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Anarchosyndicalism

Jesse Cohn

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Anarchosyndicalism is the term for the anarchist labor union movement (a labor union is called a *syndicat* in French, or a *sindicato* in Spanish). Powerful anarchosyndicalist organizations included the Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (founded 1901), the Industrial Workers of the World (founded 1905), the Confédération Générale du Travail (founded 1906), and the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (founded 1910). These unions were distinguished from their conventional counterparts not only by their radical goals – the abolition of capitalism and the state in favor of a system of generalized self-management – but also by their decentralized structure and willingness to engage in direct action, including extralegal tactics such as sabotage.

While anarchists had always placed great emphasis on the self-organization of workers at the point of production and on what Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) called “the political capacity of the working classes” as agents of revolutionary change, their attitudes toward unions as vehicles for collective bargaining and toward strikes as a tactic had been more ambivalent for a number of reasons. Proudhon, indeed, saw strikes as futile. Moreover, since trade unions lacked full legality under most governments during

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the early period of the anarchist movement, their utility was limited. With the legalization of unions, a number of anarchists saw a viable alternative to “propaganda by the deed” (sporadic acts of armed rebellion that failed to gain mass support) as well as to confining themselves to propaganda activities until the people became ready for revolution; by forming revolutionary labor unions, anarchists could survive within the capitalist and state-dominated order while maintaining and expanding their capacity to oppose it – managing, as Emile Pouget (1860–1931) put it, to “live in the present with all possible combativity, sacrificing neither the present to the future, nor the future to the present.” Moreover, in the words of the IWW’s “Preamble,” by adopting an internally democratic and federative structure, the anarchosyndicalist union would prefigure a post-capitalist and post-statist order, “forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old” – a conception not unlike that of council communists such as Rosa Luxemburg (1870–1919). The function of the union was often closely bound up with projects of political education, and each particular strike was to be seen as a rehearsal for the general strike that would topple the reigning system.

In practice, there have been tensions between the anarchist and syndicalist aspects of anarchosyndicalism, as unions found themselves pulled toward a politically neutral “pure syndicalism,” designed to maximize workers’ self-interest under capitalism, and an explicitly politicized, anti-capitalist “pure anarchism” that might alienate workers of the diverse political tendencies represented in union membership. Indeed, even within unions such as the CGT and IWW, anarchism was just one element in a mixture of ideologies, including Marxism and even Nietzschean philosophy, which sometimes went by the name of “revolutionary syndicalism.” Potential contradictions also existed between the particular interests of workers and the general interests of communities. Relations with anarchists of other tendencies (e.g., anarchocommunism, eco-anarchism) and priorities (e.g., gender equality, sexual freedom)

have sometimes been fraught, despite attempts to bridge them. Finally, anarchosyndicalists past and present have met with opposition within the anarchist movement from “anti-organizationalists” who reject unions as new forms of discipline in embryo. Some labor historians have argued that the CNT behaved in just such a manner during the Spanish Civil War, albeit under the banner of “workers’ control.” Others have emphasized the degree to which anarchosyndicalism gave play to some of the most unruly and creative proletarian impulses.

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