

Anarchism and the unions

a critique of Malatesta's ahistorical perspective

Scott Nappalos

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There is an old argument amongst anarchists. The argument starts with the nature of unions, and ends with the conclusion that revolutionaries shouldn't attempt to build libertarian alternatives outside the unions, and instead should enter into the established unions and agitate for anarchism there. Though the argument doesn't derive from Malatesta, he wrote it most succinctly and is an inspiration for many. Looking at the argument we can see the missing pieces, and why this orientation towards unions is mistaken.

Malatesta's argument goes as follows.

A union is set up to improve working conditions. In order for it to make good on their demands, the unions have to bring together large enough groups. If workers must be anarchists before they join then, it would be unnecessary since the workers are already revolutionary, and could just launch a revolution. The union would just be a duplicate of a political organization. The members would merely be anarchists on paper. Assume that the union has a revolutionary program. In times when it is inactive, it is possible for active revolutionaries to maintain the program. In times when the union is active and attracts large numbers, there will be a number of conflicting ideas. Short term interests will be more expedient and win more gains, and thereby win out over the program.

The conclusion of the argument is the anarchists should not form unions built on anarchist principles (even ones built on a libertarian character without anarchist ideology). "In general to me it seems better that the anarchists remain, when they can, within the largest possible groupings" (Malatesta 1926¹). Within the unions anarchist argue for anarchist tactics and ideas, and organize against cooptation and authoritarian currents.

The structure of the argument then is to begin with the nature of the union ["a union is set up to defend the day to day interests of the workers and to improve their conditions" (Malatesta 1925²).], elaborate the anarchist's goals in unions ["in the labour movement I see only a means of raising the morale of the workers, accustom them to free initiative and solidarity in a struggle for the good of everyone and render them capable of imagining, desiring and putting into practice an anarchist life" (Malatesta 1925b³).], derive a contradiction between an anarchist union and a union's nature ["A labour organisation that were to style itself anarchist, that was and remained genuinely anarchist and was made up exclusively of dyed-in-the-wool anarchists could be a form... of [an] anarchist grouping; but it would not be the labour movement and it would lack the purpose of such a movement, which is to attract the mass of the workers into the struggle, and... to create a vast field for propaganda and to make new anarchists" (Malatesta 1925b)], and conclude that we should organize within the biggest non-ideological unions.

Malatesta's conclusion is actually ambiguous. Within the same paragraph he asserts

"The whole point at issue is whether it suits our aims, in terms of action and propaganda, for the labour organisations to be open to all workers, irrespective of philosophical or social creed, or whether they should be split into different political and social tendencies"

and finishes with the prior quoted

¹ Anarchism and Labour Movement, www.marxists.org

² Syndicalism and Anarchism, www.marxists.org

³ Labour Movement and Anarchism, www.marxists.org

“In general to me it seems better that the anarchists remain, when they can, within the largest possible groupings” (Malatesta 1926).

He somehow misses the logical leap between the largest unions, and unions merely open to all workers. The CNT and the IWW of the time had policies of being open to all workers willing to join, though having revolutionary ideology. The issue is further confused when he agrees with Vittorio when the author states “I disagree that the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) in Spain should directly call itself anarchist, when, unfortunately, the immense majority of its members do not know what this means, what libertarian ideology is about.” (Malatesta 1926⁴), and yet does not call for the CNT to dissolve and enter into the UGT.

There are three main errors in Malatesta’s argument that will lead us to different conclusions. Malatesta botches the role of history in union’s structure, the function of struggle in transforming the consciousness of its participants, and the variations in the forms of workers organizations.

1. Ideology is less a product of will than of history.

In his reply to de Santillan, Malatesta claims he recognizes this point. It may be that he did, but he fails to see the problem for his argument. The basic idea is that unions can be revolutionary to the extent that the class or sections of the class are revolutionary. This is a historical matter. History and society develops unevenly, there will always be sections of the working class moving into and away from various revolutionary praxis embedded in their organizations. Likewise the success and failure of these movements depend on their context, i.e. The ruling class, the other workers organizations, the region’s position in global capital, etc. When we move away from the abstract and timeless perspective Malatesta uses, one leg of his argument crumbles (that it is not possible to have mass unions that have revolutionary ideas and practice).

2. Malatesta misses the role of struggle radicalizing workers consciousness.

This makes growth without watering down principles possible, since workers in participating can be radicalized (not saying it will, just that it is possible, which destroys the fork in his argument). This is a similar issue as above with Malatesta’s lack of understanding of struggle across time. Workers’ ideas are not static, but rather shift in a dynamic between the notions they have, their activity, and the ideas they encounter. Throughout history workers have built libertarian organizations not necessarily from anarchist agitation within movements so much as being radicalized by the dynamics of struggle itself (though of course there are other examples too). This means that it is also possible for workers in libertarian unions to develop revolutionary consciousness without being required to be anarchists before joining. Since libertarian unions’ structure/principles are voluntarily built, there is always a struggle around the orientation of the union. That doesn’t mean however (as Malatesta argues) that unions by their nature will cease being revolutionary when struggle progresses. Otherwise we would not have seen libertarian institutions grow at all, they would have turned reformist while growing and never had the chance

⁴ Ibid.

to be repressed. This isn't negated by the fact that the CNT or whoever did in fact turn towards reformist activities, since in fact that was true by default. All revolutionary movements either produced reformism or were destroyed. There are other factors that explain cooptation (and this was not in fact Malatesta's argument, he argues unions will become reformist before reaching revolutionary conclusions).

It is also worth pointing out that alternative libertarian institutions such as anarchosyndicalist unions, workers councils, militias, peasants' councils, etc., formed perhaps the only significant anarchist movements. Given this history, the burden of proof falls on those who claim Malatesta's strategy, which as of yet has no significant historical precedent.

3. Not all unions were created equal.

Since Malatesta died before seeing the integration of unions into the social partnership of the state and capital, it is not useful to view Malatesta's unions as identical to ours. For that reason, it is likewise naïve to think that one can merely exist within organizations that are setup for and schooled in repressing radical organizing and carry out propaganda effectively. Over 80 years of communist infiltration into the unions failed to produce any significant shifts in the unions nor revolutionary movements. Again the burden of proof lies with anarchists who think otherwise, and who have next to nothing to show for anarchist attempts at such.

Malatesta's arguments rely on the idea that all unions are the same, some just want ideology. But in fact the structure, methods, and aims of unions vary considerably. The fundamental division in our time is between unions (or workers' organizations) that seek to mediate between capital and workers, and those that are spaces for autonomous organizing that don't exist beyond the activities of workers. The former is the traditional American union, which exists mostly as a bureaucratic layer of paid staff with specialized skills who negotiate a contract for the workers. The contracts exchange workers control for largely economic gains. Workers interact with the unions, and struggle for changes through (and sometimes against it), but the union remains a third party with separate interests of its own. The 20th century is filled with examples of the unions are highly efficient repressive organizations for class cooptation and collaboration.

We can likewise show our own fork. If you try to bore within the existing repressive unions, either you do so autonomously (with workers' own separate structures to organize with) or you don't. If you work within the union's framework, you work on their terms and must fight against their superior resources both economically and in alliance with the boss and the state if you are successful. If you build a parallel structure, then you are pursuing what Malatesta argued against, it is a union of one form or another.

The conclusion we should draw is that we need our own autonomous organizations built on a libertarian basis. Like Malatesta though I have some skepticism about organizations that are built to win reformist gains within capitalism. This is why there has been recent debate within the present day anarchosyndicalist movement around the structure of anarchist unions. Instead of trying to be bodies that represent the workers and that try to become the institutional framework for boss-worker relations, the union should be the vehicle of struggle of the workers but not for the workers. We should build workers organizations that (a) build consciousness through struggle itself, (b) can initiate and widen struggle, and (c) create a framework for workers/community councils. The union is the historical memory of our experiences in struggle, maintaining

resources for learning from struggle and pushing further fights, and for defending against the coordinated attacks of the capitalists and state. These conclusions are not far from what the councilists came to from similar premises that Malatesta has. What sets anarchosyndicalists apart from others is our belief that it is possible to build libertarian mass organizations that will prefigure and train us for the task of constructing a new society from the ashes of the old.

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