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Agora-Syndicalism and Illegalist Agorism

A Response to Nathan Goodman and Nick Ford

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While it is true that syndicalism and illegalism can diverge from and even sometimes butt heads with agorism, there seems to be much use in such alliances. It was within this spirit that Nathan Goodman offered critiques of each possible tactic and alliance and while some of the points speak for themselves, others require some fleshing out and questioning.

While it is noted that all labor unions, even alt labor organizations, can sometimes use coercive tactics, I agree with Nick Ford that such tactics are no more prevalent in the syndicalist movement than any other per se. That's rather simply a pitfall of our species as a whole that we must work past as best as possible. But syndicalism is not just anti-authoritarian or alt labor, it is a tactic with an end goal: syndicalization of the means of production. When Nathan Goodman says that syndicalism can be compatible with agorism to an extent but the tactic of actual syndicalizing a workplace is not compatible or at least should not be encouraged,

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he is effectively saying that syndicalism is in fact not compatible with agorism at all.

“Syndicalism may also involve the coercive transfer of property, particularly when it entails seizing factories from their owners. There are worthwhile questions to ask about the legitimacy of existing property claims given historical injustices such as the enclosures and other state actions that have privileged capitalists and impoverished workers. However, action that serves to transfer property from one person (or group of persons) to another person or group without the consent of the initial owner is zero or negative sum action. Given that we have limited time, labor, resources, and entrepreneurial alertness, there is a real opportunity cost to devoting our efforts to securing transfers rather than production and mutually beneficial exchange.”

Syndicalism as a tactic involves using labor unions and alt labor organizations to challenge the boss' power, improve work conditions and treatment, and eventually oust the boss, taking over the workplace as a worker's syndicate and running it collectively. Without that last part, it just becomes plain old unionism though admittedly with a more anti-statist leaning. Syndicalism has as part of its philosophy a detailed critique of current capitalist property rights, agreeing with many left-libertarians that much of their property is the result of theft, coercion, enclosure, corporate subsidies, state licensing regimes, zoning laws, government bailouts, tax breaks, intellectual property laws, and other political favors, and therefore is illegitimate. And while, yes, if the original owner can be found, the property should revert back to their control and the decisions about what to do with it should rest with the original legitimate owner, as Rothbard and many others have pointed out, finding the original or “legitimate” owner can sometimes prove to be difficult or even impossible. It was in such a case that Rothbard claimed that the next best option was to turn such property over to those who have put the most labor into it recently, the workers. And while I can agree that

working towards creating other forms of production and mutually beneficial exchange is a more productive way to go for the most part (I mean why syndicalize a McDonald's instead of just starting a newer better restaurant collective that is more in line with anarchist values?), we have to remember that radical syndicalism is a tactic used mostly by the poorest on the economic ladder. These are the folks who are largely kept from participating as equal actors in the marketplace because of our rigged capitalist-state economy. Starting new business ventures, even on the black and grey markets, can involve either startup costs that are hard to afford or risks that some are unwilling to take. Unions and alt labor organizations offer a means of survival in an unfree market. Once the market is opened up to true competition, it will be much easier for someone to start a better business in an industry rather than being stuck trying to change an already existing business structure. Competition is a better tactic for eating the rich than directly taking over their property but as long as the market is rigged in their favor and they prevent true competition through the use of the state, syndicalism is a way to battle them within the confines of the skewed market they created and will hopefully aid in helping to truly free the market. I would even argue that while homesteading or syndicalizing already existing businesses isn't as productive in terms of labor as is other forms of entrepreneurship, it can lead to more productive labor than before as traditional hierarchical businesses and corporations suffer much from knowledge problems as managers, CEOs, and other bosses rarely have the knowledge of what it actually takes to produce a product or perform a service that the rank and file workers who actually perform such tasks on a regular basis do. With workers actually in charge of their own work, they are able to do away with unnecessary and counter-productive corporate rules and regulations while also experimenting with new ways of doing things and new labor-saving technology in a way that actually benefits workers and increases production instead of threatening

their jobs and financial security. All in all, collectives have the ability to run much more efficiently than top down businesses and as such can be far more productive business models.

Now as far as Nathan's take on illegalism, it's far too simplistic. He narrows the entire philosophy and set of tactics down to one small element of it: theft. But it should be noted that theft is only a very small part of illegalism and not all illegalists even participate in theft. As far as theft goes however, that was one of the tactics that fits more uneasily with agorism at best as pointed out in my original essay on the subject. While I generally see theft as antithetical to agorism, I do agree with the illegalist approach to theft as a tactic. Illegalists are not just willy nilly thieves who will just as soon rob a house or steal a personal car as they would rob a bank. Illegalists have ethics, much like agorists, that set them apart from your average criminal. Illegalists, when they do advocate theft, only advocate stealing from crony capitalists as a form of reappropriation. A consistent illegalist will not steal your purse or your car radio but will steal groceries from Wal-Mart. And while theft as a tactic might not be the most productive economically (the idea of attributing worth on the basis of economic productivity is questionable in itself but an altogether different topic), it is again a tactic of those most marginalized by the current unfree market. Theft, in illegalist terms, is a form of survival first and foremost. Don't have food, go grab some off the grocery store shelf. No need to pay for it. Much as in the case of illegitimate property claims in our discussion of syndicalism, if a capitalist sells a product that is the result of worker exploitation and government favors, do they actually have legitimate claims on such products to begin with? Illegalism allows those shut out by the system to obtain the means for basic survival on the small scale. Larger scale actions like bank robbing and redistribution of the stolen wealth are noble and bold actions and are a way to challenge unjust rigged markets and illegitimate property claims but are extremely risky and, while proving to be immediately useful if successful, does nothing inherently to

change the underlying system and only hopes to inspire others to eventually revolt which seems like a pipe dream at best. As a tactic, much like the illegalist tactic of revolutionary assassination, large scale reappropriation seems far less useful with the potential risks usually far outweighing the reward in terms of anarchist organizing. While I understand and even agree with the motives behind such actions when taken up for a revolutionary cause, I see them as far less useful and even useless at times as a means for long-term movement building and strategy. But illegalist tactics such as theft for survival, sabotage, counterfeiting, and black and grey market entrepreneurship (where illegalism and agorism meet) such as drug dealing, gun running, and sex work, are useful either as survival tactics in an unfree market or as ways to build a new world in the shell of the old while also working to slowly break the shell apart.