Syndicalism

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Syndicalism refers to diverse movements and perspectives which take the collective self-organization and direct action of the working class both at the point of production, and within working class communities, as the basis not only for overcoming capitalism but for organizing a new, egalitarian society. While tracing its origins to the trade union movements of the nineteenth century, the term syndicalism coming from the French word for unionism, *syndicalisme*, it has come to signify a radical or revolutionary approach to labor organizing which seeks to overthrow the wage relationship, capitalists and class society rather than collectively bargain workers' place within the wage relationship.

Historic anarcho-syndicalist campaigns have provided significant evidence that class struggles entail more than battles over corporatist concerns carried out at the level of the factory. Syndicalist movements have displayed attitudes of hostility towards the bureaucratic control of work, concerns over local specificity and techniques of spontaneous militancy and direct action. Syndicalist struggles have, in different instances and over varied terrain, been articulated to engage the broader manifestations of domination and control. French revolutionary syndicalism placed an emphasis on radical democracy. Within syndicalism one can discern such themes as: consensus formation; participation of equals; decentralisation; and autonomy.

Syndicalist theories of capitalist power place emphasis upon an alternative revolutionary worldview emerging out of working-class experiences and offering a challenge to bourgeois morality . Fernand Pelloutier, an important syndicalist theorist whose works influenced Georges Sorel, argues that ideas rather than economic processes are the motive force in bringing about revolutionary transformation. Pelloutier vigorously attempted to come to terms with the problem cultural domination as a basis for capitalist power. Reconstituting social relations, in Pelloutier's view, becomes possible when workers begin developing revolutionary identities, through self-preparation and self-education, as the means for combatting capitalist culture. Thus, syndicalists have characteristically looked to labor unrest as an agency of social regeneration whereby workers challenge the cultural hegemony of class domination, e.g. deference to authority, acceptance of capitalist superiority and dependence upon elites. Unlike versions of authoritarian communism, such as Marxism and Leninism, syndicalism understood the transformation of power not in terms of the replacement of one intellectual elite by another but as a process of diffusion spreading power out into the workers' own organizations. This displacement of power would originate in industry, as an egalitarian problematic, when workers came to question the status of their

bosses. Towards that end syndicalist movements have emphasized ”life” and ”action” against the severity of capitalist labor processes and corresponding cultural manifestations.

It might be argued that, far from being economistic, syndicalist movements are best understood as counter-cultural in character, more similar to contemporary new social movements than to movements of the traditional Left. Syndicalist themes such as autonomy, anti-hierarchy, and diffusion of power have echoes in sentiments of the new movements. This similarity is reflected not only in the syndicalist emphasis upon novel tactics such as direct action, consumer boycotts, or slowdowns. It also finds expression in the extreme contempt shown by syndicalists for the dominant radical traditions of its day, exemplified by Marxism and state socialism, and in syndicalist efforts to divorce activists from those traditions.

Syndicalist unions, as opposed to bureaucratic unions, sought the organization of workers from the bottom up. Their strategies rejected large strike funds, negotiations, written contracts and the supposed autonomy of trades. Actions took the form of ”guerilla tactics” including sabotage, slowdown, planned inefficiency and passive resistance.

Perhaps the strongest, and certainly the most enduring variant of syndicalism developed within anarchist movements in Spain and much of Latin America. Anarcho-syndicalism viewed the revolutionary self-organization of workers in radical opposition to capital, outside of not only union bureaucracies but outside of mainstream union frameworks themselves, limited as they were by collective bargaining over workers' contracts, as the means by which an anarchist society might be realized. Anarcho-syndicalism reached its highest level of popular involvement in Spain in the early decades of the twentieth century. The Confederation Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) played a major part in the Spanish Revolution and the resistance to the fascist regime of General Francisco Franco during the 1930s. The CNT was especially active in Barcelona during the revolution, running industries and providing social services in the region while organizing the armed resistance to fascist forces on the front lines.

Syndicalism also developed powerful movements in North America, most notably the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or Wobblies) which was active in the US, Canada and Mexico, especially in the early 1900s and the One Big Union which organized the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. Destroyed almost completely by the Red Scare of 1919, the IWW has enjoyed something of a resurgence in the twenty-first century, especially among precarious workers in service industries often unorganized by the declining mainstream industrial unions. IWW perspectives with regard to capital emphasize workers' abilities and encourage the self-determination of workers and the importance of self-directed initiatives against capital. The IWW asserts that workers must organize themselves to fight employers directly. The symbolic unity of the working class and its break from capital is stressed in the single qualification for Wobbly membership. The only restriction to membership in the IWW is that no employer can be a member.

A primarily intellectual version of syndicalism was developed by the social theorist Georges Sorel in the 1910 and 1920s in France. Revolutionary syndicalism, as this variant was known, saw working class direct action as the basis for a new society based on values of heroism and sacrifice, which stood counter to the apathy and social degeneracy of bourgeois society. Syndicalism, and worker direct action, stood also as a refutation of the rule of society by bureaucratic and technocratic professionals. For Sorel the general strike was most important not as a practical approach to labor organizing but rather as a “revolutionary myth” that served to rouse the fighting spirits of the working class and provided them with an image of the power of their unity in struggle. The vitality of the general strike was not so much material as ideological.

Syndicalism has enjoyed a resurgence recently in many parts of the world as workers seek an alternative to mainstream unions that seem unwilling to fight against multinational corporations. Many workers, including younger workers and workers in small workplaces, that are often overlooked by mainstream unions have turned to syndicalist organizing.

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