

(R)evolution in the 21st Century

The case for a syndicalist strategy

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“Those who work in the mills ought to own them, not have the status of machines ruled by private despots.”

— The Mill Girls of Lowell, 1845

Syndicalism is a movement of labor unions that aims for a vision beyond both capitalism and the nation-states. The syndicalist SAC — *Central Organization of Workers in Sweden* — neither advocates armed struggle to reach the vision nor revolt through a general strike. So, what do Swedish syndicalists propose? Rasmus Hästbacka addresses this question in the second in a series of three essays.

ASR is presenting this series in the spirit of debate and an exchange of ideas across national borders. We do not agree with every formulation. The SAC’s evolutionary approach is, we believe, unique in the international syndicalist movement. It is certainly possible to fetishize the general strike, transforming it into an idle fantasy that serves as a substitute for the day-to-day struggle in the workplaces for workers’ control and better conditions. But this is to violate the very essence of syndicalism: its emphasis on building revolutionary unions that battle for better conditions today while building the capacity and power to take over the industries and bring them under workers’ self-management.

I will begin with a quick recapitulation of my previous essay. A democratic guiding star of syndicalism is that everyone affected by a decision also should have the right to influence that decision. Syndicalists strive for economic democracy, that is democracy in the workplaces. This can be specified with the term self-management. Production of goods and services should be managed by workers themselves.

In opposition to centralized and top-down governed states of all kinds, syndicalists advocate federalism. That means self-determination in local affairs, but also cooperation and joint decisions in regional, national and more far-reaching affairs.

In a federalist society, economic democracy would mean that federations of local communities own the companies while federations of workers manage them – for the benefit of consumers and within a framework that all citizens have the right to influence. In addition to community-owned companies, syndicalists envisage worker-owned companies.

In short, this is the syndicalist version of socialism, a libertarian socialism.

The working class

In this essay, I will summarize a discussion on strategy stretching from the 1800s until today. It is primarily a discussion among syndicalists in Sweden and continental Europe. It should be recalled however that syndicalism is a worldwide phenomenon. See for example the anthology *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940*, published in 2010.

As much as syndicalists advocate unions, the agent of social change is not this or that union but the working class. Unions are a resource and tool for workers. Therefore, strategy for syndicalists is about finding ways forward for themselves *and* their co-workers, for their own union *and* the class in general.

Why view the working class as an agent of progressive change? A lucid explanation is given by Ellen Meiksins Wood in the book *The retreat from class* (1998). Workers not only gain from

challenging the capital-owning class and its nation-states. Workers have the numbers and potential power to implement socialism instead, by virtue of their position in the production of goods and services. Workers are the only class that can create economic democracy.

Economic democracy on a broad front would mean a fundamental transformation of society. In that sense, the long-term vision of syndicalism is revolutionary. Unfortunately, those who advocate revolution will be perceived as lunatics, at least in Sweden today. The term revolution is associated with political revolutions imposed on the population through the state. This includes coups, terror and blood baths. Syndicalists have always strived for an economic and social revolution, a transformation from below. A reasonable synonym for syndicalist revolution is the expression democratic transformation of society.

Sow the seeds of the future

Central to syndicalism is the idea that workers can sow the seeds of the future by means of how they organize today. This is sometimes called a prefigurative practice. Democratic unions indicate how democracy might be organized in society as a whole. I am now talking about real rank-and-file control of unions. Such control is possible in both syndicalist unions and other democratic unions such as the North American IWW and the Swedish Dockworkers Union.

The Swedish syndicalist union SAC was founded in 1910. The importance of a prefigurative practice was clarified in SAC's Declaration of principles in 1922. This document urges labor movements to "displace, overcome and replace" the prevailing institutions of capitalism and nation-states. To understand this idea, one needs to know how syndicalists recommend labor movements to be structured.

Syndicalist unions have a double structure, both industrial and geographical. The industrial structure consists of workplace sections and local industrial branches which form nationwide industrial federations. The geographical structure consists of Locals, Districts and an overarching union federation. The Swedish SAC is such a federation. The geographical structure encompasses members in all industries.

The syndicalist view is that organizing along industrial lines indicates how production can be managed in the future – by workers' assemblies at base level, their elected councils, federations and congresses. In the same way, geographical organization gives a clue as how to arrange community assemblies, councils, federations and congresses.

Thus, the double structure of unions prefigures a future system of double governance. The idea is popular governance through workers' federations and community federations. While people will participate as workers in the first structure, they will participate as consumers and citizens in the latter.

State superstition

In the words of Immanuel Wallerstein, the 1900s saw numerous labor parties in the West, East and South propose a two-step strategy for socialism. First seize state power, then introduce socialism. Step two never came.

If the core of socialism is workers' self-management of production, then the realization of socialism must entail workers taking over production. How could so-called "labor governments"

do this on behalf of the working class? Syndicalists regard this as social superstition. It is to attribute to the state a creative and liberatory capacity that it does not possess. It is to mystify the state.

In 1922, the international syndicalist movement stated that “along with the monopoly of property, should disappear also the monopoly of domination” because the state “will always be the creator of new monopolies and new privileges” (statement by the IWA).

The French-Peruvian feminist Flora Tristan coined a truism in 1843 that still holds true: “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves” (see Tristan’s book *The Workers’ Union*).

Syndicalist unions have been dismissed as single-minded for not supporting “labor governments.” Syndicalists actually did collaborate with the government during the Spanish Revolution of 1936–39. While workers in the syndicalist union CNT conquered their factories, farms and service industries, CNT leaders took seats in the Spanish republican government (likewise, in Catalonia the CNT collaborated with the regional government). This was justified as a pragmatic collaboration to win the war against Franco and fascism. As syndicalists had always warned, the government pushed back on workers’ self-management and crushed the revolution (and Franco won).

To be or not to be?

The future of the nation-state was put at the forefront in the Spanish Revolution. To be or not to be? Still today, the same question must be answered by every movement that aims for a vision beyond class society.

Those CNT leaders who advocated collaboration with the Spanish republican government claimed that there were only two courses of action. Either CNT seizes power and establishes a minority rule over Spain (since CNT encompassed a minority of the people) or CNT collaborates with the government to win against Franco.

There was actually a third proposal: to transfer all power into the hands of the people. This meant that CNT, together with the union UGT and other workers’ organizations, would have replaced the state apparatus with a system of double governance. Production of goods and services was already in the hands of workers. What remained was to expand community federations, including their functions of legislation, judiciary, policing and popular defense.

Was the third proposal realistic at that particular time and place? I don’t know but it remains (I think) a promising recipe for the future. A lucid account of the third proposal is written by American writer Tom Wetzel in his article *Workers power and the Spanish Revolution*. Wetzel is the author of the forthcoming book *Overcoming capitalism*.

Beyond armed revolt

If the double structure of labor movements is to “displace, overcome and replace” the institutions of capitalism and nation-states, what leverage can workers use? The pioneers of syndicalism regarded general strike as the primary leverage to move beyond class society. The general strike was supplemented by the idea of worker’s armed self-defense.

Not only syndicalism but the labor movements in general had inherited the idea of an armed people from liberalism and the French and American revolutions. The idea was that an armed people could sweep away old tyrants and defend itself against upcoming tyrants. Back in 1922, the following statement was made by the international syndicalist movement. Syndicalists recognize violence

...as a means of defense against the methods of violence of the ruling classes, in the struggle of the revolutionary people for the expropriation of the means of production and of the land. Just as this expropriation cannot be commenced and carried to a successful issue except by the revolutionary economic organization of the workers, so also the defense of the revolution should be in the hands of these economic organizations, and not in those of the military or other organizations operating outside the economic organs (IWA's Declaration of principles).

The term for trade unions used above is “economic organizations” (in contrast to political parties). Today, the era of armed struggle is long gone (at least in the Western world). We live in the era of high-tech professional armies. There is no such thing as building workers’ militias to beat the army or beat the police. Now I haven’t even considered the moral and corrupting dimensions of armed revolt.

The wet dream of every Western state, facing a rebellious people, is that parts of the population will be in a political psychosis, namely the fantasy that rifles and barricades in the streets can beat tanks, the air force and navy. In fact, we should expect states to place infiltrators in popular movements to initiate armed revolt. That would give the state a pretext for massive use of violence and an opportunity for immediate victory.

To hollow out institutions

In 1929, Alexander Berkman wrote the following words (republished 1995 in the book *ABC of anarchism*):

Now, what makes governments exist? The armies and navies? Yes, but only apparently so. What supports the armies and navies? It is the belief of the people, of the masses, that government is necessary; it is the generally accepted idea of the need of government. That is its real and solid foundation. Take that idea or belief away, and no government could last another day.

Again, we are faced with a state superstition, “the need of government.” The huge task is to battle this, more or less, authoritarian belief with education and agitation. A glimpse of the task can be given here by mentioning two varieties of the belief. The most authoritarian variety is that human beings are completely incapable of governing themselves – both directly and via elected representatives – and therefore need dictators. If that’s true, how can the dictators (who are humans, after all) be capable of governing others? A less authoritarian version of the belief is that people are too stupid to govern themselves and therefore must elect others to govern them. But if the masses are so stupid, how can they be wise enough to pick good representatives?

The late Murray Bookchin made the same point as Alexander Berkman but expressed it in other words. To overcome the nation-state, it is necessary to “hollow out” its legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Perhaps Bookchin would have approved the metaphor of termites eating up a house.

Alexander Berkman didn’t claim that popular education and good arguments was enough to overcome the state. He underlined the economic power that workers can exert towards both

capital and the state. By building economic power, workers are also building self-confidence and breaking the habit of obedience. As Berkman put it: “The strength of labor is not on the field of battle. It is in the shop, in the mine and factory. There lies its power that no army in the world can defeat, no human agency conquer.”

He surely underestimated the effectiveness of state violence. Again, in the Spanish Revolution the economic power-base of workers actually was crushed by state violence. A large part of the working class was physically exterminated.

If not by armed struggle, how can workers overcome the violence of nation-states? To use Murray Bookchin’s words again, the “hollowing out”-process must advance even further. The legitimacy of popular movements has to grow as the legitimacy of the state shrinks. The libertarian socialist Michael Albert has described the process like this: “We must create a situation where any attack by the state on parts of the population, will make even more people join this camp, including people in the army and police.”

During World War I, Bertrand Russell took a stand against militarism and proposed a social defense a.k.a. non-violent resistance and mass civil disobedience. Brian Martin, a contemporary professor of social science, has studied several examples of social defense. One variant is labor unions in alliance with other social movements. It is difficult for a foreign aggressor to subjugate a people who are engaged in trade union blockades, sabotage and strikes. If unions are decentralized, they cannot be stopped simply by eliminating the leaders.

Brian Martin argues that social defense can be developed into a progressive force, not only against foreign aggressors but also against authoritarian institutions on the domestic scene. See his book *Social defence, social change and the text Social defence: a revolutionary agenda*. It is easy to see the revolutionary potential of social defense. If workers build such a defense, they are simultaneously undermining their own state’s capacity for counter-revolutionary violence.

I want to summarize the thoughts above as follows. The project of syndicalism is to make the institutions of capitalism and nation-states superfluous. If successful, the institutions will crumble in favor of a popular democracy already created from below. If a popular army is built in the future, it will be built after a democratic transformation of society has already been accomplished. In other words, a popular army can defend a federalist society that has been established, but an army cannot introduce such a society through violent revolution.

Beyond general strike

Although the era of armed struggle is long gone, the idea of revolt through general strike has been kept alive. The idea is that a myriad of strikes will escalate to the point where workers take over the entire economy. That is not a strike in the usual sense of the word (work stoppage). It has been described as an expropriative general strike or a general lockout of the capitalist class.

SAC abandoned this revolt strategy when SAC adopted its 1922 Declaration of principles. SAC feared that a general strike would be vulnerable to both reactionary forces and (counter)revolutionary Bolshevik forces – or brought to a halt by reformist promises and integration with the system. The workers in SAC had carefully reflected on the bitter experiences of revolt in Russia 1917–21, Germany 1918–19, Finland 1918 and several other countries at the time.

Swedish syndicalists were also frustrated with the frequent strikes and lockouts in Sweden. A workers' victory one month was neutralized by a loss the next month. The need for alternatives to striking also grew due to a decision — made by the Social Democratic leaders of LO unions in 1922 — to break every SAC strike.

To simplify one could say that SAC abandoned the revolutionary idea of a social “turning of a pancake” in favor of an evolutionary perspective, a gradual democratization of workplaces. SAC headed for a marathon rather than a sprint. However, this strategic reconsideration needs to be nuanced.

SAC continued to strive for a vision beyond class society. Whether the transition will be a protracted evolution or a rapid revolution depends on the strength developed by the working class and the resistance mustered by the ruling classes. A process of evolution might well accelerate into revolution. That's how Swedish syndicalists began to reason around 1922 and the terms evolution and revolution became partly overlapping terms.

Central to SAC's reconsideration was to not postpone the conquest of workplaces to a general strike in the distant future. If only a small piece of power can be conquered today, that piece should still be conquered today. It is better that workers aim for a series of phases that can lead to economic democracy than to wait for a single blow to the system (somewhere in the future).

More than before, SAC started to emphasize workers' need of training in self-management prior to a full conquest of power. Such training should be carried out through the practice of union democracy, education and participation in decision-making at work (to the extent that any rights to participate have been achieved).

The register method

While the general strike remained a key concept for syndicalists on the European continent, the so-called register method became a key concept in SAC's (r)evolutionary approach. The register method was actually a whole kit of methods, systemized to increase the cohesion and power of workers.

Swedish syndicalists kept records – a union register – of available work and dictated the price and conditions for doing the work. The conditions were not dictated solely by the syndicalists, of course, but to an impressive extent it was. The register method rendered much higher wages and more influence than LO's use of collective agreements. How was that achieved? In broad strokes the following can be said. It was achieved by: developing alternatives to strikes of the “all-out” type; by workers and unemployed uniting behind common demands; last but not least, by means of a strong culture of solidarity that reached beyond the ranks of SAC.

To get into more detail, the register method emphasized struggle inside workplaces, union employment services and increased worker influence over management decisions (thus reducing the need for strikes against such decisions). Fighting on the inside could take the form of, for example, collective slow-downs. Union employment services meant that employers had to employ workers in the order and under the conditions dictated by the union (or else get no labor power). Bosses had to re-employ militant workers who had been fired and blacklisted. The register method also included shadow accounting. That meant comprehensive statistics and analysis of the company and industry in question.

Collective deals with employers, based on the register method, was an alternative to legally binding collective agreements. According to Swedish law, a so-called industrial peace obligation follows every collective agreement (i.e. a prohibition against strikes, blockades and other forms of industrial action). Register deals were an effort to keep the deals free from the industrial peace obligation. The Labor court never clarified the legal status of register deals. The crucial point, though, is that syndicalists acted as if these deals were free from industrial peace obligation.

The register method was not only used by syndicalists but also by workers in some of the Social Democratic LO unions. SAC (and some LO unions too) wanted to develop the method into a working-class leverage to transcend class society.

We should be afraid of ruins

Although SAC abandoned the revolt strategy of the pioneers, SAC didn't become a categorical opponent of general strikes. It is indeed possible to imagine a combination of the register method and general strike. A period of slow progress could culminate in a general strike and full expropriation. From the years around 1922, SAC took a pessimistic view on efforts to stage revolutionary general strikes without proper preparations, that is without a prior and partial seizure of power and training in self-management.

An even sharper critique of the revolt strategy through open conflicts was written by Gaston Leval in 1975 (see his book *Collectives in the Spanish revolution, the Epilogue*). Although not explicitly referring to SAC, he confirms that a reconsideration of strategy was needed.

Gaston Leval had been present in the Spanish Revolution 1936–39 and continued to be a warm supporter of it. In 1975 he writes about the repeated strikes and insurrections and brutal repression prior to the revolution. There is “the danger,” Leval writes, “of harming the stability of society.” He paints a worst-case scenario: “The people themselves end by preferring the suppression of political and civic liberty to permanent disorder which, let us face it, is also an attack on freedom if only of living a normal life.” Gaston Leval claims that

...one of the consequences of the continuous social conflicts was to drive people of the Centre parties towards the Right, and to swell the conservative, reactionary, and fascist forces. The figures at the February 1936 elections prove this, and here one can speak of the responsibility of the revolutionaries.

In a famous statement, the Spanish revolutionary Buenaventura Durruti said: “We are not in the least afraid of ruins.” Well, we should be.

A “sterile” strategy?

The most important labor organization in Spain was the CNT. Gaston Leval claims that the revolt strategy of CNT leaders was “sterile.” The strikes and insurrections could not by themselves lead all the way to CNT's vision. According to Leval, the broad masses of the people would never have joined these revolts in order to transfer all power into their own hands. It was Franco's attempted coup that triggered the masses to go as far as they did. In other words, without the attempted coup, the hope of a progressive escalation would not have been fulfilled.

Here we can add a weakness in CNT's organization. CNT had strong local industrial branches but weak national federations of such branches. It has been claimed that CNT “was unable to co-

ordinate subversive action on a wide enough scale to pose a serious threat to the Spanish state” (see David Miller’s book *Anarchism*, 1984).

Does Gaston Leval advocate industrial peace and submission? Of course not. Obedient masses is no recipe for progress. He calls for better strategies.

As said, SAC raised the register method as an alternative to both industrial peace and strikes of the “all-out” type. Swedish syndicalists used the method from the late 1910s to the early 1950s. The method was so successful that business leaders had to unite with the Social Democratic leaders of LO unions to crush the method, establish LO collective agreements instead and oust the syndicalists.

In the construction industry, the LO union signed many so-called monopoly agreements that only allowed LO members to be employed. In the forest industry, to the contrary, SAC and a LO union began to conclude collective agreements together. It should be noted that collective agreements were nothing new to syndicalists. It had for a long time been a tool parallel to the register method. In forestry, both SAC and LO concluded nationwide industry agreements during the years 1956–1993.

People interested in the register method can read texts in Swedish but unfortunately not in other languages (see the publications by Ingemar Sjöö and historians Lennart K. Persson and Kristian Falk).

Perhaps readers outside Sweden are surprised by the behavior of leading Social Democrats: strike breaking, monopoly agreements, crushing the register method etc. Then I might add that leaders of the Social Democratic Party placed syndicalists and other anti-fascists in labor camps during World War II. The Party also created an extra-legal intelligence bureau to keep track of political enemies. This so-called IB-scandal was exposed by two journalists in 1973 who were then sent to jail.

Strategic diversity

The SAC Congress of 2022 has adopted a new Declaration of principles, according to a proposal from the Umeå Local. It is a short text written in everyday Swedish. Like the 1922 Declaration of principles, the text emphasizes that workers need to develop their collective strength and competence in order to conquer the workplaces.

Today, SAC doesn’t elevate a specific leverage, neither the general strike nor the register method. Swedish syndicalists describe the way forward in general terms. The path to economic democracy is an independent class movement, with its emphasis in the production of goods and services. This leaves room for strategic diversity.

In the struggle for short-term improvements, SAC stands for tactical diversity. SAC is open to strikes and collective agreements – as well as other forms of action and deals that workers can use to push the frontline forward. Concrete tactics must be adapted to the concrete circumstances.

In the future, perhaps general strikes will prove to be the way to go? If the working class reaches a breaking point with established institutions, maybe the general strike is the best leverage – or the register method or something else.

Back in the day, the international syndicalist movement made the statement that “the general strike (...) ought to be the prelude to the social revolution”. It was a statement by IWA, in its 1922 Declaration of principles.

A critical comment of SAC could be that SAC has become vague and bewildered about strategy. It would be nice if we could decide in advance which leverage to use, far ahead in the future, but I doubt it is possible. It appears to me as hubris. Likewise, I doubt it's possible to predict or decide that a social transformation will be a slow evolution or a fast revolution. Let's organize and see! What can be expected, though, is that a social transformation will be international or it will not be at all.

Syndicalism in contrast to IWW

The relationship of syndicalism to the state is clear, at least in the long-term vision. All power should be transferred down to the people, to a system of double governance.

There are strong similarities between syndicalism and the unionism represented by the IWW, originating in North America, but also differences. The relationship of IWW to the state is not so clear. The IWW cherishes its independence from the state and all political parties. According to the IWW, the working class should seize the production of goods and services, while the state should have no role in running the economy. Then what?

Should the state be allowed to remain as a legislator and enforcer of laws? If so, can the state and a worker-run economy coexist? The historical record says otherwise. The state will probably crush or slowly undermine workers' self-management. If not the old system of class rule is restored, then some new form of class domination will probably be created.

On the other hand, if the IWW wants state power to be dissolved, what should take its place? Economic democracy, that's clear. As the IWW puts it in the Preamble to the IWW constitution: "By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old." But what more, in addition to industrial organization?

The IWW in North America was founded in 1905. After more than a century, the relationship to the state is still diffuse. Perhaps not too surprising, then, that IWW have had its share of state superstition. Several of the original IWW leaders lost their way into Bolshevism and praise of the Soviet Union (for example Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and James P. Cannon).

Obsolete slogans

I can understand if the IWW of today neither wants to label its vision a "stateless society", like old-school anarchists, nor use the Marxist labels "new state" or "worker's state." These labels are equally hopeless in my view. To talk about a "stateless society" says almost nothing about what kind of society it is. It could, for example, be a situation of chaos, lawlessness and mafia rule. To talk about a "new state" can be perceived as advocating continued or even worse concentration of power, for example an alleged "workers' state" of the Soviet kind.

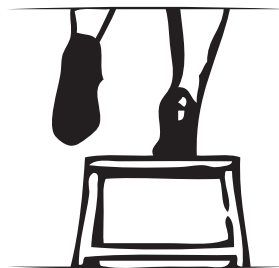
Syndicalists want to dissolve the concentration of economic and political power. If anarchists want to label the result "no state" and libertarian Marxists want to call it "new state," let them have it. The alternative label, suggested in this essay, is economic democracy within a federalist society.

Will our present societies ever move in the direction of the syndicalist vision? Nobody knows but a first step is to "bring back the movement in the labor movement" to quote Labor Notes, a cross-union network in North America. That is the topic of my third and last essay.

Rasmus Hästbacka

Rasmus Hästbacka is a lawyer and has been a member of the Umeå Local of SAC since 1997. The essay draws from a forthcoming book, Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice. A short version of this article was previously published in the Swedish union paper Arbetaren. More articles by the author can be found in Anarchist Library [here](#).

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