

Let's Build Class Unions

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Rasmus Hästbacka argues for building so-called class unions, independent of the political left, right and center. Hästbacka is a member of the Swedish syndicalist union SAC.

In the USA and Europe, the labor movements have been in a crisis for 30 years or more. Employers are constantly attacking workers – directly at the workplace or indirectly via neoliberal politics – while the labor movements are bad at fighting back, with some exceptions. One exception in the USA is the Chicago Teachers’ Union, and in Sweden, the Dock Workers Union. Syndicalist unions and the IWW are winning local conflicts in both Europe and the USA, but seldom are these industry-wide conflicts.

The political left usually claims that solutions to the crisis of labor movements are to be found within the left. This view is typical of social democrats, other left-wing parties and many extra-parliamentary groups. As a syndicalist, I take a different view.

My view is that solutions can be developed while building self-managed unions that are open to the entire working class. The word *self-managed* means that unions are controlled by the rank-and-file. Class unions are *open* in the sense that they welcome workers in general, i.e. everyone who is not an employer or a boss. The Wobbly phrase for this idea is the ”One Big Union”.

In short, the syndicalist view is that solutions can be developed by unionized workers on the shop floor. Workers can build class unions. No one else can do it for them.

The class union...

As individuals, workers may be cogs in the economic machinery. But collectively, they can stop the economy and dictate new conditions for running it again. By organizing on the job, workers can build the capacity to both win short-term improvements and ultimately get rid of the bosses and run the workplaces themselves. Production can then be radically changed according to human needs and adapted to the ecosystem. This would lay the basis for equal societies around the world.

At present, workers are divided in countless ways. The path forward is to always bring more co-workers together, regardless of union affiliation. Furthermore, the task is to spread the bonds of solidarity – from workplace to workplace, within and across industries, as well as between the workplace and the surrounding community. This is syndicalism or, if you like, simply common sense.

...in contrast to the left

While the political left tends to multiply through division, trade unions have the potential to unite the many against the rich and powerful few. Even when leftists *do* unite in some fashion, a problem remains: the left offers a path to integration or self-marginalization. The parliamentary left tends to integrate workers into class collaboration with the state and business world. That’s a dead end.

Then we have the extra-parliamentary left, as we say in Europe. In the USA, you might refer to left-wing groups that don’t aim for positions in Congress or the House but act solely outside Federal and state organs. The extra-parliamentary left tends to marginalize itself from workers.

That too is a dead end. By contrast, rank-and-file unions are about workers listening to and mobilizing fellow workers. Then, workers will act by and for themselves as a collective.

To maximize workers' unity and the capacity for collective action, syndicalists stress that all trade unions should be independent of the political left – and, of course, independent of the right and center as well.

Hug nazis?

I have advocated open class unions for about ten years. Two objections are constantly raised in debates, meetings and online. I find the first objection rather odd but the second is reasonable. The first objection is raised by leftists and can be summarized in the question: *Do you want to hug nazis?* I am not kidding. This question is raised again and again. It's almost as if many leftists have a black-and-white view on their co-workers: *Either you are a leftist like me or you are probably a nazi.*

I wish I could give you a link to a fleshed out leftist critique of class unions. But for ten years I have met only angry and confused reactions. Anyhow, my answer to the “hug nazis” objection runs as follows. The basic values of syndicalist unions are solidarity at work, union democracy and independence from all religious and political organizations. If the values of a homophobe or racist are expressed at work, then it's a violation of solidarity. Thus, the person cannot be a member of the union. Likewise, people who don't respect the democracy or independence of the union cannot be members. For security reasons alone, nazis cannot join the union. In the case of SAC, our union is officially feminist and anti-racist.

Beyond the radical cloister

The second objection to building open class unions is raised by syndicalists who are strong believers in the post-capitalist vision of syndicalism. *What if lots of non-believers join the union? That would undermine the union's capacity to advocate and fight for the vision!* I can only repeat two points that I have made in print.

First, I assume that you who are strong believers have strong arguments for the post-capitalist vision. I encourage you to engage with your fellow workers and have discussions. Make your case! I'm with you. Let us not hide in a radical cloister.

Second, even more important than presenting arguments is that union members participate in class struggle. Class struggle is a practical school and nurturer of the thirst for freedom. It's a school in the sense that workers who organize on the job will start the process of figuring out how the world works. In this process, workers will probably hunger for more freedom on the job and in life generally. Thus, the vision grows in both brain and heart, so to speak, and is mirrored in self-managed unions through which workers are expanding their power and freedom.

Is the left worthless?

Many leftists are offended when I advocate unions independent of the left, as if I am claiming that the entire left is worthless. I am not.

The myriad of leftist groups and publications might serve as so-called *affinity groups*. Anarchists have always made a distinction between affinity groups and class organizations. Affinity groups are small groups of friends or close anarchist comrades who hold roughly the same views. This is no basis for class organizing and that is not the intention either. Therefore, anarchists are in addition active in syndicalist unions or other popular movements (like tenants' organizations, anti-war coalitions and environmental movements).

Leftist groups and publications might serve as affinity groups – for education and analysis, for cultural events and a sense of community. But vehicles for class struggle they are not.

A patient march forward

In my view, the syndicalist idea is the most reasonable idea concerning how workers can come together as a class, use their economic power and take control of their lives and communities. But ideas are nothing without the patient grinding on the shop floor. I will end this article with two recommendations of websites dedicated to the nuts and bolts of organizing. The first is Organizing Work and the second Labor Notes.

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Rasmus Hästbacka

Read the long essay on Znetwork. More articles by the author can be found in Anarchist Library here.

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<https://industrialworker.org/lets-build-class-unions/>

This article was first published in the US magazine *Industrial Worker* (on January 27, 2023). Also in Spanish. The article is based on a longer essay on the website Znetwork. An even shorter summary of the essay was written for Anarchist Library here. *Photo below: Stockholm, May 1, 2022. Banner held by members in the local industrial branch of construction workers (photographer Julia Lindblom).*

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