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Syndicalism in Norway

Harald Beyer-Arnesen

1993

The following interview with Lonsslaven (Wage Slave) co-editor Harald Beyer-Arnesen was conducted October 17th. Lonsslaven is an independent anarcho-syndicalist journal published in Oslo, Norway. It has been extensively edited.

LLR: Could you describe the situation in Norway?

For many years, since the second world war, we have had a social democratic party in the government called the Labor Party — not all of the time, but most of the time. And you can say in one way that you have one big union in Norway, which is not completely true because you've got another one that's pretty big. But most workers are in the union, and the great majority among them are organized in what is called L.O., the country organization, which has very strong ties to the labor party. This is a long tradition, from way back, because the labor party started before the L.O.

But we have a social democratic government at the moment, and have had for a long time, and the policies of this government are pretty right wing. Which is not surprising because of course they're a government in a capitalistic system, and a capitalistic system that has grown more and more international. So they can't in reality do so very much different that a conservative governments, because

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they're of course pro-capitalism, though they want to have an icing.

What used to be a social security that people took for granted is slowly being taken away from people. Their life is much less secure, you have high unemployment, people can't pay the rent for their apartments and are losing their apartments. Since the second world war that's a new situation for Norway, and the same thing is happening in Denmark and Sweden. Since the war we had had this sort of deal between the government and the unions that there should be some sort of social security, and then we'll be quiet. I'm not using this as a technical term, you still have social security benefits, but they're cutting and cutting.

As more and more people lose their jobs they don't feel very secure. And the social democratic party says that the methods they used before in the 40s and the 50s can't be used now; they talk more and more in terms of markets, which have of course always been there. There's more privatization, more talk that everything has to be profitable — also social services and things like that — and in general that people should work harder and crave less, while the employing class in reality is getting richer and richer. Which the social democratic government again says of course they must because they must have much more capital if they're going to compete on a world basis.

Many old-time social democrats don't recognize this language. Because even though the social democratic party has long been pro-capitalistic, if you don't go way back in history, their language has always been different from the conservative party, but now they even begin to sound like the conservative party. So you have growing opposition among members of the labor party and sympathizers with the party who might have been members almost their whole life, because they feel that the leaders of the party have become leaders more for the rich than for the working class.

Much of this opposition is inside the unions. Within this opposition are also different left-wing groups. So this opposition is a

very mixed group. It could even be people working for the conservative party, but the majority would be people that we could call left social-democrats...

LLR: What prospects do you see for syndicalism?

I think the prospects are greater than they have been for many, many years, for many reasons. One is that people aren't as satisfied as they seemed to be before, which of course doesn't make them anarcho-syndicalists but it can make them ask questions that they didn't ask before and be more open to alternative ideas. At the same time that the system in Eastern Europe has crumbled, the old regimes — you can call them state capitalist, whatever term you choose, they certainly weren't very pleasant — people are seeing that the capitalist system doesn't function very well either.

They see what's happening in Norway, they see what's happening in Sweden, they see what's happening all over the world. And they certainly see that the free market in Eastern Europe doesn't function at all. Which gives anarcho-syndicalist thoughts an opportunity to spread. In general, I feel that people are more open to them now than they were before. Because of course we don't have this Stalinist tradition, we didn't slaughter all the people, we can say that we have always been for democracy — what we want is more democracy. The only one of these capitalistic rights we want to get rid of is the right of property. Freedom of speech we're for, and always have been; it's not just something we say now when it's crumbling over there in Eastern Europe.

I think there is a potentiality if people who have these ideas — and they're not so many, not many people in Norway call themselves anarcho-syndicalists — but if those people who do exist manage to work together, which doesn't mean they have to agree with everything, but at least not waste their energy fighting between each other, I think you would have a slow growth. I don't think anything will happen overnight. The people who will be interested in these ideas in the beginning will be "impure"; they won't accept

at once all our dogmas, all our proofs, because understanding both this society and the future and the history takes time.

Anarcho-syndicalist groups for a long time will be a small minority in Norway, but that doesn't mean that it's not possible to spread ideas and practices that tend to point in our direction. And in reality it's not the most important thing what people call themselves, but what they do. So if you can get more people to use direct action methods that point to a better society when they can see that what they do is not just to some extent points to a future and gives them at least for a short time they obtain something. I think those things are important. The spreading of ideas is more a long process, but spreading ideas is important for doing these concrete things, they sort of work together.

LLR: Your paper is called the *Wage Slave*. Could you explain how it began?

A couple of us had worked with the Norwegian Syndicalist Federation making a couple of papers together with them. Then came a discussion of what the next issue should contain and we found out that we wanted different things. So instead of quarrelling about that, it was better to part as friends and they make their thing and we make our magazine.

Broadly, we want to create in Norway a space, a social space for libertarian views and ways of looking at things — propaganda, but propaganda that doesn't just repeat old truths. So although we call it an anarcho-syndicalist paper, it's open to different kinds of anti-state socialism. The magazine's subtitle is "For the abolition of wage slavery and anarcho-syndicalist ideas and action," which is not an exact translation from Norwegian because the word we use for action has a slightly different meaning, it means more practice.

We try to do half and half theoretical stuff and more concrete struggles. But the perfect article for us is one that takes a concrete struggle and from that derives the theory — you don't separate the two things. We have written very little about strikes in Norway, but there's a reason for that. To say that there was a strike, which

begin with the production, you begin with the needs. People have to define their needs, and then find out how they will satisfy these needs. While money implies that you go the other way around.

Money is based on social and geographical isolation between people, and isolation between their needs — its based on isolation and it also perpetuates it. It's difficult to use money in any human sense. If you visited a friend and had to pay for a cup of coffee it would be a different relationship at once. The extent and ease of travel today makes money even more ridiculous. Neighbors always helped one another out without pay. Through communication people talk with each other and make agreements, not by counting but in meeting each other's needs.

The work and creativity of others to a large extent is our freedom — it gives us more possibilities than if we do everything alone. Freedom means possibilities if it has any meaning at all. If people can't see that their needs are interconnected it's not possible to build a socialist society. A socialist society is not just a technical organization — it's based on human beings, and on human beings controlling their own lives. Without that it's not socialism.

Who is going to control? The only reason for vouchers is that we don't trust people, that somebody has to make sure that each gets his fair share and decide what that is.

Money also means that somebody has to give the products a price, which means for example that you count labor hours. But that doesn't really say anything because one person can create a thing in four hours, another eight, it depends on the machinery you use which means that you always are dependent upon thousands of other people even to produce the most simple things.

These labor vouchers are a very primitive form of money and they're not very practical. If you want a pair of shoes, you have a voucher for a pair of shoes, and then you want something else you need another piece of paper. People would very quickly find out that you have to have something that can be exchanged for everything; if not you really get a bureaucracy, it would be much worse than you had in the Soviet Union. If somebody is going to sit somewhere and write out notes for all the possible things that people can buy, and how are they going to count all the things that do exist?

The use of money also implies that you don't see things as a whole. If you're going to make a house you need nails, you need a hammer, you need a lot of tools. They're a lot of people involved in this. If you are going to have nails you have to get iron from somewhere. Someone made the hammer, what did he make the hammer from? What equipment did he need to make the hammer? Who made the equipment that made the equipment that made the hammer? Then you have to eat of course, and who grew the food. From the beginning you have a lot of people involved. If you were to do all these things yourself, even if you worked 24 hours for the rest of your life you probably wouldn't ever build the house.

And anyway, if a socialist or anarchist society, whatever you call it, is a society where people control their own lives, that means that they also have to control what they produce and what they produce must be directly related to their needs. Which means that you don't

most people know from before, we don't find very interesting. If something special happens which means that this isn't just one of those ordinary strikes — almost like a ceremony, you know what will happen before it begins and no one could really care that much because they know they will get this 50 or something and it's all organized from above. But, we're always looking for strikes or struggles that go a little further than this. Like the strike in Melbourne in January 1990, I think, where the people working at the trams said, "Well from today the trams run free." And they took over the whole tram system. That sort of gives a direction that says much more than all those little strikes that go on. So we are looking for strikes and struggles with qualities that point in the direction we want to go. And then it's much easier to pin the theoretical thing to it — it's much easier to communicate that way.

We think it's important that, if you want to change the society, you must understand it too. Which means that we also print stuff that some anarchists might think a little bit far out. For example, we would include thoughts from the Situationists, because we feel some of the stuff, not all of it, shows how many left-wing groups sort of become a part of the establishment — become one more commodity that doesn't really threaten the society. Especially the so-called punk groups — I use punk in a very wide way — which tend to think that if there are a few people out there in the streets fighting with the police, which is of course making a lot of pictures for television, that they're really changing things by doing that, besides maybe getting us more police. They tend to believe that if you're seen you change things — if things are spectacular you change things — but they seem to become just like another movie. It can be very amusing...

In the longer run we would also like to, together with NSF or anyone else that stand for the basic fundamental things that we stand for, do some practical work too. It could be in support of strikes and things like that, to have more concrete influence on the working-class struggles in Norway in a small way — basically trying to use

direct action methods which would be some kind of propaganda by the deed, but not in the sense of bombs. What I mean is direct action, where there's a direct connection between what you do and what you attain. You don't go calling to the government, saying "can't you please change this." You try to change it directly. I think that also would help people better understand what we write.

LLR: Could you give us a sense of what the NSF is doing?

I'm not a member, and they should really talk for themselves. The NSF prints information about anarcho-syndicalist tendencies in the workers movement earlier in Norwegian labor history — anarcho-syndicalist ideas had some influence in the early labor movement in Norway, though they never grew as strong as they did in Sweden, but very few people knew this. If you look back at the 20s the ideas that were put forth were much more radical than you would find today. So they give a historical approach, and then put forth how they believe that you can build a more democratic union; not that they believe that they can make the L.O. an anarcho-syndicalist organization, but they hope to at least move the rank and file movement in that direction, and more power down to the shop floor.

Many people are getting tired of the union bosses up very high, who don't think to give them anything. And not only by so-called left wing people, but in a situation where you're getting much more unemployment in Norway, you're getting less social benefits and so on, people tend to expect more of the union, that they should do something, which the union bureaucracy of course doesn't do.

So within this movement the NSF tries to spread anarcho-syndicalist but also more democratic ideas. Although much of this opposition, as far as it's organized, is organized by union officers at the local level, shop stewards and leaders of the local union and so on. So the organized part of it is not really a rank and file movement, although they have sympathy. They try to bring more democracy into the unions, but also to distribute anarcho-syndicalist ideas...

LLR: What role do you see for international solidarity?

I take it as obvious that capitalism can only be fought globally. For example, Norway has always been a big shipping nation, and since shipping is international by nature Norwegian ships recruited sailors from all parts of the world. Ten years ago, Norwegian shipowners decided that Norwegian sailors were too expensive, so they began flagging out to evade their agreements with the sailors' union. Now only the captain and top officers are Norwegian — the rest are from India, the Philippines, etc. There is an apartheid system on these boats. The union fought for laws, but didn't succeed. Now it's almost impossible for Norwegians to get jobs on Norwegian boats. The reason is because the sailors never fought an international fight — they accepted that the wages of foreign sailors should be lower. If you really have an international trade, than the only answer is to organize internationally.

Today all industry is like ships that sail the oceans with an international crew, and the only way to fight is to make the fight global. That's why you got unions in the first place — to keep workers from being pitted against each other. First they were local, then national. Now unions must be global.

In the past century, the social contact of activists around the world was much greater than it is today. Even though information is exchanged, the personal aspect is neglected. It's much easier to understand solidarity when it's real people, rather than just some number or name. Workers should be encouraged to visit unions around the world to build personal ties, perhaps as part of their vacations. Rank and file workers, not union leaders. It could be fun, too.

LLR: Today many socialists, and some anarchists, say we have to rethink our approach to markets; that some form of market or voucher system may be necessary to avoid the bureaucracy of centralized planning...

Market socialism is nonsense — no sense, it does not make sense. Labor vouchers are a primitive form of money, to call it by another name doesn't change the reality. Vouchers raise a basic question: