

Anarcho-Syndicalism and Dual Organisation

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How should anarchists, concerned with rebuilding a fighting movement of the working class, organise today?

As anarchists, we recognise that our fight against the bosses isn't made through elections, or in parliament, but at work. We have power when we organise with our co-workers, take action which disrupts the ability to make profit, and when we link our struggles across industries.

Easier said than done. So what strategies should we be using to build this kind of movement?

Anarchists are in agreement that, just as our struggle can't be outsourced to politicians within the State, we also can't defer to unaccountable bureaucrats within the established unions, or place our hopes in their legalistic tactics of cosyng up to the bosses and politicians.

So what do we do? Do we form new unions? If we are anarchists, and want our unions to be run in accordance with anarchist principles (ideally with the long-term goal of revolution), surely we should be forming *anarchist* unions? Those who consider themselves *anarcho-syndicalists* will generally argue that this is exactly what we should do.

There are a handful of anarcho-syndicalist unions around the world which have actually organised workplaces. To the extent that they bring workers together to fight the bosses, with rank and file control over the struggle, we can acknowledge that they have done some good work.

But there are some problems that come with this strategy that render most anarcho-syndicalist groups horribly ineffective, and which compromise even the strongest examples, like the Spanish CNT. If I walk into a warehouse or office and tell my co-workers, '*you should join me in the anarcho-syndicalist union. It's a union built on anarchist principles, with the ultimate goal of overthrowing capitalism and the government in a forceful revolution.*', I am limiting the scope of that organisation to those co-workers who already agree that this is a good thing, are willing to sign their name to such a group, and perhaps even split from their current union to do so.

Anarcho-syndicalists will often say this isn't a problem, because the anarchist union (despite the name) is anarchist only in the sense of its structure; it is open to anarchists and non-anarchists alike. This kind of anarcho-syndicalism places no special emphasis on the organisation having revolutionary politics.

Putting aside that many non-anarchist workers – who are the overwhelming majority – will likely still be put off by the idea of signing up to an 'anarchist' union (so long as they don't understand what anarchism really means or lack the confidence to join such a group), to what

extent can we say that an organisation is really ‘anarchist’ if it is not comprised of anarchists, or unanimously committed to social revolution?

Anarchism isn’t just about the ways in which we make decisions, but the content of the decisions made. It is a good thing for organisations to be under the control of their members, with co-ordination among delegates, and with delegates distinguished from bureaucratic representatives by their strict adherence to the positions mandated by their electors. Such structures encourage the best kind of activity and are central to the anarchist conception of organisation. Nevertheless, anti-authoritarian forms of decision making don’t *necessarily* lead to decisions consistent with revolutionary anarchist politics.

Having built an anarchist union, filled with non-anarchists, and divided in terms of the commitment to a revolutionary anarchist programme, we could very well find ourselves in a situation where the supposedly ‘anarchist’ organisation behaves in a way which contradicts our goals or principles. Despite its libertarian internal structure, it will be a machine which is not fit for purpose, but which will always retain the loyalty of militants who view it as inherently anarchist. Those who view the anarchist union this way will see its preservation as an overwhelming priority for the anarchist movement, which it supposedly represents.

This brings to mind the experience of the CNT (‘National Confederation of Labour’) during the Spanish Revolution of 1936 – the high point of anarchism as a revolutionary working class movement. Presented with a policy of entering the Republican government (effectively as a *fait accompli*), the majority of the CNT’s rank and file tacitly accepted the organisation’s violation of anarchist principles. To be sure, many anarchists sacrificed their ideas due to the fear of isolation in the war against fascism, but the break with anarchism was certainly made easier by the CNT not limiting its membership to committed anarchists.¹

As tension over the participation in government grew, CNT publications and politicians (transformed – as anarchist theory predicted – by their position in the State) denounced efforts to renew the anarchist character of the revolution. Such militancy was condemned as overly dogmatic, vanguardist, and an attack on the libertarian movement itself: the CNT *was* anarchism, whether it held ministerial portfolios or not!²

¹ Many anarchists in Spain came to understand that a specifically anarchist counterpart to the CNT was required, the result being the Federation of Iberian Anarchists (FAI). But the FAI was not the kind of formal, political organisation that dual organisationalists would endorse. Born in conditions which necessitated a degree of clandestine activity, and seeking to unify all those who identified as anarchists, the FAI was rather ephemeral, and did not unite militants on the basis of a shared analysis or programme. It was, instead, a loose network of affinity groups which considered itself the guardian of anarchism in the workers’ movement. The lack of real agreement or organisational capacity to effectively influence the direction of the CNT was laid bare by the FAI succumbing to its own incoherence and division. Throughout the Spanish Civil War the FAI lacked a shared position on government collaboration, and, like the CNT, saw little sustained resistance within its ranks when notable members accepted ministerial posts in the government. Only the Barcelona section of the FAI took the initiative to reverse CNT policy, taking up arms alongside the Libertarian Youth and freshly-formed ‘Friends of Durruti’ during the May Day crisis of 1937. These groups were united by a specific, common programme of revolutionary anarchism.

² An accessible introduction to this complex topic is Danny Evans’ book ‘Revolution and the State: Anarchism in the Spanish Civil War’. Evans’ thesis owes a lot of debt to the groundbreaking research of Augustin Guillamon, whose scholarship on the May Days is presented in his excellent book ‘Insurrection’. The best single study of the Spanish Revolution available in English remains Burnett Bolloten’s monumental ‘The Spanish Civil War: Revolution and Counterrevolution’.

What alternatives are there to this specific kind of anarchist unionism? Can we avoid both the isolation faced by many purist anarcho-syndicalist groups and the risks of incoherence, best demonstrated by the CNTs disastrous break with anarchist principles?

Historically, the main alternative to forming explicitly anarchist unions (or trying to transform non-ideological unions into anarchist organisations) has been *dual organisationalism*. This strategy argues that we should organise amongst ourselves as anarchists, in autonomous and specifically anarchist organisations, while also intervening in mass-organisations of struggle, which unite workers on the basis of class.³

With the approach of dual organisationalism we don't ask that our co-workers become anarchists before we can organise together, or otherwise convince them to be part of an anarchist union (having explained that members don't need to be anarchists anyway). We ask, "*do you want to fight the bosses together, as equals? Do you want to stand up to the governments that back them? Can you show solidarity with all of your co-workers, regardless of their race, gender, or sexuality?*" In many cases this will even mean arguing that workers should sign up to an existing union, most of which will have quite conservative politics and bureaucratic structures.

But this can be done without hiding or abandoning our anarchism. We should promote anarchist methods of organisation, encourage the use of direct action, and, wherever appropriate, discuss revolutionary anarchist ideas with our co-workers. We should be honest that it is anarchism that motivates us and that we believe our struggles can't be limited to reforms. We should also fight any attempt to co-opt the struggle through parliamentary politics or bureaucratic organisation. This will mean being ready to fight attempts by union leadership to exercise control over the rank and file, and perhaps even break with the union if necessary to further the struggle. Importantly, by grouping together all workers on the basis of class, we also avoid the problem of separating the more radical workers from the less radical ones, and the possibility of their influence being felt in union meetings.

These efforts to promote anarchist ideas at work should be well organised, coordinated, and linked with other struggles (inside and outside of our workplaces). This is the task of specifically anarchist organisations.

The existence of an independent anarchist political organisation allows us to put forward a coherent, shared analysis and develop a common strategy which consistently favours the self-organised struggle of workers. It allows anarchists to adapt to whatever new conditions the class struggle creates, rather than commit us to the self-preservation of any particular mass-organisation – including those which are labelled 'anarchist'. This distinguishes dual organisation from the variant of anarcho-syndicalism, which doesn't insist on an explicitly 'anarchist' union, but which still views workplace organisation as sufficient (dismissing the usefulness of independent anarchist organisations).

Today, anarchist unions struggle to attract members within their organisers' workplaces, where there is little popular awareness of socialist theory and practice, and where workers often lack the confidence to rock the boat. This is also the case with unions that are less ideologically

³ Also known as 'organisational dualism' and closely associated with the ideas of 'platformism' and 'especificismo'. All of these developments within anarchism represent an attempt to theorise the role of a theoretically and strategically united anarchist grouping and its relationship to the self-organised activity of the broader working-class. These ideas can be traced back to the founding of anarchism as a distinct tradition and the work of Bakunin. Two recommended texts are 'Organizational Issues Within Anarchism' by Felipe Corrêa and 'Bakunin, Malatesta and the Platform Debate', co-authored by Corrêa and Rafael Viana da Silva.

specific but still nominally revolutionary, such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).⁴ If we are being honest, we have to say that these organisations generally don't function as unions at all. Anarcho-syndicalist groups like the Anarcho-syndicalist Federation (and revolutionary unions like the IWW) lack the capacity to carry out the central function of an effective union: the ability to organise a critical mass of workers *on the job*.

These are, in reality, *political organisations of like-minded comrades*.⁵ The shared basis for membership is not the *class-basis* of being united in the same workplace, industry, or even necessarily location (there are often many 'at large' members in such organisations). These ideological groupings instead serve as a sort of 'hub' for those with a shared analysis and strategy. Individual members then intervene in their respective workplaces (sometimes even as 'dual carding' members of the established union) in order to push struggles in a direction which aligns with their politics.

I don't point this out to disparage interventions in non-revolutionary unions by revolutionary organisations. In fact, the important point here is that *this practice essentially replicates the strategy of dual organisationalism!* What should be recognised is that this differs from the approach of anarcho-syndicalists who argue that we must form explicitly anarchist unions, or those who say that we should unite workers in the IWW. Likewise, it should be self-evident that it demonstrates the utility of having a distinct organisation for the coordination of our efforts and the shared development of our thinking.

Shouldn't we be transparent with ourselves, our comrades, and our co-workers if this is our approach?

⁴ Despite some significant involvement by anarchists in its founding (and anarchists having been influential in strengthening the federalist and anti-parliamentarian tendencies of its 'Chicago Faction'), the IWW is not, and never has been, an 'anarchist' union. Many IWW members were involved in the Socialist Party, or favourable to a Marxist conception of capturing state power, with the IWW merely serving as the 'industrial arm' of the socialist movement. It is true, however, that the logic of direct action, and the idea (shared by many 'syndicalists' and 'revolutionary unionists') of the general strike as a prelude to revolution, naturally attracted anarchists to the project. In turn, it likewise attracted unionists sceptical of politicians to the ideas of the anarchists around them.

⁵ From an anarchist communist perspective, the IWW faces additional problems here, as it is much vaguer in terms of its ideological orientation. This has been made all too evident by some of the strange organising projects which have occupied the organisation over the last few years. Having become detached from the union's roots within an active socialist movement and militant working class culture, the IWW has been reduced to involvement in activist and 'mutual aid' projects, 'unionising' small co-operatives, and even being the union of choice for 'democratic socialist' election-campaign staff!

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