

International Workers Association

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2018

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Who we are

The International Workers' Association (IWA) is an anarchosyndicalist federation founded in 1922. It seeks to organize workers into combative syndicalist organizations engaged in workplace struggles and grassroots organization, without union bureaucrats, parties or the state, to defend the rights and new conquests of the working class, towards a social revolution.

The IWA unites organizations with similar aims throughout the world with a final goal of establishing a libertarian communist society.

The IWA is independent of the bosses, employers' organizations, political parties and state institutions and does not receive any form of subsidies.

What we do

The IWA sections are involved in a wide-range of activity, including workplace solidarity and union organizing, training and advice for workers, campaigns involving outsourced, temporary and seasonal workers, organizing among migrant workers, anti-militarist campaigns, international solidarity campaigns, community organizing and the promotion of self-managed cooperatives.

Principles of Organization and Action

Among the defining principles of anarchosyndicalism and the IWA are:

- Direct action
- Direct democracy and Federalism
- Solidarity and Mutual Aid
- Internationalism
- Independent financing
- Rejection of capitalism and the state

Direct Action

The IWA's basic method is direct action, which means that people organize and take action themselves, as a means of struggle and solving their problems. Direct action means collectively deciding and acting, without intermediaries. In workplace conflicts, common forms of direct action include strikes, boycotts, protests, etc.

The use of direct action promotes self-organization and initiative, equality and solidarity among people. It is also a way to refuse the power of institutions which seek to maintain the position of those in charge. Through direct action, workers take control of their own struggles and in the process they develop a range of skills which will be useful in developing the basis of the future libertarian communist society.

Federalism and Direct Democracy

The IWA consists of member Sections which are independent but have to abide by the accepted principles and decisions. There is a recallable Secretariat, which helps coordinate the activities of the International but has no executive powers. The decision-making within the IWA is federalist and each Section has one vote.

The IWA functions on the basis of direct democracy, rotation of duties and recallable delegates. The decisions are taken at the base by the members, who mandate delegates to represent their agreements to others, for example, at the regional, confederal or international level. The delegates serve only as “spokespeople” for their members, interpreting the opinions of the group. If they do not express the agreed opinions or they abuse their positions, they can be recalled at any time.

Solidarity and Mutual Aid

In the IWA we support struggles in the workplace and community. Solidarity and mutual aid reflect the idea that we need to work together, not compete and stand against each other. Today we help somebody, tomorrow they can help us. Without solidarity, neither small victories nor wider social changes are possible.

Internationalism

The struggle for the liberation of the working class from capitalism and the state can only be international. We reject the ideas of national interests in favour of international solidarity.

In concrete practice, the IWA Sections support the local struggles of the other Sections. This is particularly well seen in struggles with multinationals or companies with business interests in various countries as we may confront them in different locations simultaneously.

Independent financing

The IWA is financed from its members’ dues. We do not accept subsidies from business, political parties or the state, or any institutions dependent on them.

Rejection of Capitalism and the State

The IWA is independent — financially, politically and organizationally — of political and business interests. That is because the fight against capitalism and the state must be fought in a way that strengthens grassroots self-organization and doesn’t allow these interests to have influence over our struggles. Labour and capital have nothing in common. The IWA is against all forms of collaboration between workers and bosses through such bodies as works councils and other state corporate schemes.

In workplace struggles, the immediate goals may relate to concrete material demands but the ultimate aim of the International is to replace capitalism and the state with a more equal and self-organized society.

Aims

Our practice is to promote organization from below, without leaders, with decision-making being as direct as possible. Our goal is to spread these practices through every level of society, so that people will be able to directly manage both the production and distribution of goods and to coordinate for their mutual support and benefit.

The names for the organizational units proposed can vary: some speak of communes, some of collectives, some of self-managed workplaces and communities but the idea is the same. The workplaces, communities, regions etc. would act in federations, with the units having open and free assemblies where decisions are made. The agreements are carried by delegates mandated to represent one unit to the others. Such representatives are rotated and recallable; their function is to carry forth or implement the decisions made, not to rule or decide for others.

Furthermore, our goal is to ensure that access to products and services is as just and equal as possible by eliminating the sources of accumulated wealth, possession and power, such as capitalism and the state. Capital is oriented on profit, leading to systematic pressure to lower wages, increase the workload and working hours. The role of the state is to guarantee the functioning of capitalist relations and manage the society through its institutions, laws, courts and repressive forces.

We aim for a society where work is freed from capital and the state. The goal of the IWA is a society based on human needs and not on profit – a libertarian communist society. Practicing the basic principles of anarchosindicalism represents a concrete way to work towards this goal.

Brief History

The IWA was founded in Berlin in December 1922. It marked an important break in radical labor from the Bolsheviks, Social Democrats and other forces, rejecting union centralism, parliamentarianism, militarism and nationalism. It originally comprised unions from Germany, Argentina, Chile, Denmark, Norway, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden and France and from Spain, which joined a year later.

In the 1920s, many of the sections participated in great struggles but also suffered repressions from the state. In the 1930s, the Spanish Revolution took place in Spain, where the local section of the IWA, the CNT, struggled for the social revolution, organizing rural and workplaces collectives on a large scale, until crushed by the brutal violence of the fascists. Many people from the IWA from other countries fought side by side with them in solidarity. As fascism and totalitarian regimes spread, the IWA sections were repressed on a large scale, outlawed and many of their members murdered.

In the 1950s, the IWA began to revive itself. The CNT in France was active in reorganizing the international. New organizations joined and some older Sections reactivated themselves. In the 60s and 70s, FORA in Argentina came back to life. The death of Franco saw the reemergence of the CNT in Spain. Soon after, FAU from Germany and the NSF from Norway were reorganized, In Italy, USI, which had never ceased to exist, managed to transform itself as an active union and the British section of the IWA, which had been in decline, also went through changes and later became the Solidarity Federation. A section from Portugal, AIT-SP was admitted in the 90s and later, the COB from Brazil also joined.

The regime changes in the old eastern block led to the formation of new anarchosyndicalist groups in those countries. New sections like KRAS in Russia, PA in Slovakia and ASI in Serbia joined the IWA and the ZSP from Poland joined later.

Together these constitute the Sections of the IWA.

For more information on current activities, check the websites of the Sections or the IWA.

Member Organizations

At publication (2018), our international has 11 Sections in Europe, South America and Australia. They are:

- AIT-SP (AIT Portuguese Section)
- ASF (Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation, Australia)
- ASI (Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative, Serbia)
- CNT-AIT (National Confederation of Labour, France)
- CNT-AIT (National Confederation of Labour, Spain)
- COB (Brazilian Workers' Confederation)
- KRAS (Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-syndicalists, Russia)
- NSF (Norwegian Syndicalist Federation)
- PA (Direct Action, Slovakia)
- SF (Solidarity Federation, UK)
- ZSP (Union of Syndicalists of Poland)

There are also 6 Friends of the IWA:

- Autonomus Workers' Union (Bulgaria)
- Germinal (Chile)
- Libertarian Student's Union (Colombia)
- Orestad LS (Sweden)
- Weiner Arbeiterinnen Syndikat (Austria)
- Workers' Solidarity Alliance (USA)

Several initiative groups also exist in Asia, with some affiliated to the nearest Section (ASF). Initiative groups are new organizations that hope to join the IWA.

For information on affiliation, please contact the IWA Secretariat at secretariado@iwa-ait.org.

Contacts to the IWA Sections

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