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A dual-track syndicalism?

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In 2022, the Swedish syndicalist union SAC holds a congress. Some say that SAC is at a crossroads. But what exactly are the choices? In the following essay, Rasmus Hästbacka argues that the choice is between building a popular movement union or a "revolutionary" cadre union. Hästbacka believes in a popular movement that progresses on dual tracks, i.e. a movement that builds both syndicalist sections *and* cross-union cohesion among workers.

The Swedish labor market has recently been highlighted in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* and on the Counterpunch website. Two articles concern the anti-strike law of 2019 and a new strategy for collective agreements that SAC has developed. Two more general texts on the future of syndicalism have been written by Gabriel Kuhn and Torsten Bewernitz on the Counterpunch website, and by Gabriel and Frederick Batzler in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* (issue #79, 2020). The new collective agreement strategy is being tested (at the time of publication) by warehouse workers at Ingram/Zalando in Stockholm. More such experiments await.

Why should an international audience care about tiny Sweden and a syndicalist union of only 3,000 members? In a globally interconnected economy, one could argue that the class struggle in tiny villages may affect the mega cities and vice versa. Business leaders usually react hysterically even to small sparks of workers' militancy as if they could spread wildly. If their forecast is correct, then maybe even the smallest spark is of interest to us all.

In this essay, I will try to clarify the crossroads that SAC faces by replying to my comrades Gabriel Kuhn and Torsten Bewernitz. As Gabriel and Frederick Batzler express the same perspective in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review,* my essay is a reply to the latter article as well. I also want to highlight a promising way to conduct class struggle, namely what I refer to as *dual-track syndicalism.* The essay draws from an upcoming book, Swedish syndicalism - An outline of its ideology and practice, written by me which will be published by the Local of SAC in the city of Umeå in the autumn of 2021. I want to emphasize that I'm not presenting the official position of SAC below, but my own opinions.

On the Counterpunch website, Gabriel and Torsten have placed two projects in opposition to each other. On the one hand, the ambition to build a mass labor union. On the other, the ambition to train organizers who bring workers together regardless of union affiliation. Gabriel and Torsten put formal organization against informal mobilization of workers. The Swedish SAC cannot grow into a large union, they suspect, but syndicalists can play an important role in the workplaces.

In short, my two comrades suggest that we abandon the project to build a formal mass union. Instead, they seem to put their hopes in networks of workplace organizers. Swedish readers may recognize this perspective from a recent debate in the SAC magazine Arbetaren.

I regard the crossroads that Gabriel and Torsten describe as a misunderstanding. They describe two incompatible paths when these are actually two parallel tracks that can reinforce each other.

become revolutionary, to play a revolutionary role. The workers are the *actor*. Unions are the workers' *resource and tool*.

The anarchist Murray Bookchin and many with him have advocated revolution without rooting this aspiration in the working class. Thus, they've promoted a cause without rebels. Bookchin even denied the revolutionary potential of the class. Instead, he put his hopes in "citizens in general" and municipal elections – or as Wayne Price put it: "a crackpot fantasy".

Syndicalists maintain that the revolutionary potential of workers is based on the strategic position in the production of goods and services. This position allows workers to develop the capacity to establish economic democracy. The workers are the only social class that can develop such a capacity and thus carry out a revolution worthy of the name. Workers also make up the part of the population that has the most to gain from revolution.

Another issue is that the term "revolution" may be obsolete, at least in a Swedish context. We have better synonyms, for example: "democratic transformation of society." This is discussed further in my upcoming book. Anyhow, the best resource and tool for workers are syndicalist unions, namely popular movements that practice a dual-track syndicalism. At least that's my view on the situation in Sweden.

Maybe I am mistaken. Then I will be grateful if comrades enlighten me. If I am mistaken, then SAC would be wise to reject the proposed Declaration of principles at the Congress of 2022.

Rasmus Hästbacka, member of the Umeå Local of SAC

Read the follow up here. More articles by Hästbacka in Anarchist Library here.

Of course, we could decide that only workers who express radical opinions are granted membership in our union. But is that relevant? Anecdotal evidence says otherwise. Many of my former colleagues have voted for conservative parties and at the same time promoted solidarity and democracy at work. I've met many radical-sounding workers who don't promote any of this at work. Many Swedish syndicalists have had similar experiences.

I find it embarrassing that "revolutionaries," still to this day, divide humanity into different degrees of consciousness and place themselves on top of a consciousness ladder. In Spain in the 1930s, the anarchist group FAI tried to keep the mass union CNT "clean" from reformism. When a revolution broke out in 1936, many FAI leaders tried to contain the workers' aspirations. Some leaders took seats in the government and undermined the workers' self-management of workplaces, villages and cities. Supposedly "pure" revolutionaries thus acted to limit the revolution.

Of course, there were also FAI leaders who criticized the participation in government (for example, the Friends of Durruti). A contemporary book on this theme is written by Wayne Price. Time and time again, the counter-revolutionary nature of states manifests itself.

As I see it, either we trust ordinary workers, or we trust no one. We are *all* terribly non-conscious, at least in some respects, but through collective struggle, discussion, and education, we can all grow in insight and competence.

The practical attempts to build cadre unions have in some cases resulted in anarchist or "revolutionary" clubs whose members don't organize their workplaces. If anarchists want to form so called affinity groups, that's fine, but syndicalist unions are something else. Affinity groups are no substitute for unions.

Let me be clear. I am not only sceptical of "revolutionary" cadre unions. I also don't believe in turning SAC into a "revolutionary" *mass union*. Why? Because *no* trade union can be revolutionary. It is the global working class that has the potential to

Why not recruit as many members as possible *and* offer all members training in organizing? Why not try to build a big union *and* an even bigger movement within the working class? Gabriel and Torsten don't touch on these questions, but do raise another question: should syndicalists put their own union or the working class at the center? Their answer is the latter. I say *let's do both!* Let's put workers at the center and develop a union in the midst of workers.

In the 1930s, SAC had more than 30,000 members. No one can really predict if SAC will grow into a mass union again or not. We can only try and see. Oddly enough, SAC hasn't made a large-scale attempt since the 1960s. During that decade SAC grew. I believe we need to build both SAC sections and cross-union groups; at least we need both sections and cross-union *cohesion* among workers. The key people on both these tracks are workplace organizers. What do I mean by these terms?

A *section* is a formal union in the workplace. The section is open to all employees except the bosses. Sections practice self-determination in local affairs and direct democracy. By the term *cross-union group* I refer to a group of co-workers who meet regularly, regardless of union affiliation, for the purpose of discussing and pursuing common interests. Such a group can be supported by unions or function as an independent collaboration between colleagues. The cross-union group can be informal or become formalized. If it adopts bylaws and elects a board it becomes a union under Swedish labor law.

By *workplace organizers* I refer to employees who bring their co-workers together in joint action at work. I'm not referring to paid union officials coming from the outside, although such comrades can support workplace organizers. The task of the SAC Locals is to support workplace organizers. In areas where members lack a Local, new Locals need to be formed (with central support from SAC).

Below I will elaborate on why organizers need to work on dual tracks – to create both sections and cross-union groups (or at

least cross-union *forums*). I also intend to highlight what I regard as the real crossroads for SAC: *should SAC become a broad popular movement or a narrow cadre union?* A popular movement union has low thresholds and welcomes workers in general. By the term cadre union, I refer to an organization that requires members to be active and conscious "revolutionaries." Today, the cadre idea is invoked by, for example, the British Solidarity Federation in its pamphlet Fighting for ourselves.

I won't comment on the so-called dual-card-idea, that is to be a member of both a syndicalist union and a bureaucratic/business union. I don't necessarily reject this idea, but I don't know of any positive experiences of this in Sweden.

Let's take a look at three successful sections in Sweden. These sections have succeeded in involving more and more workers in union conversations, won small conflicts, recruited more members, and finally mobilized many employees in addition to the section's own members. The first section, at a food factory in the region of Skåne, has won secure (or more permanent) employment contracts. The second section, at the Zalando warehouse in Stockholm, is presently engaged in a conflict about health and safety issues and basic dignity. For example, pregnant workers are denied chairs to rest on.

In the Stockholm subway, during the first decade of the 21st century, a section staged a three-year organizing plan. One of several long-running conflicts concerned the right for all workers to take breaks. An interesting experience was that the massive agitation of syndicalists (both oral and written) could unite the work force really fast. Thus, a collective attitude was expressed in certain issues that produced better results than the section's strikes and blockades. Class struggle isn't just about putting economic pressure on profits but putting psychological and moral pressure on bosses as well.

I will now shed more light on the pros and cons of *formal* union organization and *informal* cross-union struggles. I will do

"revolutionaries" only. But they hope that a majority of the members will become active organizers. I think we need to be more realistic and value all union members, from the most to the least active, and recruit even more workers. The fees from both active and so-called "passive" members are crucial for financing union training, magazines, technical equipment and so on. Gabriel and Torsten want to establish more union halls or worker centers. Can we afford this if our membership doesn't grow?

Gabriel and Torsten don't discuss money, but they make another point: workplace organizing should be tied to community organizing. I agree. The same point is made by Gabriel and Frederick Batzler in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review.* As a union, we should spread our tentacles in civil society, but we need to rebuild a strong backbone for this to be meaningful (and the backbone is workplace organizing). In Sweden, this tradition has been labelled rörelsesocialism (in English: *movement socialism*). This tradition is forgotten but can be reinvented.

Now, let's shed more light on those who *do* advocate "revolutionary" cadre unions. How do these fellows want to counteract reformism (i.e. integration with the system)? They usually invoke the old cadre idea of the French CGT (from the beginning of the 20th century). Many CGT leaders didn't want to recruit a majority of the working class. They only aimed for those who they regarded as a "conscious minority" of the class. The rest were arrogantly and elitistly called "the indifferent crowd." Not until a situation of revolution was imminent, the CGT leaders believed, could the majority become "conscious" and then be recruited.

To me, the idea of "revolutionary" cadre unions is rather embarrassing. How can the leaders of such unions be sure that they themselves are so terribly conscious? And how can the leaders make sure that only "revolutionary" workers are allowed into the union? The former sounds like self-glorification and the latter like self-deception. What is this if not idealistic nonsense similar to the teachings of Leninist parties?

the other hand, our class struggle to change society will be lost if we have no ideological compass. Between these poles – a rigid ideology versus no ideology – syndicalist unions move forward on a middle path, indeed a contradictory path.

When a syndicalist union such as SAC adopts a Declaration of Principles, it reflects the majority views of active syndicalists. The text is not a package of mandatory opinions. It is enough that all members practice the basic principles of syndicalism (*i.e.* rank-and-file democracy, solidarity, and independence). A Spanish CNT pamphlet contrasts the union with anarchist groups in the following words: The CNT "expects nothing more from its members than that they are workers and respect its structures."

People who label themselves revolutionaries usually raise this objection: how can a syndicalist union implement the long-term vision if not all members are convinced that the vision is both desirable and possible to realize? My answer is threefold. First, no union can implement the vision (and they shouldn't even try). Only *the working class* can do it *through* SAC, CNT and other unions.

Secondly, at present not all SAC members are convinced supporters of economic democracy and federalism. It is up to syndicalists who *are* convinced to argue their case, not only in their workplaces but within SAC as well. Let the union be an open marketplace of ideas! I'm not calling for empty preaching here. When syndicalists win the trust of co-workers through their union practice, they can recruit and convince more and more workers.

Finally, if class struggle is pushed to its peak – on a broad front and in many countries at the same time – then we can move beyond the prevailing class societies. I suspect that a majority of workers don't want to carry out a social revolution until they have pushed the limits of the current system; that is, until they have achieved all the reforms possible within the system. Maybe we need a social *evolution* that eventually turns into revolution.

It should be noted that my comrades Gabriel Kuhn and Torsten Bewernitz don't advocate cadre unions of convinced

this by way of two examples from my previous workplace, the university in the city of Umeå. These examples are no basis for generalizations, but they illustrate my point.

Some years ago, a conflict took place in the departments of law and political science. The concerned staff consisted of about 100 employees. We put an end to an unpopular reorganization and pressured five bosses to resign. We won by using petitions, questioning management at staff meetings, and boycotting smaller meetings arranged to divide us. We also staged an advisory vote and elected a new boss for the department of law, which the employer side ultimately accepted.

Our conflict showed the strength, but also the weakness, of *informal* cross-union organizing. Our cohesion and militancy quickly faded away. Informal organizing is often short-lived, and so the wheel must be invented again and again.

At Umeå University there is also a small syndicalist (SAC) section. The section shows the advantage of having a *formal* democratic union. The section has remained active since its start in 2006. Compared with other unions, it provides excellent service in individual cases. But the section has a weakness. It has a scattered membership in many departments, and few members have developed cross-union cohesion with their colleagues. The section conducts client service, but rarely collective struggle.

What can a section do to develop its capacity for collective struggle? If the workplace is big (like a university) the section may form smaller subdivisions. The first steps could be to arrange: (1) cross-union lunches at departments where syndicalists work, (2) section meetings where the potential for organizing each department is discussed, and (3) a committee that visits members at work and supports those who want to wage cross-union struggles with their colleagues.

Cross-union struggles can generate more members and better cohesion. This is the basis for building subdivisions of the section or stronger cross-union groups (or both). The section board can then

coordinate all subdivisions and support all groups. Can a SAC section initiate official cooperation with other unions? Sure, *if* these unions are on the side of workers and follow directives from the shop floor.

I will now move on to the real crossroads that SAC faces: *should SAC develop into a popular movement or a "revolutionary" cadre union?* The founders of SAC in 1910 wanted to build a popular movement union. This ambition can also be described as building an open and independent class organization.

Judging from the current bylaws of SAC, the original ambition remains. The same goes for an official SAC book on syndicalism published in 1984 (*Syndikalismen* written by Sven Lagerström). On the other hand, current attitudes within the SAC point in several directions. Popular movement ideas compete with cadre ideas. The 2022 Congress can clarify what the members want SAC to be and do. A majority can choose the popular movement path by voting for a new Declaration of principles, which is on the table.

To me, building a popular movement makes sense. Why? Therein lies a hope for both immediate improvement of living conditions and, in the long run, a democratic transformation of society. A popular movement union can use the strength of dual-track syndicalism. A cadre union, on the other hand, limits itself to a single track – the informal and cross-union track. The cadre risks becoming a weak network of workplace organizers. In Sweden, many radicals have initiated such networks that have faded away.

In contrast to weak networks, the Swedish dock workers have succeeded in building a democratic and militant union. I regard their union as the flagship of Swedish unions today. They have a formal union open to all workers in their industry.

It remains to be seen whether Swedish syndicalists will build a popular movement union in other industries. As soon as syndicalists express this ambition, people who label themselves revolutionaries raise objections. They usually claim that a union that welcomes all workers becomes hopelessly reformist without the will or capacity to democratize workplaces and abolish class society. Such a union can win daily demands within capitalism but nothing more, it is said.

The risk of reformism is real, of course, *i.e.* that syndicalist unions become integrated with employers and the state apparatus. Two synonyms for integration are absorption and co-option. This means syndicalist unions risk becoming administrators of the system they claim to oppose. But this risk is real for all unions and struggling workers. It's a permanent risk even for non-union networks and supposedly "pure" workers' councils and committees.

The only guarantee against integration, as far as I can see, is to completely marginalize ourselves – to place ourselves in a "revolutionary" monastery far from the working class. Or maybe, as the Norwegian syndicalist Harald Beyer-Arnesen put it: "The only guarantee against co-option is death."

So what can syndicalists do to reduce the risk of being stuck in a reformist trap? If there is a general formula, I perceive it as follows. To avoid both integration and marginalization, each syndicalist section should act within the workforce, develop its ability to mobilize the staff into collective action and bargaining, and retain this ability. A prerequisite for maintaining this ability is to practice the basic principles of syndicalism: rank-and-file democracy, solidarity at work and a union independent from all religious and political organizations.

It is also important, I think, that SAC and other syndicalist unions are clear on two crucial points. First, that the union has a long-term vision: economic democracy and a federalist social order. Secondly, that the union doesn't require all members to be convinced supporters of this vision.

The ambition to build an open class organization is lost if we welcome only convinced workers. Mandatory belief systems may be natural for churches and political parties but not for unions. On