed against the cobas were approved with the okay of the confederal unions and served to deepen the divide. In 1991 there was the first nationwide strike called by the various cobas groups from different categories against the Gulf War. COBAS was no longer a single grassroots organization or mass movement, but had become synonymous with a plethora of small union organizations.

The Anarchist Communist Strategy

As we have seen:

- class unity has been broken on many occasions;
- representation of the class is today in the hands of a whole series of unions each claiming the title of mass workers' organization, be it on the level of institution or at grassroots level:
- the capacity of the proletariat to organize itself in Councils seems to have exhausted itself with the changes in the organization of labour or else been absorbed by the union bureaucracies; it is perhaps emerging again today as a mutant, providing the spark for countless protests against the confederal unions' line and nursing the alternative and grassroots unions.

But what about us? For us, mass organizations are the product of the capacity of the working class to organize its strength in the clash with capital in any given historical and socio-economic context irrespective of sex, religion, geographical origin or ideology. Consequently, the unity of the mass organization comes from the ability of its objectives and its struggles to defend the immediate (and historical) interests of the proletariat to be widely shared. Its revolutionary force comes not only and not so much from the maximalism of its demands of from the harshness of the struggle, but from its capacity to function according to a libertarian method of decision-making and responsibility. These two characteristics of the mass organization place the anarchist communists in a situation of continual confrontation with the authoritarian currents, who — both as far as objectives and struggles are concerned (the reformists and the trade unionists) and as far as control is concerned (the authoritarian communists) — try to weaken or erase the autonomy of the mass organization. Anarchist communists know

workplace. It is strongly biased towards the communist left-wing, but autonomously with respect to the parliamentary left, which was to result in a split which led to the birth of the S.in.Cobas. Its original statute foresees a horizontal structure.

S.in.Cobas: A split from the SLAI guided by Rifondazione Comunista. It is active above all in certain factories and in local administration, thanks also to its parliamentary connections.

Other base unions are active only within certain categories, for example the Or.S.A. and SULT in the transport sector and SNaTeR in telecommunications. All the so-called base unions, with the possible exception of the USI, found themselves effectively forced to present candidates at the union elections in the workplace, with some even obtaining excellent results. However, there is unfortunately no data available to allow us to establish if the base union delegates have been able to practice a proper relationship between delegate and workers, as one would expect of anti-bureaucratic syndicalists, in respecting the mandates they have received from their workmates who have elected them.

2001–2003

The victory of Berlusconi and his right-wing government in the elections has, for now at least, forced the CGIL into taking on again a more combative role, given that its existence and legitimacy as Italy's biggest union is at stake. The return to militancy of the CGIL, with all the weight of its organization — 5 million members — has clearly placed a shadow over the grassroots unions who now seem to be more concerned with distancing themselves from the CGIL than with looking to build a vast mass movement against the government. This was dramatically seen on the occasion of recent strikes this autumn against the destruction of state pensions, with the aggravating factor of the appearance of further divisions between the various base unions.

This was the moment of the birth of "base syndicalism,â€ or grassroots syndicalism, as distinct from confederal syndicalism. It was a galaxy, composed for the main part of advanced political militants active in the world of labor, but was potentially capable of attracting large radical sectors of the class. During the first great financial crisis following the war, the CGIL-CISL-UIL trio were forced into partnership with the government and the bosses and in the autumn of 1993 there were violently vociferous protests in the streets against their leaders. The war on union representation was now declared and the agreements signed by these three unions, by which they managed to obtain an exclusive on the right to represent the workers, seemed like a bad joke.

1995–2001

These were the years of centre-left government when we witnessed the absolute submission and complicity of the confederal unions. The CGIL, above all, stands accused of throwing open the doors of Italy to neo-liberalism by supporting and facilitating the bosses and the centre-left governments without criticism, with the introduction of reforms and contracts which only served to worsen the workers' conditions. The dissention which was widely expressed in all areas served to strengthen the "base unions" at a local level, or within certain categories, but there remained a weakness regarding global representation of the collective class interests. In recompense, the cobas also spread to the factories — right to the heart of the CGIL's union power!! However, the politico-syndicalist class which was at the root of the various grassroots syndicalist organizations had come from different ideological backgrounds and political choices, and soon this resulted in competition between the base unions, each trying to assert their hegemony within a certain sector or among the few thousand workers that they represented. There were various futile consultation pacts, there were

cartels which at times included all but at other times excluded this one or that one; the CGIL (which supported the war in Kosovo) was systematically demonized, but there was never any strategy of dialogue with its members or with its internal opposition. Grassroots syndicalism set itself up as an alternative to a CGIL which was no longer viable, not even for reformism, but in the cobas galaxy everyone felt they were an alternative to everyone else or imagined themselves to be a possible pole of reference for the others. These were the years when the opportunity was lost to make a great step forward through a federative pact between the various organizations.

The Grassroots Syndicalist Organizations

USI: Revived in 1978, it reached a certain consistency in the '90s, before it split into two (following disagreement on union practices), with a more syndicalist, open wing and the more orthodox, ideological wing. The split was later sanctioned by the IWA (AIT). USI-AIT today claims a historical legitimacy as a revolutionary, anarcho-syndicalist union, which is lost to the collective memory, and seems to attract workers who have already made a political choice towards anarchism or libertarianism. It considers its anti-war activities to be central. The other USI, excluded from the IWA, is limited more or less to the city of Rome where it is quite active through its policy of labour forums. Both organizations lay claim to the name USI.

CIB Unicobas: This union was born from the cobas movement in the schools in 1991 and describes itself as an independent, libertarian union, something which has been responsible for an appreciable growth over recent years, particularly in the schools sector. It makes no ideological claims and has a horizontal organizational structure. Having been, in the early '90s, a driving force for the aggregation of base unions, it is now going through a phase of self-

isolation due to differences with other base unions who tend to exclude it. It is part of the SIL network and, together with CGT-Spain, SUD-France and SUD-Switzerland it is working towards the creation of a European federation of alternative unions, the FESAL.

Confederazione COBAS: This is the Cobas that is most commonly seen in demonstrations and on TV, despite it only formally becoming a union quite recently. It is descended from the remains of the school cobas groups of the '80s and is still strongest in this area. It presents itself as a political, syndicalist and cultural entity, which makes it seem something of a party-union-cultural association. This, in fact, leads one to suppose that its members share not only a common labor strategy, but also a political and ideological line. This characteristic together with its tendency to want to devour all around it, was mainly responsible for the failure of the policy of trying to get "all the cobas into one single union". It enjoys great political and media support among the Italian communist left wing, which also serves to make it much more visible than the other base unions, but also much more susceptible to the general political choices of parties such as Rifondazione Comunista or structures like the Social Forums, one of whose greatest exponents is in fact the Confederazione COBAS leader.

CUB: Federated with the RdB (which is strong in the civil service), the CUB is the largest grassroots confederation in Italy, with unions in several different categories. It grew out of a split in the machinists' sector of the CISL. It has been able to reach the requisites which enable it to enjoy national representativity, something which has permitted it to participate in talks for national work contracts, while placing itself firmly as an alternative to the CIGL-CISL-UIL trio. It has a vertical organizational structure, with paid officers and services for workers. It employs a distinct syndicalist line, with no apparent ideological interference.

SLAI COBAS: This union exists above all within certain large industrial plants where it practices highly radical policies and is able to win votes and seats in the union representation elections in the