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Anarcho-Syndicalism: A Historical Closed Door...or Not?

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It is often said, that even if large-scale revolutionary unions was still a possibility, they would never be able to organize the entire working class. This most likely is very true. At least it is not very wise to base a strategy on the opposite at this point in history. Thus membership should never been seen as an end in itself but as a means. There can be only one end: an all-inclusive global society borders, classes and hierarchies, and consequently also without states, and in the here and now to practice this as far as we can. But for this we have to start building the links between workers. Links which once created, we will gladly share and extend to others so long as it is on the basis of practical, non-hierarchical solidarity.

whether they were actually workers in the shipyard itself, or women or children or grandparents, could go along to the village assembly and actually vote and take part in the decision-making process of what was taking place...

What we tried to do in Puerto Real is to show that the anarcho-syndicalist union is not just an industrial organization that takes on factory disputes, but rather has a much wider social and political aim. What we have tried to do in Puerto Real so far is to attempt to interlink various different disputes, taking on various struggles around education, around the provision of health services, cultural aspects, and we have been struggling against the proposed construction of a new golf course, the privatization of the cemetery, we have been fighting against various local tax increases...

–Pepe Gomez of the CNT, October 1993. From “Anarcho-Syndicalism in Puerto Real,” published by Solidarity Federation/La Prensa, 1995. P.O. Box 73, Norwich, NR3 1QD, U.K.

Direct action in the anarchist sense means making as far as possible the means into the ends, and thus bringing about a re-arrangement of the world on a small or large scale. By using our potential industrial power to accomplish this, we may not only bring about modest changes in our lives, but put our own and other worker’s imagination on fire, opening up our eyes to the wide field of our potential powers. This is even more important in a time where capitalism has super-imposed itself as a social factory on increasingly larger parts of our lives, and where the division of labor has been driven to such extent that it becomes increasingly difficult to see, through the fog of atomization, that it is we who are producing this world as a whole.

Ilan Shalif, a libertarian communist whose thoughts I value even when I do not agree with the conclusions reached, made the following remarks on the electronic discussion list of class-struggle anarchists, Organise, which provoked the following thoughts. (However, he would not necessarily agree with all the positions I argue against below.)

Anarcho-syndicalist union is a myth and a dream that cannot be materialized in the capitalist society of this time. And if it could be, it would have been only of its members. Nothing can belong to the wider working class but the fact that its members are exploited by the capitalist class. ... I still can not see at present any anarcho-syndicalist union that is not so only in name. (Either it is not a union or it is already on the way of co-option and reformism.) ... In the capitalist society of the 2000s, it is hard to imagine any practical union which is not big and co-opted. It is entirely different thing with regard to workers committees in a not too huge conglomerate....

It is like in wave surfing at the sea – you can “catch” waves, you cannot create them. In our struggles, we [libertarian communists] are part of the water, but the main variable is the wind of history – we can only contribute to it our breath.

When the time will come that authentic workers unions will tend to become libertarian it will mean that the revolution is already on it.

Is anarcho-syndicalism, and revolutionary unionism in general, a historical closed door: a dream that cannot be materialized in the capitalist society of this time?

Contemporary story may seem to back up such a claim. In the post World War 11 period the syndicalist Central Organisation of

Sweden's Workers (SAC) was transformed into a bleak shadow of its former self. This carries some significance as, with the exception of the French CGT in a much earlier period, SAC is the only revolutionary union never to be brutally suppressed. Meanwhile the Wobblies of the IWW are alive and kicking, but only 900 of them; the CNT after Franco is reduced to below ten thousand members, and in the very place of its former grandeur, Catalonia, is crumbling from inner tensions; the modest growth of the French CNT and Unione Sindicale Italiana produced passionate disputes on questions of co-optation and reformism, and ended in splits; the German FAU is showing progress as far as newspaper production goes, but there is little sign of union-building; Solidarity Federation's industrial network in U. K. consists of half a hundred members; elsewhere the situation is pretty much like in Norway where NSF has kept it going since 1976 as a small propaganda group, with currently approximately 40 members spreading the message within the corporative unions. The renewed interest in Eastern Europe has so far produced nothing more. In the early historical strongholds of anarcho-syndicalism in South and Central America, the situation is even bleaker than in Europe. The most promising sign in a long term perspective may be the reappearance of the advocacy of revolutionary unionism in South Africa, and for the first time in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, but any union is at this point nowhere to be seen. The general picture Ilan paints of the current state of affairs is true enough, even if one could always argue over its complete accuracy, but that would mostly be on definitions.

But to permanently shut the historical door of anarcho-syndicalism, it is not enough to empirically determine its current state, and to disclose the mechanisms within contemporary capitalism working against building such a movement in the immediate future, one would also have to deny the possibility of its re-emergence in times when the class struggle intensifies, and more workers begin believing in a world beyond capitalism. The present marginality, and for the most part non-existence of

And as an essential, integrated part of this, opening up spaces for collective discussions where the dream of a society beyond capitalism can be nourished.

At the present stage, building the structures of revolutionary unionism must be seen as a vehicle to awaken this dream within the working class of a world beyond capitalism. It is very hard to see how this could be done to any large extent within the framework of corporative unionism. Corporative unionism is beyond the state of reform. It must be deconstructed. Therefore also the importance of an open anarcho-syndicalism.

Open Anarcho-Syndicalism

An open anarcho-syndicalism implies that solidarity is extended beyond the membership: To on a micro and macro level think in terms of the working class as a whole, and develop links of solidarity and practical coherence to the rank and file and local branches wholly or partially controlled by workers within the bureaucratized structure of the corporative unions. The union principle has no meaning outside a union of solidarity, which ultimate measure is not membership but practical solidarity.

While the workplace is the obvious point of departure for anarcho-syndicalism, it cannot see it as its limit, something which would tie it to the logic of capitalism. An instance of beyond-the-workplace-unionism is the struggles CNT has been engaged in against the closing down of the shipyards of Puerto Real, near Cadiz in the south of Spain, where the struggle was extended to the communities as a whole and to the conditions of life within them:

Every Thursday of every week, in the towns and villages in the area, we had all-village assemblies where anyone who was connected with the particular issue,

To Catch the Winds

The rejection of anarcho-syndicalism out of fear of co-option has a slight similarity to the sailor who shrinks from learning to swim as he is concerned it might put his life in jeopardy.

To recreate anarcho-syndicalism may seem to be the vicious circle of being too few to set out and remaining so because the organization for workers to join is not there. Even when the first framework is set up, and there exists something you can begin talking of in terms of a union, many will say: "Could be a good idea, but far too small to be a union. If more workers join, I will consider it." Despite its legendary history this is pretty much the situation for the IWW today.

But this mechanism works both ways; having reached a certain level, an organization may suddenly enter into a fast growth. A similar effect may occur when the nucleus of revolutionary unionx pop up at several different places within a short period of time. There is even something to a name: the reaction an organization will be met with, it will be different when presenting itself as a propaganda group for an idea to be implemented somewhere in a distant future, than if it presents itself as a union-building organization based on certain principles. If a revolutionary union is what you want, it becomes essential to start building a structure which may be put in use (on a small scale) in the here and now for practical solidarity, and as such be viewed as a functional too by others.

However refined the methods of co-option are made, the winds of discontent will always be blowing. Recreating anarcho-syndicalism involves fanning the flames of discontent and disrespect towards bosses. But the structure must be there to channel and give extended life to these winds, suppling them with some direction and a greater strength by bringing them together. Our task consists in bulding direct links of some permanence between workers locally, within the limits of the state and globally, and from the workplace to the communities in which we live.

revolutionary unionism, could very likely be said to be a reflection of the current generalized lack of confidence among workers in the very possibility to build a world without capitalist social relations. The question should also be asked: would building even a marginal revolutionary unionist structure at the present moment function as a vehicle for increased confidence in parts of the working class? I find reasons to believe that the answer to this is yes. But let us first take a look ahead.

The Link to the Future Society

It is logical for social revolutionaries to view the organizational question in the light of their ends; to find means consistent with the needs of a future global libertarian communist society, or here more particularly with the needs of a transition to such a society: the bridge to the organizational forms perpetually created anew within the boundaries of materiality by the needs, desires and imaginative powers of members of a free society.

We live in a world with an excessively developed division of labor. This makes the existence of horizontal links between workers critical to the success of asocial revolution. This is not an entirely new situation. The absence of pre-existing horizontal links was one of the main factors contributing to the failure of the Russian revolution, sustaining among workers a lack of confidence in their ability for self-management beyond the limits of the workplace.

Workers councils are predominantly structured around geographical units and are not adequate to deal with the day to day horizontal links of production in a non-bureaucratic manner. Thus it was no coincidence that it was through the soviets that the Bolsheviks first established their separate power, while the factory committees served as a base for opposition and workers' power during the short revolutionary period in Russia, a power which soon dissolved in the absence of functional horizontal ties.

While these are not unique to revolutionary syndicalism, and also bureaucratic unions maintain them, they are there only exceptionally direct links between workers in general: as a rule they bring the select few together and serve the function of isolating workers into mutual passivity, transforming mutual contact and aid into the business of a stratum of specialists cultivating the noble art of empty phrases – making any direct contact between workers in general suspect and illegitimate.

The Question of Permanent Organizations

Some social revolutionaries forswear any permanent large-scale working class organization within the framework of capitalism. As capitalism is the very *raison d'être* of such organizations, these organizations, in trying to maintain their separate existence when the class struggle has reached a stage where this framework may be transcended, become institutionalised obstacles blocking the way for the full unfolding of the revolution. The revolution must create its own organizational forms; those which may endure and grow within the framework of capitalism will be inadequate to the needs of the social revolution. The unions in their function as brokers of labor power cannot escape the logic of capital, regardless of the political convictions of its delegates and the efforts to develop democratic union structures. It thus becomes critical to uncover the illusions of unionism and diffuse knowledge of working class struggles directed simultaneously against the employers and the union.

But following this logic, these anti-union struggles will be compelled to either transform themselves into alternative structures taking up in themselves the function of a union, or fall back to a situation of atomization within or without the corporative union structure. Consequently one is seemingly left with the illusionist trick of making atomization the springboard of the social revolution. More likely, the tacit assumption underlying this strategical

be more precise, capitalism imposes the situation which produces the need for them, and from this need we cannot escape before we take the world in our own hands. The more disorganized we are as workers – membership in corporative unions being often just a particular kind of disorganization, functioning largely as the organization of passivity and division – the more we will become a flexible material in the hands of others, and ruled by the logic of capital.

The labor contract, whether collective or individual, is by its very nature a disciplinary mechanism at the very foundation of capitalism. Entering into such contracts involves a conditional acceptance of the class relations. This is simply the prerequisite of survival of any worker, and not something one can withdraw from on the basis of one's political convictions.

As wage slaves – temporarily employed or unemployed, in the process of being formed as one, or already discarded – we are linked to the functioning of capitalism. But this linkage is not total; we are not the mere appendages of capital. Our acceptance is always conditional: In wildcat strikes and in an endless numbers of minor acts of sabotage and obstruction daily taking place at most every workplace, we temporarily withdraw it. There exists a cleavage in the link that can be widened or tightened, which also implies that the process described above is reversible. The contrary would also be sensational, implying that the structure of unions could somehow remain entirely unaffected by the general ebb and tide of the class struggle. The anarcho-syndicalist project is to make the forced acceptance of the class relation more and more conditional, until the final explosion of energy, dreams, thoughts and desires, where the linkage is broken, classes abolished and our free individual and collective creative powers are put in use to non-hierarchically rule the present and future, without the bondage imposed by the Siamese twins of state and capital.

a corpse of worker representatives extending from the top to the bottom levels, most of the times both capable and willing to sustain peace, order and a spirit of mutual responsibility for the welfare of capitalism, and with the state as the final, “neutral” arbiter.

This corporative structure may be most clearly expressed in countries like the Scandinavian ones with a high percentage of workers organized into passivity, but even in countries with a very low percentage of unionization, the overall conditions of the working class as a whole is largely determined within the framework of a the more or less corporative union-employer-state relation. This latter situation however tends to open up a wider potential field for action and organizational structures more difficult to control.

In places where unions are wholly or partially outlawed, and where consequently direct action often is the only channel for discontent left, the situation becomes less predictable and potentially explosive. Conditions vary somewhat from country to country. In India, according to one source from that part of the world, every union is a private enterprise, a money machine for its owner(s). There is no way out of studying unions and the situation they operate under concretely, but still what is most striking in the overall picture is that the moment unions gain some legality, there is a strong tendency that they are co-opted into a resemblance of the unionism of the former Soviet Union. Is not the AFL-CIO in many ways, if not in all, just such an outfit? Still, is this all unions could possibly become within contemporary capitalism?

The Cleavage in the Link

Workers will always organize themselves whenever they see the need, and they have the sufficient cohesion and collective strength to do so. Unions are simply not something we can avoid, even if we so wished: they are something capitalism imposes upon us, or to

thought is that a revolutionary ferment will arise from within the corporative union structure, thus making itself entirely dependent on the continued existence of this framework.

The critique of unionism contained within the above position is, however, not alien to anarcho-syndicalism. The awareness of its inevitable contradictory nature is at very core of anarcho-syndicalism and the source of its vitality. In this it captures the fundamental reality of the working class within capitalism and inserts itself into the very terrain where social revolutions are born, and where they also repeatedly have been lost. Anarcho-syndicalism’s contradictory nature at the same time constitutes its driving revolutionary force and puts it in jeopardy of being co-opted by the logic of capitalism. Therefore the great emphasis on institutionalized precautions to prevent the latter development and the re-occurring conflicts within anarcho-syndicalism.

The only guarantee against co-option is death, so it becomes self-evident that any permanent organizational structure within capitalism will perpetually run the risk of being co-opted, and as such become an obstacle in a revolutionary situation. But to counter the argument, would an organizational structure emerging in the heat of a revolutionary situation, composed of workers with most of their concrete experiences from within a bureaucratized, corporative union structure, or disorganized altogether, be less likely to be co-opted into either an old or new class relation? I think not. The opposite seems a far more rational judgement. The tendency to reformism and co-option which always will exist within revolutionary unionism (the “heroes” growing tired) constitutes one of its greatest assets. It forces these questions to be answered concretely on a day-to-day basis, and not just in an abstract future. I refuse to accept the logic that being accustomed to a greater degree of servility and passivity is a great asset in a revolutionary situation. Neither do I see any historical evidence supporting this view, but on the contrary an endless trail of blood and a line of tyrants giving witness to the opposite.

It may even be asked if the rejection by genuine revolutionaries of all permanent mass organizations is not the ultimate triumph of capitalist co-optation.

The Question of Co-optation

Since the time of the emergence of a mass union movement, and the “glorious” period of revolutionary syndicalism, capitalism has greatly sophisticated the mechanism which enables it to integrate unions into its development. This process started the moment private and state capital felt compelled to accept the existence of unions.

This acceptance has everywhere been intimately bound to the condition that the unions through their representatives exercise a restraining and disciplinary influence, and when necessary use sanctions to keep their members within certain limits to the point where unions have become the main factor upholding capitalist stability. Some fragments of this history in two of the Scandinavian countries may illustrate this:

From 1905 the Swedish Employer’s Association (SAF) started working towards a system of nationwide collective bargaining and binding, time-limited agreements. As is often the case, it was foremost the major industrial companies which saw the advantage of integrating unions into positions of shared responsibility, and the attendant consolidation of centralism such a process was bound to entail. As more and more binding agreements were entered on a national level between the member organizations of SAF and the social democratic union confederation LO, this left the syndicalist SAC, with its principled stand against such contracts in an entrenched position. What should be considered licit and illicit forms of industrial actions and procedures was agreed upon and later confirmed and institutionalized through the “Law on Collective Agreements and the Industrial Tribunal” of 1928. This law, which was

to be followed up by others, became an instrument for connecting, not only injunctions and sanctions but likely more crucial, benefits such as unemployment insurance to what was regulated in nationwide contracts. Members of SAC were to be covered by these, even if their union refused to have any part in them. The law of 1928 stands out as a milestone in a process which effectively marginalized SAC, the expressed intention of both SAF and LO. Since then a thousand threads have been spun binding the employers associations, the unions and the state together in a web of interdependence.

In Norway, the national contracts were largely a result of the Norwegian Employer’s Association’s lock-out strategy. But from about 1911 there had developed a strong syndicalist inspired opposition within LO advocating direct-action methods. In 1918 the Iron and Metal Worker’s Federation resolved to lay the power of beginning and ending industrial actions in the hands of the workers directly affected, while the Workingman’s Federation, the largest union at the time, resolved to abstain from signing local contracts. What went under the name, “recognized terms,” had also increasingly supplanted written contracts locally. This led to a court decision in 1920 saying that the unions would be hold juridically responsible for the actions of their local branches, whether they chose to sign the contracts or not, thus undermining one of the principal reasons not to be an official party in any written contract: “to get away from the condition where the employers can force the union to intervene when irregularities occur.”

The slave contracts as they were aptly called at the time, would not go away. Instead, around them an intricate web of laws and binding agreements were to regulate every potential and imaginal conflict between buyers and sellers of labor power. Within this framework there was no room left for revolutionary unionism... which in effect became unlawful. In the process workers gained something but the employers gained far more: stable conditions for the continued exploitation of labor, a pacified workforce, and