

Renewing and Reforming Labor

The Case for Anarcho-Syndicalism

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This is an edited transcript of a talk at the 11th Global Labour University Conference: “The Just Transition and the Role of Labour: Our Ecological, Social, and Economic Future,” September 28–30, 2016, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Thanks very much for having me on the panel, along with comrades Hilary Wainwright, who has been a key figure in the British feminist and socialist movement, editor of Red Pepper, Ozzi Warwick of the Oilfields Workers’ Trade Union in Trinidad and Tobago, and Martin Egbanubi of the Michael Imoudu National Institute for Labour Studies, Nigeria. There is quite a nice link between the different inputs, with their stress on self-activity and the immense creative potential of working class and poor people, as organizers, as rebels, and as creators of new models and ideas.

What I want to look at in this paper are the ways that we can think about the role of the self-activity of ordinary workers as a means of reshaping society, as a means of taking society in a different direction to where we are currently going. I want to open a conversation on the role and potential of unions as a force for progressive change, and about the possibilities of that change. I do not want to get into an argument about which labor and left traditions are right and which are wrong, but rather, to try to push the boundaries of what we think unions can do. And I want to do this by engaging with the core project of the most radical, yet maybe the most misunderstood of the big left traditions: syndicalism.

It is fairly obvious that the world is in a huge mess. It is fairly obvious that the mainstream political system is not delivering to ordinary people. Yet the fact is that a lot of the frustration ordinary people face, and the suffering and the insecurity that characterizes life today, is being channelled by right-wing, xenophobic and national, racial and religious fundamentalist forces.

It is in this context that we really need to open up a dialogue on the left, and to really look into the tool box of left ideas and history, the repository of the past, of painfully learned lessons and powerful approaches, to rethink ways that we can creatively take our struggles forward. Yes, we need to avoid dogma, to avoid imposing formulae without thinking about context. But we need the record of past experiences. We have to have a really rigorous discussion, but while we should not simply pour old wine into new bottles, we should also avoid throwing the toolbox away by labelling views we do not like “dogmatic” or outdated.

The Core of Syndicalism

At the heart of syndicalism is the argument that bottom-up, democratic unions, autonomous of the state and of party control, should defend and advance working class claims in the present, and at the same time develop popular technical, organizational and ideological capacities that will enable the working class as a whole, through its self-activity, to both defend and advance its power, its claims, its rights, within the capitalist framework—but also to form, through unions, the nucleus of a new social order. A new social order based on workers’ self-management, based upon a democratic planning of the economy, based upon popular power and workers’ control.

This is an “embryo hypothesis,” which is that the union structures can themselves form the basis, the nucleus, of that new social order, in order to avoid the situation which we often have, which is that working class movements hoist others into power, in the state.

This approach is one in which the self-activity of the working class is both the means of struggle, and also the aim of the struggle, for working class power. The struggle for working class power and emancipation is not something done for a moment and then outsourced to other forces, like political parties and the state, but is something developed on a daily basis through self-activity; the struggle itself is actually the core of the new social order.

Now there are a couple of general points I want to make, before I engage with some other union traditions.

Myth of the Declining Working Class

First, unions matter. Around the world there has been a very popular discourse that the trade union movement is in decline, that it represents a minority, that it is something, perhaps, that belonged to an early period of history. This argument, which is not just made by the right, but also by a surprising number on the left, is wrong. If we look at some of the available figures, the number of people involved in unions has actually increased, looking worldwide.

Underlying this is a larger process around the world, of massive proletarianization. We don't have a clear figure of exactly how large the working class is right now—I mean the class dependent on wages but lacking control of work, so I include white collar jobs, service jobs, the unemployed, and the families of employed and unemployed workers—but we do know that, for example, there has been a demographically much larger process of proletarianization in Africa, Asia and Latin America over the last 50 years than in all of the history of the West over the last 300 years.

We also know that according to ILO's Global Wage Report, wages are the largest single source of income for households around the world. We know that around half the global work force is in waged or salary jobs. We know that while the industrial working class fell by 5 million from 2000 to 2013 in the Western industrial countries, it has grown by 195 million in the middle-income countries alone. We know that by 2006, the majority of the world's population was urban. And we know that while the overall agricultural population is declining, within that population the peasantry is a shrinking part, as agricultural wage labor expands.

So the working class is bigger, unions are getting bigger, and the potential for unions is growing massively.

Constructive Dialogue on the Left

Second, we really need to think about the different left traditions as a family of ideas, that comes out of a common set of struggles and a common set of concerns. The big traditions, such as Marxism, social-democracy and anarchism (including syndicalism), emerged in response to capitalism and the state. As Daniel Guerin argued, anarchism and Marxism both “drank at the same proletarian spring.” The different traditions may vary on how they tackle the problems, and we cannot claim the family has always been a happy one, but, I think, a dialogue between the different traditions is quite productive.

A constructive dialogue allows us to examine different historical experiences, the paths of ideas, different insights, and engage in a process of collective learning. This is a way of both affirming common concerns and common working class roots, but also of clarifying issues, surfacing assumptions, and revisiting important challenges, debates and moments.

I really do not think we are in a position where we should efface differences in the left; I do not think we need to be afraid of differences in the left. I do not think the old divides are irrelevant, and I do not think we are in some new era where the existing traditions are irrelevant. We have not left the 19th century: classic capitalism is back, but bigger.

Learning From the Past

I think we are all in complete agreement about rejecting the dogmatic methodology of looking at older traditions as having the answers to everything, from Karl Marx's implied approval of polyester suits to workers' control! But this does not mean we must abandon the traditions. We need to understand the left traditions as a resource that was and is collectively and internationally generated. Neither Marx, nor Mikhail Bakunin, Piotr Kropotkin or, for example, C.L.R. James sat in an ivory tower, and came up with these traditions. They were, rather, part of a collective process of knowledge production that has been sustained, elaborated and applied by millions and millions of people across the world over the last 150 years. If we look at this repository, this toolbox, with an open mind, we can, on the one hand, find and develop many good and useful ideas; and, also with an open mind, we must, on the other hand, draw the lessons from the past experiences.

Critical historical reflection matters. We need to be very careful not to repeat old mistakes and sow old illusions, and at the same time we also need to recognize that a lot of what is now being called "21" century socialism" is not new and not particularly 21" century. Many of the ideas people put under this label have been around in various forms on the left since at least the 1820s! Many have been tried; very few have been very successful. It is easy enough to say, these days, that the Russian Revolution failed and draw the lesson that revolutionary dictatorship has failed.

But we also need an honest balance sheet for other proposals. For example, the idea that we can have a transition from capitalism through a massive expansion of the cooperative sector, a so-called "social" or "non-capitalist" sector, was for example, P.J. Proudhon's position, back in the 1830s; the idea these should be sponsored by the state was argued by Louis Blanc at roughly the same time. This did not get anywhere, despite a mass base and mass support. This grand failure—rather, series of grand failures—is precisely why people like Bakunin shifted to a much more confrontational approach, of collectively seizing the means of production, instead of creating alternative means of production on the margins.

So a dialogue on the left, with our own history, and a constructive debate and reflection, can help us avoid reinventing the wheel, avoid repeating mistakes that we can avoid—and there have been huge mistakes on all sides, we need to be quite clear on that—but also allows us to look at how earlier generations grappled with challenges we imagine are new, but are anything but: mass immigration, hostile states, global capital, the absence of the so-called "standard employment relationship"—and a global division of labor that pits workers against each other.

Global Traditions, Not Western

Third and last, I want to emphasize that, just as the working class is a universal and global class, its big left political traditions — Marxism, social-democracy, and anarchism/syndicalism

and others—are also global ideas and traditions. I am proceeding from the premise that we cannot really think about the world of ideas and politics and class formation in terms of unique civilizational silos, African, European, Asian and so on: we are talking, in this case, of class-based traditions, representing a global class and traditions that have been globally constituted. For example, Marxism may have begun in Germany, but was also indebted to British economics and French socialism; it has been profoundly shaped and reshaped by experiences in, for example, China, Cuba, India, Mozambique and Russia. So to present such an idea as “Eurocentric” is inaccurate and misleading. There is no simple one-way flow from the “West to the Rest,” but something else entirely going on here, part of a global labor history.

Syndicalism emerges from the broad anarchist tradition: I want to be very clear, here, that by “anarchism” I mean a working class political tradition that emerged in the First International from the 1860s, a tradition indelibly associated with figures like Bakunin and Kropotkin, a rationalist revolutionary form of libertarian socialism opposed to social and economic hierarchy and inequality, which fights for a radically democratic, global, federation of workers and community councils, based on assemblies, mandated delegates, and common ownership. It aims at putting the means of administration, coercion and production under popular control, enabling self-management, democratic planning-from-below, and production for need, not profit or power.

Freedom Requires Solidarity

The core premise is an insistence on the value of individual freedom, but also the related claim that individual freedom is only possible through cooperative, egalitarian and democratic social relations. In the genuinely communist society advocated by Bakunin, people are genuinely free in that they have both shared, equal relations to major social resources, no inequalities of class, gender, race and so on, and the real, substantive possibility of making direct, meaningful decisions in a wide range of areas of life. The fact of the matter is that you can have all of the rights that you want in a Constitution, but if you are homeless and sleep under the railway bridge, you are hardly in the same position as a railway owner.

This view—individual freedom through economic and social equality, in a society based on political pluralism—leads directly to a critique of capitalism, landlordism and the state itself, for all are seen as means of centralizing wealth and power in the hands of small ruling classes. But it also involves a critique, for example, of authoritarian family relationships, of multiple forms of social oppression by gender, empire, nation, race and hierarchy between people generally.

Thus, individual freedom requires a revolutionary reconstruction of social relations, one in which all people are guaranteed a basic means of life, one in which there is greater and every increasing freedom for individuals and the abolition of artificial and imposed inequalities. This requires, among other things, the abolition of structures like capitalism, landlordism and the state that are locked into anti-popular logics precisely because they are built upon, and express, class inequalities of power and wealth. They enable as well as require the subjugation and exploitation of the popular classes.

The state, which is always centralized, is not, from this perspective, a neutral, technical solution to governing complex societies. It is primarily a means of placing administrative and coercive

power in the hands of the few, enabling these to administer these resources in a top-down chain of command, and at the expense of the popular classes.

Writers like Max Weber, who were well aware of the negative consequences of modern state power, and of how empty the claim that the people actually govern was, misunderstood this, and therefore saw state power as a necessary evil. But, for Bakunin and Kropotkin, the state was neither efficient nor essential, but a form of class rule. When we take class into account, it follows that the enemy is not everyone in the state, because state bureaucracies as such are not interest groups that overlap with classes; rather state bureaucracies are an organized apparatus of class rule, by a small number of state managers who cooperate closely with a small number of private owners, and that most people in these systems are ordinary workers. Opposing capitalism means opposing capitalists, not the workers they employ or any useful products they provide or sell; likewise, opposing states means opposing state elites, not the workers they employ nor any useful products they provide or sell.

For syndicalism and anarchism, the idea that the popular classes can play the state, or political, elite against the private capitalist or economic elite, or that we should replace the existing state elite with a new state elite, or get the state elite to merge with the private capitalist elite through massive nationalization, simply misses the fact that the state elite is part of the problem, is part of the ruling class and is driven by an anti-popular logic that is no way different, and in no way more contingent or changeable, than the anti-popular logic of the private corporations.

This means that people who manage the state are—regardless of intent, ideology, personal history, or social origins—part of an oppressing ruling class. It is not that good people are co-opted by the state because they are corrupted or do not understand the issues; it is the logic of their position at the top of the state that forces them to act in ways that are anti-popular. South Africa is a case in point: look at the once-glorious movement of Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela 22 years down the line, and see what it has become. It is not the first example, and will not be the last, and it cannot be blamed on a few bad apples like Jacob Zuma. It is completely typical case; there is nothing exceptional about what the ANC has become, for the story is the same with all political parties that have got state power, whether they are of the left or of the right.

Not Elections, But Counter-Power

Now the question must arise: how do you solve this problem? Electing yet another party, and hoping that this time, magically, the outcome will be different, is not reasonable.

The anarchist tradition is a diverse one, with a lot of internal debates, but the main strand, the anarchism of Bakunin, Kropotkin and others, is what I call “mass anarchism.” It argues that we need to organize, from below, for an alternative society, through a pre-figurative politics of mass-based, class struggle organizing.

This means, firstly, building alternative mass organizations in struggle against the ruling class. Organizations that constitute the base of resistance, the levers of social revolution as well as the nucleus of a new, self-managed, egalitarian order. This is an approach that can be described as building popular, class-based counter power.

This involves bottom-up, democratic, mass organizations that can resist, then defeat, then surpass the ruling classes: the aim is essentially the extension of a democratic egalitarian popular project that is the complete opposite of the core, centralized, elite-run, hierarchical institutions of

the state and the corporations. To extend this project across society requires a move beyond resistance, or small experiments, to enabling common ownership of, and democratic control over, all core social resources. I agree with comrade Hilary that the autonomist John Holloway is wrong to think that capitalism will “crack” through the proliferation of experiments and exits. It’s far too powerful for that; we need to warn people how dangerous the system is. We need a direction, a politics, a plan about where we are going.

As my comrades on the panel have demonstrated, ideas matter: there is nothing automatic about mass, democratic bottom-up organizing leading to a transformation of society. On the contrary, the typical pattern is that mass democratic organizations and popular struggles—despite the gains they may win and imprint on the social order—get captured; they get used as mechanisms for small elites to ride into state power, where those self-same small elites—former union leaders, national liberation heroes, one-time grassroots militants, whoever—then become part of the system, and play a role in the reconsolidation of ruling class power.

For Bakunin, without a revolutionary theory the popular classes are doomed to repeat an endless cycle of ruler replacing ruler, and exploiter replacing exploiter, as revolts against oppression generate new oppressors. Therefore, there is a need to use the democratic space within the mass organizations to make the argument for an alternative, for a critique of the present, a vision of the future and a strategy to reach it. A new “social philosophy” (Bakunin), and the real possibility of a new order and a faith in the ability of ordinary people to create it.

This project, then, of counter power requires as its twin a revolutionary project of building popular counter-culture—of counter-hegemonic struggle—so that, ideally, you have a situation where there are not only mass democratic, class-struggle movements, but those mass democratic movements are at the core of the constitution of a popular alternative worldview.

Ideas, Debate, Pluralism

Therefore we will need specific anarchist or syndicalist political organizations—not as a substitute for popular self-activity, but as a force to promote it; not as a party aiming at state power, but as a force to help push the mass organizations themselves, and so the popular classes, to take power directly.

What Bakunin wanted, for example, in the First International, was not an anarchist international, any more than he wanted a Marxist international. He wanted the First International to be a body that provided the greatest possible class-based unity, and within that framework, to have the democratic discussion, elaboration and testing of different perspectives.

This is not what happened, as the First International split between the anarchists and the Marxists in 1872, but the record is quite clear that the anarchist wing included many non-anarchists and that the Bakuninists, over the next five years, consistently tried to organize a reconciliation. This was not because the differences did not matter, but because the unity of the working class and the peasantry was paramount, because revolution required mass democratic organizations, not small political sects, and because, they believed, issues could be democratically resolved. This was at the core of their project.

Where do unions fit in here? For most mass anarchists—Bakunin and Kropotkin included—unions are an essential part of building counter-power. As mass-based organizations, based at the workplace, they are the single most important and irreplaceable means of placing means of

production under popular control; as extremely resilient mass organizations that function best when overcoming divisions among workers and championing common demands—for example, around wages—and more specific demands—for example, around gender equality or immigration rights—they can be mighty levers of revolution; as formations based at the point of production, they wield enormous structural power by being able to disrupt capital accumulation and state functions.

There is obviously a complete rejection here of the idea that unions can be fundamentally incorporated into the status quo. Obviously union leaders can be corrupted and incorporated. Obviously many unions develop a bureaucracy—full-time officials and leaders—which acts as a brake on struggles and contain the seeds of betrayal. But unions themselves cannot be co-opted. They represent a fundamental contradiction within society. They cannot be bought off, and workers cannot be bought off. The very fact of unions’ existence arises from the inability of this society to meet the needs, political, economic and social, of the popular classes.

Reforms, Not Reformism

For syndicalism, you can and should win reforms—progressive changes, within the existing system—through mass democratic, class-based movements, including unions, but what is key is how we win reforms. For syndicalism and for mass anarchism generally, reforms should be won from below. This enables them to be a means of activating ordinary people, a means of developing confidence, of building organization and consciousness, a means of creating further momentum for more and escalating demands—and a means of improving people’s lives.

But, as someone said earlier, after one contradiction is resolved, another emerges. Mass anarchism insists that one victory for reforms does not solve the problem. Reforms are valuable but inadequate.

The point of syndicalism is an application of the counter-power/ counter-culture strategy in the workplace. But the ambition and scope of syndicalism also means building a union movement that is not just economic, focused only on wages and conditions, or reformist, giving up the revolution, or only workplace-based. It involves a union movement that organizes on a wide range of issues, at work and beyond work, economic, social and political. It stresses direct action, is open to alliances with a range of popular class forces, and it is profoundly political but independent of political parties. It is popular, radical and political, but also tolerant of diversity. It is a transformative unionism that constitutes within itself the seeds of a new order within the shell of the old society.

I want to be very clear here that the vision of syndicalism, and of the mass anarchism from which it emerged, involves the idea that unions will be political, but they will not be “political unions” in the sense that we usually mean—unions allied to parties. On the contrary, unions will simultaneously engage in economic and political activities, and in practice reject any effort to set up a division of labor where unions “do” economic issues, and parties “do” politics. The aim is to overcome the gap in the working class between economic and political struggles, and help therefore block the dead end of seeking state power that parties tend to follow.

Unions and other forms of counter-power, which would take the same line, would thus replace parties in many respects, and avoid the pattern of allying to political parties to betray. Within the counter-power, let a thousand political currents bloom, and operate, but reject substitution of

parties for the mass democratic organizations, and the path to state power—for the state arena is an “enormous cemetery,” where the “real aspirations” and “living forces” of the masses are “slain and buried” (Bakunin).

Goodbye to the Parties

As Bakunin argued, a bourgeois-democratic state is a “thousand times” better than the most “enlightened” dictatorship, but elections are an “immense fraud” in a capitalist system: “The day after election everybody goes about his business, the people go back to toil anew, the bourgeoisie to reaping profits and political conniving.”

We continue to speak, in most of the labor and left milieu, as if the state is something different than capitalism—as if capitalism has an essential nature, where the place of power is always occupied by capital, where the dynamics of capitalism are iron laws of history—yet, despite all of our experiences, as if the state has no essential features, fusion with elites, or iron laws. We had reformist and revolutionary parties in power, we have had left social-democrats, right social-democrats, we have had radical nationalists and Marxist-Leninists; right next door to South Africa, we had a revolution under the Marxist-Leninist party, FRELIMO, in the 1960s and 1970s, in Mozambique. But every one of these state projects, without exception, saw the parties join the old elites, or form new elites. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the logic of mass organizing for the popular classes, and of self-management and democracy from below, and the logic of state and corporate rule. Setting up yet another party, or trying to fix existing parties, is a dead end. The whole approach is wrong.

“Movement Unionism” Not Enough

In closing, I want to suggest that syndicalism is not the same as “social movement unionism,” which refers to democratic unions that build alliances with other forces, and fight for democratic reforms, because while it shares these elements syndicalism rejects alliances with political parties aiming at state power, something that the quintessential social movement unions—Brazil, Korea and South Africa—all accepted.

While social movement unionism has a vague, often elusive, aim, syndicalism has a clear revolutionary project, as it aims very explicitly at a project of self-management through the unions and other organs of counter power; this is a battle that, it is very clear, unions cannot fight on the alien terrain of the state, but organize outside and against the state.

It will involve organizing state workers, but it rejects the use of the courts, parliament, the official policy and corporatist machinery and the pursuit of state power. It aims at organizational self-sufficiency and working class autonomy, including financially. I do not suggest we completely reject any external funding, for example, from other unions, even parties, but this must never be a substitute for being largely self-financing—and every care must be taken to ensure the democratic control of funds, and subordinating all funding to existing goals, rather than changing goals to get funding. Every effort must be made to keep the number of full-time posts in unions limited, paid at the wage of average workers, and subject to the strictest accountability; funds must focus on education and organizing, not investments. And every effort to use funds to build systems of patronage must meet zero tolerance.

The anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain in the 1930s had two million members, no state funding, no rich donors, had a tiny staff, yet ran thousands of worker and neighborhood centers, dozens of newspapers including the largest daily in the country, a radio station, and fought a brutal ruling class. It is absurd that there are left-wing unions in South Africa with a billion rands tied up in investment firms, while they cannot fund a decent media or education programme and chase foreign funds to keep going. Those billions should be poured into mass organizing and education. Self-sufficiency is a precondition for autonomy, and a safeguard against lazy organizing and a union bureaucracy that controls the money through centralized accounts, access to donors and a role in union investment companies.

Plans for workers' self-management, which Hilary mentioned, like the proposals of the Vickers workers in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, are absolutely inspirational; I think we can all agree in being awed by the creative capacities of the working class, and recognize the need to extend real democratic control over production and roll back management control. But as Vickers showed, faith in the state was misplaced; despite support by the Labour Party left, like Tony Benn, no real support came from the state—and in any case, Benn favored a heavy role for the state in managing industry, which is the opposite of real democratic control over production

To fight against capitalism is also to fight against the state; to fight against social and economic inequality in society is also to build a mass democratic, class-based movement.

Unions Can Change Tracks

Finally, syndicalism rejects notions that unions automatically develop in one way or another. It rejects the pessimistic view of Robert Michels—who had been, by the way, very close to syndicalism before moving rightwards—that all unions, like other mass formations, inevitably end up undemocratic; it rejects Richard Lester's notion that unions inevitably "mature" into bureaucratic, conservative bodies. It equally rejects the views that unions are automatically or inevitably revolutionary. They are not, and in most cases are far from it.

When I talk about the need for the working class to extend power through unions, I am not making the argument that every single union can do it; many are completely incapable of doing it; and that is precisely why we need to reform and renew the unions, through such means as rank-and-file movements. We need both ideological and organizational renewal.

In South Africa there is a major split in the unions, with the South African Federation of Trade Unions (SAFTU) emerging from the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), but this is, so far, basically a division of unions largely sharing the same political traditions; for many involved, it's not a profound political break with the traditions of the SA Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress movement of the African National Congress (ANC), but an effort to rescue those from the SACP and ANC—a return to the "national-democratic" revolution project, the party form, the ideas of Chris Hani, Joe Slovo and so on.

From the mass anarchist and the syndicalist perspective there is nothing automatic about mass democratic movements becoming revolutionary. There is also no pre-set trajectory in history that takes us inevitably towards socialism, there are no stages of history that are taking us anywhere, or that capitalism itself will inevitably collapse, whether we give this a 19th century spin, and bet on economic crisis, or a 20th century spin and bet on imperialist wars, or a 21st century spin, and bet on ecological disaster.

It is fundamentally the self-activity of ordinary people that can switch history onto a new track, but it is fundamentally by changing ideas that people will change the track. Ideas are the driving force here. This is not an idealist conception: ideas only take root when they intersect with social formations and class interests; but it is the recognition that it is that ideas that are going to change the world, and that this is the only certainty we can have about the future.

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