

# **A History of Anarcho-syndicalism**

**A Self-Education 24 unit correspondence course**

SelfEd collective

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# Self Education

No such thing as a decent quality free lunch? Probably not, but A History of Anarcho-syndicalism is both free and (we hope) decent quality. It has been produced by the SelfEd Collective, labour free and at minimal costs. If you have no Internet access and require printed materials, these will be supplied at cost.

## Objectives

A History of Anarcho-syndicalism is designed to;

- Provide a history of the struggles that led to the emergence of modern anarcho-syndicalism.
- Develop an alternative view of working class history to accepted historical accounts.
- Illustrate the critical role of direct action as an idea and culture.
- Draw out the diversity of working-class ideas and struggle in different countries and contexts.
- Challenge the idea that “there is nothing we can do”.
- Show that struggle can be a liberating experience, and can get real results.

## Aims

This course introduces the history of the working-class movement. It looks at the ways in which struggles against oppression have developed in different countries and at different times. By taking it, you can see how it celebrates the endeavours of ‘ordinary’ men and women against those who seek to rule and boss over them.

Anarcho-syndicalism is an ever-changing body of ideas and methods of struggle to bring about a society free of states, capitalism and other oppressive institutions and relationships. Since it develops through practical experience, it is a characteristic of anarcho-syndicalism that the development of ideas and strategies is ongoing. It has and will continue to change since the events dealt with in any particular Unit in this course. In other words, anarcho-syndicalism is not about rigid dogma, but principles and practice. The Course aims to illustrate the development of such principles and practice.

A History of Anarcho-syndicalism is not a passive, coffee table affair. It is a means of challenging the existing order by increasing self-knowledge and self-identity. The history of the movement offered here is the result of collective effort, put together by different people with diverse

ideas and different backgrounds and knowledge. All of us are activists who see the need to learn about and from history. By taking this course, you can become a part of this history, contribute to its development, and be active in applying the lessons of history to today's struggles.

The SelfEd Collective is based in Britain and the course therefore aims to take a British perspective on world events. English is also the main language of the material accessed in researching the course, although it should be noted that material in other languages does exist.

Since it focuses on working-class struggles, this course is fundamentally different to the sort of history being offered in school. All histories are partial, both in the sense of being 'partisan' (i.e. biased towards a cause) and 'partial' (i.e. fragmented). No history is complete, nor is it purely 'objective'. Unlike most history courses, this one acknowledges the unavoidable 'incompleteness' of history, and offers this as a version of history which has been put together with more integrity than most histories which claim 'objectivity'.

The sources used in assembling this course vary between published academic books, histories and polemics, and pamphlets and papers produced by people during the times of the struggle in which they were involved. This is a history of people from different countries, cultures, times and in differing situations. The ideas developed accordingly and in some cases the written ideas were suppressed and often deliberately destroyed. Often, the people involved were also physically killed or imprisoned by the government of the day.

This course is dedicated to all those in our history, who have struggled against oppression, for a better world for all. We owe it to these people not to give up or stand aside while the carnage of modern capitalism and nationalism continues. We owe it to them to find out more about their efforts, learn from them, and take up their struggle today. That is why this course is not aimed at armchair voyeurism. It is about getting ourselves better informed for our collective struggle for a better world. It is just a start, but, we hope, a worthwhile one.

## Content

The Course content is divided into 4 main blocks and each Block is then subdivided into Units that analyse separate episodes and events.

- Block 1 charts the origins of anarcho-syndicalism. It starts with the evolution of the working class in Britain, as feudal society transformed into industrial society over the 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It then explores the radical period of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries in Britain, where the origins of anarcho-syndicalist tools such as the general strike can be traced. At this point, the growth of international working class organisation enters the scene, and we turn our attention to the birth of the 1<sup>st</sup> International and its development in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the theoretical ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, which were developed at this time. This brings us to the first major burst of syndicalist mass-organisation, which started in France, and which had its roots in events in late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century France. Block 1 ends with the subsequent spread of French syndicalism to Britain in the period 1900–1914.
- Block 2 is dedicated to case studies from around the world, centred on the spread of syndicalist organisations and activity from France, around the turn of the century. Particular

focus is given to North America, and the rise of the Industrial Workers of the World syndicalist movement. Other Units concentrate on the situation in South and Central America, Scandinavia, and southern Europe.

- Block 3 centres on the inter-war period. In particular, the Russian Revolution is examined, highlighting the struggle between anarcho-syndicalist ideas and those of the Bolsheviks. It then follows the subsequent formation of the International Workers Association (IWA), the anarcho-syndicalist international, in 1922, and its progress into the 1930s. The remainder of Block 3 focuses on the growth of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in the Spanish Revolution, in the period up to 1939. This remains the best example of anarcho-syndicalism being put into practice, with the collective organisation of society on a regional scale across Spain. Units will examine the way in which this anarcho-syndicalist experiment functioned in economic, political and social terms.
- Block 4 charts the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism since the 1930's. It commences in Spain where Block 3 left off, and goes on to examine the rise of fascism and the Second World War. Post-war history is then studied, with the heyday of social democracy in the western world, and the establishment and stagnation of the social democratic labour movement. From the late 1970's, attention turns to the decline and eventual death of social democracy and the re-birth of rampant market capitalism, recession, labour struggles and social change. Also covered during this period are the death of Franco and re-launch of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain, and the subsequent emergence of the modern IWA. From here, recent development of anarcho-syndicalism in Britain and the role of these ideas in the wider struggles of 1980s and 1990s are considered.

## **Format and support**

State education structures are designed to prepare you for your role in a divided society. By definition, exams produce mostly failures and only a few real winners. The split is not based on 'intelligence' or hard work, but on privilege and how well young people learn to mimic and copy the techniques needed to progress through the system. This Course has no exams and no trappings of state education structures. The material in the booklets is intended to be in clear, plain English.

Each Unit contains sections at the back to assist with drawing conclusions, checking your understanding of key points, and suggestions for discussion, as well as help get further reading started. Books and pamphlets listed here that cannot be obtained locally can be purchased or borrowed through the SelfEd Collective

## **Self-education: A revolutionary tool**

The anarcho-syndicalist tradition of self-education is deep-rooted, as it has been across the full breadth of labour history. 'Educate, agitate and organise' has long been a central theme of working class struggles. For good reason. Without education in its widest sense, we could not hope to form successful anarcho-syndicalist organisations.



At the heart of anarcho-syndicalism, is the concept of direct democracy. To work in reality, democracy requires everyone to participate equally, and to be aware of each other's views and needs. This in turn requires all to have a basic level of awareness — of knowledge, and of society. The key to this awareness and participation is education. Without knowledge through education, participation in democracy is impossible. Knowledge is power. If we do not share knowledge equally, we cannot hope to share power either. And power sharing is how anarcho-syndicalism functions.

Class is not solely based on economic relations — that one class is rich and another is poor. Historically, the ruling class have been well aware of the power of education, and have therefore deliberately preserved, restricted and distorted education for their own ends. The class system in Britain is therefore underpinned by education. It is through closed, elite schools that the rich perpetuate their power. It is also through the state education system which the rest of us experience, that the same ruling class prepare us for life within the hierarchical society which they control. The continuation of inequality relies on a widespread sense of powerlessness. Thus, much of state education is designed to limit and condition us to accept our position, rather than develop our knowledge and full potential.

We cannot rely on the state to deliver the education we want. In fact, the only way to overcome the sense of powerlessness is through personal development. Self-confidence can only arise from collective self-reliance, self-determination, and self-education. No-one can educate themselves as an individual. Knowledge does not just appear — it is developed by human interaction. In other words, we can only educate ourselves through interaction with each other. Self-education is therefore collective by its very nature. We aim to put self-education theory into practice, and we hope *A History of Anarcho-syndicalism* is an example of this.

# **Block 1**

# Unit 1: Introduction – The origins of Capitalism

This introductory unit provides a background for the course. It examines the emergence of capitalism through the agrarian and industrial revolutions in Britain. Although this period predates the emergence of anarcho-syndicalist ideas, it provides important context to the course.

Anarcho-syndicalism originated as a response to capitalism, and seeks to replace capitalism. This Unit therefore gives us an insight into how capitalism came about, and an indication of how it works. It also serves as an example of how historical change comes about.

Major historical change is neither mere accident, nor a result of the actions of prominent historical figures. Rather, the course of history is determined by the interaction of economic development and social movements. Thus, capitalism did not arise from the efforts of a few inventors causing an industrial revolution, nor because British capitalists had some special “enterprising spirit”. It arose from the systematic breakdown of feudalism as a social and economic system and the imposition of a wage labour system in its place.

## This Unit aims to:

- Provide the basis for the rest of the course by examining the development of capitalism as it emerged in the first industrialised nation
- Examine, via a history of its development, the basis on which capitalism operates
- Look at the ways in which historical change comes about through the interaction of economic and social relations
- Provide an ‘alternative’ history of working-class people and their lived experiences
- Raise issues around the nature of history as it is usually written

## Terms and abbreviations

**Capitalism:** System in which private or corporate wealth (capital) is used in the production and distribution of goods resulting in the dominance of private owners of capital and production for profit.

**Feudalism:** A political and economic system where a landowner granted land to a vassal in exchange for homage and military service.

**Agrarian:** Relating to landed property.

**Protectionism:** The protection of domestic producers by impeding or limiting, as by tariffs, the importation of foreign goods and services.

**Laissez faire:** An economic doctrine of non-interference that opposes government involvement in commerce.

## Introduction

Anarcho-syndicalism originated as a response to capitalism. This introductory unit examines the emergence of capitalism through the agrarian and industrial revolutions in Britain in order to provide a context for the development of the movement.

As well as providing an insight into how capitalism came about, and an indication of how it works, this unit looks at the nature of historical change. It challenges the idea that historical change is determined by the discoveries or endeavours of a few people, or by an unquantifiable ‘spirit of the age’ – an idea often offered as explanation of sweeping change. Rather, it looks at the idea that change comes about by the interaction of economic development and social movements.

Understanding how historical change comes about, and how societies choose to spell out their version of the past is a crucial part of coming to understand the political present. Acknowledging that social changes have occurred over time alerts us to the fact that if society has not always been the same, then it can change. Study of the past also raises questions around what we are encouraged to think of as ‘natural’ social relations in the present. This Unit is a starting-point in raising some of these questions.

## The Feudal Economy

From the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> Centuries, medieval feudal society was based on a series of regionally based, largely self-supporting economic systems, each composed of a town and its surrounding agricultural district. Within these mini-economies, peasants were forced to work the land for a feudal lord in exchange for the right to build shelter on, and work a small strip of land. Although they were allowed to cultivate this strip of land and, if they could afford to, keep animals on it, they still had to hand over part of their produce as rent. After paying this rent and meeting their own needs, the peasants traded the little that was left of their harvest in the town for goods produced by the town’s craftsmen. The gentry and their innumerable servants consumed the harvest from the lord’s land, plus the peasants’ ‘rent’. Any surplus was traded for locally produced goods, or for imported goods, although the latter were limited luxuries.

In the towns, industries were organised into powerful guilds, and production was carried out by master craftsmen and their families. Only men could enter the guilds to become skilled workers, and this direct structural sexism was a severe limitation on the economic and social power of women. Each craftsman owned his tools and worked in a single shop, with his family and assistants. Guilds aimed to eliminate competition, both from within and from outside the regional economy, and to limit production to ensure it didn’t outstrip demand, causing prices to fall (which they would if market forces came into play). Only guild members could produce and sell goods in the region. They could not expand their output beyond a given point, nor could they hire more than the agreed number of assistants. Guilds set exact quality standards to which goods had to be produced, as well as the prices they must be sold at. Thus they maintained monopoly production, ensuring a decent standard of living for craftsmen and their families.

The feudal economy persisted in this form up to around the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. Thus, social and economic life continued to be characterised by the dominance of agriculture, and by production geared to meet immediate local needs (including those of the feudal landlords). There were numerous restrictions to ensure that the regional economies remained relatively closed. For example, the sale of goods from outside the economic regions was severely restricted. Through such restrictions, the feudal lord ensured the continuation of the economic region on which his authority and economic survival depended. Trade was limited and so the amount of money in circulation was very small.

## **Rise of the Merchant Class**

The relatively static feudal way of life, which had endured for centuries, began to break down at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. A primary cause of the shift away from feudalism was increased foreign trade, which led to the emergence of a new class of merchant capitalist. These new merchants amassed great fortunes by purchasing foreign goods cheaply and selling them on at huge profits to Europe's aristocracy.

This boom led to many European countries growing rich from taxes and attempting to boost their share of trade by establishing colonial empires. Once a country established a colony, it would try to impose a trading monopoly by banning foreign merchants and ships. For example, the riches of Spanish colonies in the Americas could only be exported to Spain, where they were traded on to other European countries at a tremendous mark up, enriching both Spanish merchants and the Spanish state.

The race for new colonies inevitably led to conflict. England, being a relative latecomer to the international trade race, found that many of the prime sources of wealth had already been snapped up, so it embarked on nearly three centuries of war to establish its own colonial empire. Thus, it defeated Spain in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Holland in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, and France in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Having meanwhile spread its supremacy throughout Britain, England thus became the world's mightiest seafaring and colonial power. Indeed, it was to engage in bloody wars right up to the second world war in an attempt to maintain economic power (ironically, after centuries of war, Britain finally lost her superpower economic status to a former colony and a close friend – the USA).

The growth in trade both outside and within Europe led to increased money exchange. This in turn led to inflation being injected into the feudal economies for the first time, so that the 16<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed a price revolution. For instance, in Britain, wheat prices, which had been static for centuries, more than trebled between 1500 and 1574.

Increased use of money and inflation began to undermine the feudal order. The gentry wanted money to buy the new luxury goods that flooded Europe. Meanwhile, spiralling prices meant they could make money either by producing and trading agricultural goods directly, or by renting the land to a growing class of large-scale farmers. Thus, capitalism was quick to penetrate into English agriculture, where part of the land-owning class formed a bloc with the new capitalist farmer.

These changes in the economy led to a dramatic change in social relations. The peasantry, who had been, to all intents and purposes, tied to the land and virtually owned by the lords, were set "free" – in other words, evicted. Evictions gathered pace as trade increased, especially as the

growth of the textile industry raised the demand for high quality English wool. The landed gentry enclosed more and more common land, to raise sheep. Such land was owned collectively by the peasantry and was forcibly taken over — stolen — by the aristocracy. Some measure of the pace of evictions can be gauged from contemporary writers. Thomas Moore, at the start of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, recorded that “the sheep swallow down the very men themselves”. By 1581, H. Stafford wrote:

*“Gentlemen do not consider it a crime to drive poor people off their property. On the contrary, they insist that the land belongs to them and throw the poor out of their shelter, like curs. In England at the moment, thousands of people, previously decent householders, now go begging, staggering from door to door.”*

Evicted from the land and faced with massive price rises for basic foods, the lives of an increasing number of landless peasants became ones of desperation and growing starvation. Evictions were to carry on in Britain for the next three centuries. As a result, today, it still has the smallest rural population in the industrialised world, and even amongst these, the majority neither own nor work on the land. (It is interesting to note that the transition from feudalism to capitalism took a different route in France due to the French revolution. The land, which under feudalism was jointly owned by the lord and the peasant, was taken from the defeated aristocracy and handed to the peasantry, making France a country of small-scale peasant holdings the opposite of what occurred in Britain.)

It was not just in the countryside that the feudal order was breaking down. In the towns throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, the guild system also suffered due to the increased trade. The new merchant capitalists now bought goods locally for export. Hence, these were no longer produced for sale locally, but were instead sold to merchants. As merchants could travel the country to buy the cheapest goods, craftsmen soon found themselves competing with each other in a national market. This undermined the guild system, which could only operate through control of regional economies, maintaining monopoly production, and keeping market forces at bay. However, with the establishment of a national market, the regional monopolies were broken. Henceforth, market forces began to dictate patterns of trade, fundamentally affecting all aspects of production, consumption and pricing of goods.

## **The emergence of Capitalism**

Capitalism started to emerge during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. At first the merchants, or “buyer uppers”, as they became known, were a link between the consumer and producer. However, gradually, they began to dominate the latter, first by placing orders and paying in advance, then by supplying the raw materials, and paying a wage for the work done in producing finished goods.

The concept of a waged worker signalled a crucial stage in the development of capitalism. Its introduction was the final stage in the “buyer uppers” transition from merchant, (making money from trade), to capitalist (deriving wealth from the ownership and control of the means of production). The first stage of capitalism had come into being. This stage saw one new class, the primitive capitalists, exerting power over another new class, the waged workers.

Early capitalism also engendered new methods of production. The earliest was the ‘cottage industry’, which saw individual homes become mini-factories, with production directed by the capitalist. The cottage industry model became so widespread in the woollen textile industry that

it became a method of mass production. In turn, the wool trade became Britain's most important industry by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

Importantly, the hundred-year transition from feudalism to primitive capitalism had strong state support. The regionally based feudal economies and the power of the aristocracy ran counter to the interests of this alliance between capitalism and the increasingly centralised state. The state gained the wealth it desperately needed to maintain its growing bureaucracy and standing army, by tapping into capitalism through taxes, customs, duties and state loans. In return, it conquered colonies, fought for dominance of the world's markets, and took measures against foreign competition and the power of the aristocracy. Such measures included bans on the import of manufactured goods, restrictions on the export of raw materials destined for competitors, and tax concessions on the import of raw materials. Restrictions on exporting raw materials hit the aristocracy particularly hard as agricultural produce is, by its very nature, raw materials. Thus, bureaucrats and capitalists defeated the aristocracy – though a section did survive the transition from feudalism by forming an alliance with the new capitalists.

It is worth noting here that the alliance between the state and capitalism occurred across Europe, though in different forms. instance, in Germany, where capitalism was much less developed and therefore weaker, the more powerful state was able to exercise much more control. This was an early indication of the development of the social market in Germany under which the state has much more power. In Britain, capitalism was much more developed and so was able to exert much more influence, leading to the development of the free market system, under which the state has far less influence.

## **Social impact of capitalism**

The establishment of capitalism was a time of upheaval and bitter struggles between new and old power-brokers. At the same time, the mass of the population were dragged unwillingly into an increasingly violent conditioning process. The new capitalists needed to be able to exert ever more pressure on their producers to produce more for less, so that the capitalists could maintain trading prices and increase profits. They looked to the state to ensure pressure was brought to bear on workers who, for the first time, were being forced to sell their labour in an increasingly competitive work environment, which was itself aggravated by the swollen ranks of the new landless and unemployed. Laws were passed setting a rate for the maximum wage payable to peasants. The aim of all this brutal legislation was to turn the dispossessed into a disciplined obedient class of wage workers who, for a pittance, would offer up their labour to the new capitalism. The state also clamped down on beggars, whose ranks were swollen by dispossessed peasants and ruined craftsmen. Able-bodied vagabonds were lashed or branded with red-hot irons, while persistent vagrants were liable to execution.

The problem of creating a disciplined and regimented workforce should not be underestimated. Viewed from our advanced modern industrial perspective, submitting to the routine of going to work daily, for a set number of hours, usually inside a building, appears the norm. From the perspective of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century peasants, however, this routine would have been alien. The working day under a pre-capitalist agrarian system would have been shaped by hours of light and hours of darkness, as most work took place out of doors. The intensity and length of labour was dictated by seasonal considerations, such as planting or harvest periods. Similarly, holiday

periods, even those marked by the Church, were seasonally derived and often based on ancient pagan festivals. The number and extent of these holidays helped define and shape the working year; up until the Reformation during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, it is estimated that around 165 days a year, excluding Sundays, were given over to celebrations and festivals..

## **The Rise of Manufacturing**

The spread of capitalism meant that the feudal economic system and the power of the aristocracy was in terminal decline by the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century. The establishment of mass production, based on the cottage industry, meant England was well on the way to becoming a capitalist and industrially-based society. As the 18<sup>th</sup> Century progressed, this transition was completed.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, a primitive form of manufacturing developed, which differed from cottage production in that workers did not work from home, but rather from single premises, or factory, owned by the capitalist. However, this early manufacturing differed from its later form in that it still depended on human physical power with little use of machinery. As such, early 18<sup>th</sup> Century manufacturing can be seen as a link between domestic production, based on cottage industry, and capitalist production, based on the mechanised factory system.

At first, the move towards factory production was driven by cost. Centralised production spared capitalists the cost of distributing raw materials to individual workers. Further, as the factory system developed, it soon became clear that it gave capitalism much greater control over the workforce, establishing tighter organisation of work and workers and thus higher productivity.

Keeping production under one roof also meant the possibility of speeding it up by breaking the process down into planned stages. This entailed workers specialising in one particular component of the production process. Within this new system, the worker's role was reduced to repeating the same monotonous task over and over. This led to gains by the capitalist because of the greater speed of the production process and the better quality of the goods. Importantly, this division of labour into separate tasks significantly transformed the nature of work. It effectively de-skilled craftsmen and women who had been trained to produce finished goods by participating in the process of production from beginning to end and arguably, removing the sense of meaningfulness inherent in being present in the whole process of production to the point of completion.

These transformations, of the place and nature of work, lead to yet another fundamental change in social relations. Society rapidly evolved into two clearly defined social classes, the industrial capitalist and the waged worker. Capitalists broke their remaining links with their merchant past, giving up their commercial role to concentrate on organising the production process. Their sole source of income was profit, gained from the exploitation of the labour of the emerging working class.

Working class life also changed dramatically under the factory system. Even under the cottage industry system workers had had some independence. Owning their own basic tools and cultivating a plot of land enabled them to subsidise their income. This, and the fact that they worked unsupervised from home, gave them some degree of autonomy and control. In the factory, any semblance of autonomy was lost completely. Workers had to work a specific number of hours under the direct supervision of the capitalist, who owned the more specialised tools. With no land or tools to earn extra income from, workers became totally dependent on their ability to



sell their labour. Thus, a clearly defined working class was emerging, separated totally from even limited control of the means of production. The wage slave had been born. New social relations within the factory also developed. With the division of labour it was necessary for someone to co-ordinate the actions of many workers. The job of overseer, or foreman, came into being, separate from the rest of the skilled workers. Also, as production was increasingly simplified, the unskilled worker came into the process; a concept which had never before existed. Though the creation of the primitive factory system did greatly increase productivity, the savings made were not enough to entirely eliminate cottage industries, which still had many advantages.

Under the cottage system, the capitalist did not have to pay for a factory and its upkeep. Wages could be kept to a minimum, as cottage labourers paid for much of their own upkeep through growing their own food and working on their own behalf. As a result, production was often integrated, with the first and last parts of the process based in the factory, and the intermediate parts done by cottage labourers. Through such developments, manufacturing grew out of the cottage industry in Britain. This contrasted with the rest of Europe, where the state generally remained stronger, and attempted to introduce manufacturing by planning, providing factories and recruiting the workforce. For example, in France, capitalism was far more state-directed, and this remains the case today.

The needs of capitalism changed as factory production developed and the state was again enlisted to ensure continued expansion. Under existing apprenticeship laws, the right to engage independently in industry was only granted to men who had served a seven-year apprenticeship and who were members of a guild. This severely limited the number of workers that could be hired, which hampered the spread of factory production. At first, manufacturers by-passed guild regulations by setting up in rural areas and new towns where the guild system didn't operate and by investing in new industries not covered by guilds. However, as capitalism expanded, calls for an unregulated free labour market grew. The state responded by sweeping away the remaining restrictive guild regulations, bringing their power to an end. It also undermined the practice of local Justices of the Peace setting minimum wage levels. The free market form of British capitalism demanded and got a completely deregulated, unprotected workforce that it could then exploit to the full.

Capitalism developed quicker in Britain and was far more 'productive' than elsewhere — it produced more goods more cheaply. This brought calls from British capitalists for international free trade and for an end to protectionism. So, after centuries of building up the economy behind barriers to foreign competition, Britain suddenly decided that protectionism is an abomination. This tactic has been used since by all advanced capitalist countries including the US, Germany and Japan. Current attempts by the developed nations to force underdeveloped nations to open their borders to free trade under so-called free trade agreements should be viewed in this light.

The laws originally brought in by the state to protect the interests of capitalism against foreign competition were now a barrier, preventing the more dynamic sectors of British industry, most notably the cotton and metal trades, from exploiting overseas markets. By the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, calls for free trade had gained widespread currency, particularly with the publication, in 1776, of Adam Smith's *The Wealth Of Nations*. These *laissez faire* free market ideas, upon which British capitalism developed, still dominate the British ruling elite's thinking, and helps explain why the Thatcherite free market "revolution" occurred in Britain in the 1980s, rather than elsewhere.

## The Industrial Revolution

By the early 1770s, the economic and social conditions were in place for the industrial revolution to explode on to the world's economies. Powered by a number of new inventions, the primitive factory system was transformed, as machine power drove productivity to unprecedented levels. With the factories transformed by the new machinery, the cottage industries could not possibly compete and soon collapsed. Between the 1770s and the 1830s, there was a boom in factory production with all manner of buildings being converted into factories and the majority of waged labour taking place within factory buildings.

It would be over-simplistic, however, to see the industrial revolution merely as a result of the invention of machines that replaced many workers. As we have seen, the social relations needed for the industrial revolution to take place had taken centuries to evolve. Without the factory system, these inventions would have been meaningless. In the first place, the machinery introduced into the work places of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England was specifically intended for factories, as they had developed within the economic and social conditions of the time. In this sense, we can see that these inventions themselves were largely products of a particular context within history. In addition, it should be noted that the invention of machines to aid production was hardly new. Under feudalism their introduction had been opposed by the guilds, often violently, with the audacious inventor occasionally being put to death. For example, the Ripon loom was banned in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century after guild opposition. But the demise of the guilds meant the way was opened for the introduction of all manner of labour-saving inventions. The water wheel, the blast furnace, pumping machines for mines, improved transmission of power through cog-wheels and fly-wheels, were just a few of the innovations which paved the way for the industrial revolution.

Given the pre-conditions for the development of capitalist industry, it is hardly surprising that the industrial revolution first took off in the cotton industry. Cotton production only appeared in Britain in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century and was free of any guild restrictions. Further, it had to compete with the well-established woollen industry.

Both these factors encouraged higher productivity, resulting in the invention of the spinning jenny in the 1730s, followed by the mule, followed by the mechanical loom.

However, it was not until the invention of the steam engine that the industrial revolution truly took off. Steam power replaced human power, first in the cotton and metal industries, then throughout the rest of industry. This explosion in productive power transformed Britain's economy. As productivity increased, so the prices of manufactured goods plummeted, stimulating demand for British goods across the world. As a result, the value of British exports rose from £15million in 1760 to £59million in 1805. This new wealth, however, was not experienced by the workers whose labour had made it possible. Abroad, these were the black slaves upon whose backs the cotton industry in Lancashire grew and prospered. In Britain, it was concentrated amongst the few, capitalists who owned the means of production and 'bought' with capitalist-dictated wages, the labour of the workers.

It is important to note that ownership of the 'means of production' at this stage in the development of industrial capitalism meant not only the ownership of factories, machinery and the power to invest or withhold capital, but also the means of the production of knowledge. Capitalists who owned newspapers, for example, could exert great political influence to protect their own interests. Ownership of a newspaper meant not only the direct control of print workers, dis-

tributors and sellers, but control over the transmission of information. This could, for instance, extend to direct or indirect political influence through specific politicians or parties. It might also extend and protect capitalist interests by the spread of ideology and, less subtly, blatant propaganda.

Within the conditions engendered by the industrial revolution, workers faced up to eighteen hours a day in the factories and horrific living conditions in the “booming” manufacturing towns. The brutality of the new capitalist system is perhaps best summed up by its treatment of children. Women workers, from the onset of the industrial revolution, were used as cheap labour, while retaining child- raising responsibilities. With nowhere to leave children, women had little choice but to bring them to work. It was not long before they were seen by capitalism as an even cheaper source of labour. By the early 1800s, children as young as five could be found working up to twenty hours a day down mines, with conditions little better above ground in the factories. Orphanages systematised this slavery, handing over a steady stream of children to factory owners.

Along with terrible living and working conditions, wages fell in real terms, due to rocketing corn prices caused by the Napoleonic wars. In response to the rise in corn prices, and with an eye on the main chance, large farmers and the aristocracy rushed to grow wheat on every available patch of land. This caused the enclosure of yet more “common” land, emptying the countryside of ever-greater numbers of peasant farmers, and driving them into the misery of the industrial cities. This conclusive chapter in rural clearance completed the centuries-old process of transforming Britain from a feudal agricultural society into the world’s first capitalist industrial society. Demographic statistics of the period are extremely illuminating; in 1750 some 90% of the population of England lived in the countryside. By the time of the 1851 census the number of people living in urban settlements was greater than those living rurally.

## Conclusions

A brief look at the history of the economic and social conditions that pre-dated the industrial revolution shows that capitalism did not arise from the efforts of a few inventors causing an industrial revolution, nor because British capitalists had some special “enterprising spirit”. It arose from the systematic breakdown of feudalism as a social and economic system and the imposition of a wage labour system in its place.

Sadly, capitalists and state bureaucrats copied the ‘success’ of industrialisation across the western world, as they sought to cash in on the huge wealth enjoyed by the new British ruling class. The capitalist system, based on the exploitation of the working class, soon spread to Europe, and as we will see, to the rest of the world. Presently, capitalism, alongside its essential partner institutions of sexism, racism and homophobia, dominates the global economy, continuing to inform and maintain the social relations within it. The now-familiar pattern of economic success being measured by which country or capitalist can extract the most profit from the workers under their control has its origins in the transition of Britain from a feudal society.

We will see in the next Unit, that the coming of capitalism has, somewhat paradoxically, also brought with it the potential for workers to organise for change. Though capitalism brought with it untold misery, ordinary people were far from passive victims in the face of exploitation. Instead, they sought to resist capitalism, giving birth to the idea of an alternative world, free from

exploitation and misery. In the remainder of this course, we will trace that resistance, and the struggle for a new world, and how such ideas developed into the theory and practice that came to be known as anarcho-syndicalism.

## Key points

- Present –day capitalism arose from the systematic breakdown of one social and economic system (feudalism) based on obligation, and the rise of another social and economic system (capitalism) based on wage labour
- Until the end of the eighteenth-century, the work experience of the labouring population in England was predominantly agrarian-based but by the mid-nineteenth-century was predominantly urban
- Colonialism, involving the establishment of national trading monopolies, began with merchants and state chasing the wealth created by foreign trade and led to several wars over exploited foreign territory, over four centuries
- Changes in the economy in England led to changes in social relations
- The industrial revolution began in England and came about as a result of changes in economic and social relations
- The present-day model of the capitalist exploitation of labour for profit has its origins in the transition of Britain from feudalism to capitalism

## Checklist

1. When and how did the breakdown of the feudal economy begin in England?
2. What are the common features of the peasant evictions of 16<sup>th</sup> century and the land enclosures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century?
3. What are the main differences between the work experience of the labouring population of England before and after the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century?
4. What was the first stage of capitalism and how did this come about?
5. How did the primitive form of manufacturing that developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century differ from cottage production? How did it differ from later developments?
6. What were the main effects on the nature of work of the factory system of the early nineteenth-century?
7. What is meant by ‘protectionism’ and why did capitalists call for it to end in the late eighteenth-century?

## Answer suggestions

1. *When and how did the breakdown of the feudal economy begin in England?*

A major cause of the shift away from the feudal system was the increase in foreign trade around the beginning of the sixteenth-century. As well as leading to the creation of a class of merchant capitalists, the growth in foreign trade promoted the use of money and produced inflation. This came about mainly through the aristocracy's money-making schemes of direct trading of agricultural goods or renting out land; all undertaken in order to attain money to buy foreign goods. In addition, the purchase of locally produced goods for export by the merchant capitalists enforced competition between craftsmen in a national market, thus breaking the regional monopolies and the power of the guilds. After this, market forces dictated all aspects of trade.

2. *What do the peasant evictions of 16th century and the land enclosures of the 18th century have in common?*

The peasant evictions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century came about because the gentry began to rent out land to a new class of large-scale farmers, in order to make enough money to buy the new foreign luxury goods that were flooding Britain and Europe. Peasants who had hitherto been tied to the land were driven off and left without shelter or subsistence. The enclosures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century came about because large farmers and the aristocracy wanted to grow as much wheat as they could in order to profit from the huge price rise in corn caused by the Napoleonic Wars. Common land was enclosed which meant that peasant farmers were thrown off and were prohibited from cultivating or keeping animals on this land. In both cases, the economic greed of the powerful classes have resulted in deprivation for the labouring classes.

3. *What are the main differences between the work experience of the labouring population of England before and after the end of the eighteenth-century?*

Prior to the onset of the industrial revolution, most work was land-based, took place out of doors and was dictated by hours of light and darkness and the seasons. The production of goods was often seen through from beginning to end by the same worker. After the onset of the industrial revolution, when the factory system evolved,

labour took place by the clock, mostly indoors and was repetitive and monotonous, one worker being responsible for one part of the process of manufacture. Other differences include the wage system, the place of work, conditions and the move from the countryside to the towns and cities. It can be noted that, while the changes were sweeping as a whole, there were many variations across the country.

4. *What was the first stage of capitalism and how did this come about?*

The first stage of capitalism came about during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when merchants gradually became more involved in the production of goods by supplying materials and paying wages. The merchant made the transition to capitalism by making profits from the ownership and control of the means of production. This is considered to be the first stage of capitalism.

5. *How did the primitive form of manufacturing that developed during the 18th century differ from cottage production? How did it differ from later developments?*

The main difference between cottage production and the primitive form of manufacturing that developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century is in the location of work. In the new system, workers did not work from home but from a premises (factory) owned by the capitalist. This new form of manufacturing differed from the later factory system in that it still relied very much on human physical power and skill and involved little machinery.

6. *What were the main effects of the factory system on the nature of work in the early nineteenth-century?*

The main effects were to lengthen the working day, and the number of days spent in work, to create a new class of 'overseer' separate from the majority of the workers, and sweep away guild regulation. It ended the practice of local wage setting and drew the labouring classes into the horrific conditions of the new industrial towns. Workers became totally dependant on their ability to sell their labour and the working class emerged as a category of people who were separated from even limited control of the means of production. You may have found many other changes from your reading and thinking around the implications of the sweeping changes wrought by the factory system of the early nineteenth-century.

7. *What is meant by 'protectionism' and why did capitalists call for it to end in the late eighteenth-century?*

Protectionism is an economic system that protects home producers by way of tariffs to foreign imports and services. Once capitalism had developed in Britain and it became the world's dominant economic power it was producing more goods cheaply and needed to open and exploit overseas markets. This meant a call for international free trade and an end to the tariffs. Paradoxically, these had been originally set up to protect capitalists from foreign competition, but they became a barrier to increased profits for the big British capitalists.

## Some discussion points

- In which ways can studying the early history of capitalism in Britain help us to understand the present-day working of capitalism?
- What have you learned about the nature of history as it is generally offered during the course of studying this unit?
- Was the development of capitalism inevitable?

## Further Reading

Specifically for this Unit, there are very few good books which cover the period in question and give any real weight to the issues facing the working class and how they dealt with them. However, there are many general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. Try searching your local library.

**I. I. Rubin. A History of Economic Thought. Pluto. ISBN 0745 303013. -LI- -BS-**

Rubin, a Russian Bolshevik, first wrote this in the 1920s (he was subsequently executed by Stalin for questioning Soviet economic policy). Though clearly marxist-determinist, this remains a very useful background to the rise of capitalism.

**K. Marx. Capital. various reprints available. -LI- -BS-**

In the original, Marx is not an easy read, and this is no exception. However, it is detailed and was written sooner after the events than most books available today.

**L. Spencer & A. Krauze. Enlightenment For Beginners. Icon. ISBN 1874 166560. £8.99 -BS- -LI-**

Accessible (with pictures!) and modern (so available) commentary on the closing days of feudalism and the transition to capitalism. Classical perspective, and rather light on the labour movements of the era.

**E. P. Thompson. Customs In Common. -LI-**

A homage to pre-capitalist society, with some good accounts of early resistance to the first signs of capitalism.

Note: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. There will be many useful sources which are not listed here, and some of those which are listed may be difficult to obtain. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK — available from AK Distribution under Course Member discount scheme (order through SelfEd), — BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 2: Britain – The radical period 1750s-1840s

The period 1750–1830 saw the rapid rise of the market economy in Britain, so that by the early 1830s ‘full-blown’ capitalism had become firmly established. During this same period, as capitalism tightened its grip on the emerging working class, so the first signs of real resistance against this new form of economic oppression began to be developed. Particularly during the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a radical period in Britain, and the working class started organising themselves and trying out methods of resistance. Of these, one of the most significant was the idea of the Grand National Holiday – the forerunner of the General Strike. Although a coherent set of ideas and tactics was not yet developed, some important lessons were already being learned which would later contribute to the advent of early anarcho-syndicalism.

### This Unit aims to:

- Offer an interpretation of working-class radicalism 1750–1840 from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective
- Introduce, through case studies, the history of organisation and direct action in working-class movements
- Look at the social, political and economic context of the formation of early general unions and wage campaigns
- Suggest some of the reasons why mainstream historical accounts have failed to acknowledge working-class revolutionary aspirations

### Terms and abbreviations

**Diggers:** A communistic movement that flourished during the English Revolution and Civil War. They advocated the abolition of private ownership of land and believed that political revolution must be based on social revolution.

**Habeas corpus:** A writ requiring persons to be brought into court before a judge to investigate the lawfulness of their imprisonment.

**Hampden Clubs:** Social and political societies set up in the industrialised north of England with the aim of social reform.

**Levellers:** A political group of the English Revolution who advocated political reforms around basic individual rights and the principle of popular sovereignty.



**Tolpuddle Martyrs:** In 1834 six agricultural labourers, who had combined to resist wage reductions, were sentenced to seven years transportation on a trumped-up charge of administering illegal oaths. They were pardoned in 1836 after massive sustained protests.

## Introduction

Unit 1 outlined the first stages of the growth of capitalism. This Unit examines the ways in which the emerging working-class responded to the new ways in which they were being exploited within capitalism. The first signs of working-class resistance emerged during a radical phase in England during the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This Unit highlights key moments in the period of working-class responses to capitalist oppression, and looks at the forms those responses took.

As with Unit 1, this Unit seeks to provide a historical context for the growth of some of the ideas that later emerged as identifiably anarcho-syndicalist. In order to make sense of the development of these ideas, we need to understand the context in which they came about. Historical accounts have often overlooked the highly organised and forward-looking way in which the working class responded to the emergence of capitalism and industrialisation. This unit reviews the evidence for working-class radicalism and in the process, the true extent of working-class revolutionary organisation becomes apparent.

## Problems with classical history

Many classical historical accounts of the period 1760–1840 are somewhat patchy in their record of working class history. Notably, they tend to underplay or even dismiss the reality that workers could organise themselves and take direct action in the pursuit of revolutionary aims. This tendency is partly because of a wider tendency to portray revolutionary aspirations as somehow “un- English” and not part of the English working class character. It is interesting to note, for example, that the events of the seventeenth century are never described as a revolution, but a ‘Civil War’. Often the reason given for this is that the status quo prior to the ‘Civil War’ was completely restored. Given that this is patently untrue, there must be another reason for the English being deemed incapable of revolution. Basically, it is due to a mythical ‘national character’ which is as racist as it is part of upholding a myth of ‘Englishness’. To quote just one example of this mythology, the historian Weymouth states:

*“The English working man has no desire for conflict...they possess no innate tendency towards revolution...while the action of revolutionaries on the continent was not lost on the subject masses of Great Britain, the majority of working men were loyalist at heart and lovers of domestic peace.”*

This myth of ‘Englishness’ is deeply pervasive and many historians ignore the evidence and portray the English working class as largely passive and only occasionally reactive. The fact that the history of the working class does not conform to such caricatures is often explained away by the liberal use of the words “mob” and “riot” in the average history book covering 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century British history. Typical references of this kind include descriptions such as the Gordon Riots (1780), the mobbing of the King in London Streets (1795 and 1820), the Birmingham Bull Ring Riots (1839), the Rebecca Riots (1839), the Plug Riots (1842) to name but a few. Use of the terms “mob” and “riot” tend to imply that, typically driven by poverty, the

normally docile working class occasionally lost control and committed isolated and random acts of violence before falling back into their placid acceptance of capitalism.

Reasons for this misleading description of events vary. The tendency to downplay working class organisation come from an ideology which places a docile and largely disorganised working class at the base of society. This assumption emanates partly from the mythology of 'Englishness' against which England defines itself and distances itself from 'Johnny Foreigner'. It may also come from a complacency which is borne out of the position in society in which the majority of academics find themselves; middle class beneficiaries of capitalism. Whilst not all historians are middle-class, taken in by myths of Englishness or conscious upholders of capitalism, many are affected by the assumptions built into English society and are part of the dominant class within it. History and historians are shown to be as much a product of the time in which they are writing as the events that they claim to be recording. All histories are partial. This being the case, there is no such thing as merely 'recording' events – all historians are interpreters of events, which means that their biases and prejudices will inevitably come into play.

Also, historians with differing political agendas may have good reasons to underplay a highly organised working-class response to capitalism. Liberal and right wing historians may wish to deliberately play down co-ordinated action, or may not make the (rather obvious) connections through the course of their research. The motives for this are probably already clear – talk of revolution and organised direct action tend to encourage people to review not only their history but also their present social position. Marxist historians, on the other hand, wish to demonstrate that workers could not reach "political consciousness" without the revolutionary perspective of the Marxist intelligentsia, which was absent at this time, as the period was prior to Marx. Labour historians may prefer to stress the social democratic tendencies of workers by attempting to distance trade unions from violent direct action and revolutionary goals.

This problem of historian bias is further compounded by the fact that the working class perspective of working class history is often missing, since during this period, the actions taken by the working class were often illegal and punishable by death or transportation. Operating in such circumstances, it is not surprising that working class organisation remained largely clandestine, with very few records kept to indicate how the organisations operated and what their aims were. These are grave omissions from any account of working class history. However, there is strong circumstantial evidence that many of the working class actions of the period were in fact highly planned within working class communities, with detailed aims. The growth of workplace unions can be interpreted as being an integral part of this wider struggle against capitalism. The goals of these integrated working class organisations were as sophisticated as the organisations themselves. Most significantly, the struggle for immediate improvements to pay and working conditions during the period were often backed up with longer-term aims that clearly demonstrate a revolutionary perspective. The combination of working class community and workplace organisation, linked to the struggle for both immediate gains and longer term revolutionary change, formed an important initial basis for the set of ideas which was later to emerge as anarcho-syndicalism.

## **Class Organisation**

As factory based capitalism developed, workers increasingly came together in large groups and suffered the same working conditions in the same building on a daily basis for the first time. It did not take long for them to recognise a common interest between themselves, and against their rulers and bosses. This growing sense of class-consciousness was the catalyst that led to organisation and working class action. For an 80-year period between 1760 and 1850 the British ruling class sustained the biggest attack on its authority ever organised by the working class. The decline of the guilds, along with the protection they had offered (see Unit 1), made it increasingly obvious to workers that they must seek new forms of organisations. So they began to form alliances and unions for their own self- protection. As early as 1683, printers in London began to organise in chapels, with a system of penalties for “non-observance” of chapel rules. Around the end of the eighteenth-century, the Government stepped up action to make such primitive unions illegal. Partly to get around such legislation, workers organised friendly societies, and often used these to mask their covert union activities. This was a successful strategy, and friendly societies quickly spread to most parts of Britain. So effective was this form of organisation that the sustained action against the starvation caused by soaring food prices during the eighteenth-century was able to draw on a well-developed and self-organised national network of working class friendly societies.

## **The Food Riots**

Most histories have recorded the working class protests at rising food prices in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century as ‘food riots’. The massive unrest and violent action of the period has largely been interpreted as unplanned, disorganised, desperate scuffles. In fact, many of the so- called ‘riots’ were actually planned and co-ordinated. The unions were instrumental in this organised campaign, with workers consciously planning direct action aimed at lowering food prices. That workers should plan such illegal violent action hardly fits in with the classical historians’ views already referred to in this Unit. But in spite of the workers’ desperation through lack of decent available food, were far from being confused and desperate underlings. One early example of the real extent of planned resistance is seen in a letter the mayor of Liverpool wrote to the Home Secretary in 1772, with allegations that a meeting of the town journeymen carpenters were planning a ‘riot’. Whereas historians have traditionally interpreted riots as spontaneous actions brought about by nothing more than the pressure being brought to bear on the ‘rioters’ immediately prior to the event, officials like the mayor of Liverpool, who were there at the time, clearly had other information and a different understanding. Indeed, many of the ‘food riots’ of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century were carefully planned; they were simply too well organised to be otherwise. Throughout the Thames valley in 1766, for example, villages and towns were patrolled by large groups of workers, calling themselves “the irregulars”, who enforced ‘popular’ food prices. Another example of this type of organisation is found in Halifax, in 1783, where workers marched on the town, formed in rows of twos, and forced the shops to sell oats and wheat at a fixed price. Given that in the time leading up to the execution of the alleged leaders, troops were drafted into the area to prevent wide-scale disorder and a planned attempt at rescue, we must assume that the authorities then knew about what historians since have contrived to overlook; wide-scale working-class organised resistance.

These examples were not isolated incidents of working class community planning. In 1795, the climactic year of the food 'riots', workers took co-ordinated action across Britain. In Carlisle, Nottingham, Newcastle, Cornwall and London to name but a few, well-organised actions against high food prices have been documented. Very often these protests took a characteristic form. After a prearranged signal, often a woman holding aloft a loaf of bread decorated with a black ribbon, the so-called 'mob' would take over the market place, often for days, in order to enforce low food prices.

The practice of workers seizing grain being transported on roads, rivers and docks, also became common. Eventually, the Government was forced to accept that it could no longer guarantee the safety of the food in transport. Farmers began refusing to send food to market for fear that it would be commandeered in transit or that the workers would force it to be sold at a low price.

## **Government Response**

Fearful of a French Revolution type insurrection taking place in Britain, the Government introduced a range of Acts of Parliament in the last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, aimed at breaking working class organisation. In 1795, Prime Minister Pitt introduced the Seditious Meeting Act, which banned public meeting and brought forward legislation suspending habeas corpus. In 1799, the Combination Acts were introduced, which outlawed trade unions.

In 1797, an Act was introduced which made the swearing of unlawful oaths illegal. This piece of legislation was of great significance, for the swearing of oaths was the basis by which the working class organised successfully, and ensured both secrecy and solidarity. Not only did the ancient guilds, and later the unions organise around oath-taking, so did all manner of working class organisations, from political clubs to insurrectionist movements. By banning oaths, the Government hoped to end the methods by which clandestine working class organisations had been operating for hundreds of years. The importance the Government placed on undermining working class organisation by attacking the oaths system can be seen from the severity of the sentence for conviction under the new Act – up to 7 years transportation. By contrast, the anti-union combination legislation carried a maximum sentence of three months imprisonment. It was under the swearing of oaths Act that the Tolpuddle Martyrs were found guilty and transported in 1834.

The Government of the period recognised the food 'riots' as part of an organised working class protest with revolutionary undertones. Historians have by and large chosen to interpret this as 'panic' on the part of the government. However, the more likely explanation, one for which there is plenty of evidence, is that the food riots, far from being unplanned acts of desperation were highly organised. The Government did not see the unions as 'respectable' organisations cut off from this working class agitation, but as part and parcel of the food 'riots' protests. The anti-working class legislation introduced by the Pitt Government was not solely aimed at curbing the unrest. It also aimed to undermine the working class methods through which protest was organised.

## The Radical Period

As the 18<sup>th</sup> Century drew to a close, Government fears that working class unrest may begin to take a revolutionary direction appeared ever more justified. By the early 1800s, organised protest was beginning to take on a quasi-insurrectionist nature. Actions such as consumer strikes were advertised in advance by handbills with wider aims than just the immediate demand for cheaper food.

This was particularly the case with factory workers in the growing industrial regions of the midlands and the north. Across Yorkshire in 1800, meetings were called by handbill in Sheffield, Wakefield, Dewsbury and Bingley. The purpose of these, as printed on the handbill, was 'to expose the fraud of every species of hereditary Government, to lessen the oppression of taxes, to propose plans for the education of helpless infancy and the comfortable support of the aged and distressed [and to end] the horrid practice of war.'

In December 1800, magistrates in Sheffield issued a proclamation against 'numerously attended' meetings that were being held in fields at night. Government spies reported that 'there is a system of organisation going on in secret committees and preparation of hostile weapons'. By March 1801, this had spread to Leeds and Huddersfield, where magistrates reported to the Government that they feared 'an insurrection was in contemplation by the lower orders.' In Lancashire, magistrates reported that in Ashton-under-Lyne (near Manchester) a delegate meeting had taken place with 'agents' present from Yorkshire, Birmingham, Bristol and London.

With the temporary measures under the 1795 Seditious Meetings Act expiring, it became lawful once again to call public meetings, and these began to be called in a highly co-ordinated fashion. As the Committee of Secrecy in the House of Commons noted: 'It appears to be in agitation suddenly to call numerous meetings in different parts of the country, at the same day and hour.' An alarmed Government quickly re-enacted the Seditious Meetings Act and habeas corpus was suspended for a further year.

Organisation returned underground. In Halifax, in 1801, some form of delegate meeting took place with the swearing of oaths and the joining of the United Britons — an organisation based in Lancashire. All who joined were required to answer yes to the following questions:

*1 Do you desire a total change of the system? 2 Are you willing to risk yourself in a contest to leave posterity free? 3 Are you willing to do all in your power to create the spirit of love and brotherhood and affection among the friends of freedom?*

In June 1802, a small eight-page pamphlet appeared entitled 'Addressed to United Britons' claiming to unite 'in a chain of affection' all those seeking to overthrow the nation's oppressors. By 1803 the Government received a number of reports by informants that secret organisations had 'pervaded the great body of the people in manufacturing districts, and that pikes — pointed wooden stakes — were being prepared. Reports also came in from Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Midlands of a secret organisation in existence, which sought to channel discontent at soaring prices into a revolutionary direction.

As well as these shadowy insurrectionist organisations, the early 1800s saw the growth of a national organisation campaigning for a minimum wage. This aimed to use constitutional methods to achieve its ends, although the campaign itself was illegal, being organised on the basis of secret committees. It was well represented in the industrial heartland, with some twenty secret committees of weavers existing in the industrial towns of Lancashire alone. The common geographic spread, class situation and clandestine organising methods strongly indicate that these

committees had connections with the more insurrectionist groups, although this is often denied in the history books. Agitation for a minimum wage reached boiling point in 1807, with petitions, strikes and demonstrations. Despite a heavy Government response and the arrest of many involved, a similar burst of protest occurred in 1811, when a petition in support of a minimum wage was handed in to Parliament. The extent of the minimum wage organisation is indicated by the fact that it contained signatures from throughout Britain, including 40,000 from Manchester and 30,000 from Scotland. However, the signatures were wasted on the Government.

The failure of the minimum wage movement to gain reform through constitutional methods drove many working-class people to direct action. On the failure of the petition, the Lancashire organising committees apparently abandoned constitutional reform and, acting in a single mass block, they turned to Luddism (see E. P. Thompson).

## **Luddism**

It was about the time of the failure of the minimum wage campaign that Luddism burst onto the scene. It is important to make a distinction between the common image of Luddism and its reality. The popular contemporary portrayal is that it was an uncouth backward looking movement; so much so that it is common even now to refer disparagingly to someone who is suspicious of new technology as a 'Luddite'. Popular historical interpretation has constructed the Luddites as 'simple minded labourers [reacting] to the new system by smashing the machines which they thought responsible for their troubles' (E.J. Hobsbawm). In addition, there is a slightly more sophisticated analysis often put forward that Luddism was a form of collective bargaining based on sabotage. However, none of these representations are accurate.

The Luddites were not trying to prevent technological progress and protect their privileged position as tradesmen by destroying machinery, nor were they opposed to new technology. They were, however, very strongly linked to the minimum wage campaigns through their emphasis on preventing the lowering of wages. In addition, there is evidence that the aims of Luddism were not immediate, local and reactionary, but revolutionary.

Luddism was in fact rooted in the clandestine working class organisations that had been growing since the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century. It developed in the industrial heartland, which by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was to become the scene of insurrectionist organisation. Luddism originated in Nottingham around 1810. It quickly spread to Derbyshire and Leicestershire, then onwards to Lancashire and Yorkshire. The Luddism movement was well organised. Members not only swore an oath but also were expected to pay a regular subscription. Regular secret meetings were held, mainly on the moors at night, from which organising committees and delegates to attend regional meetings were elected. Such organisation enabled small bands of Luddites to remain largely undetected by the authorities, as they moved through the English industrial heartland, destroying the machinery of those employers who had lowered wages. By 1812, the Luddites were confident and numerous enough to begin attacking well defended mills. Groups of armed Luddites in Lancashire and Yorkshire attacked several such mills. Pitched battles were fought with soldiers, with many being killed or wounded on both sides.

As Luddism spread, it quickly began to take on a revolutionary perspective. The fact that it presented such a threat at its height may indicate why the Government and those in power at the time sought to spread false rumour as to the Luddites' reasons for their actions and their intent.

As its strength grew, Luddism increasingly took an insurrectionist nature. It spread to areas like Sheffield, where technology such as gigs and shearing frames were not in operation. Luddite activities began to include the collection of arms and raising of funds as well as the destruction of machinery. A secret House of Commons committee noted this with alarm. Luddism's appeal also began to spread beyond weavers, and workers from various industries began taking part in armed raids. Luddism, especially in Lancashire and Yorkshire, became increasingly inspired by the notion of overthrowing the Government once the organisation had spread and enough arms collected.

The fear amongst Britain's ruling class increased with the growing strength and political direction of the Luddist movement. Government quickly responded by making the crime of frame breaking a capital offence. Armies of Government spies were dispatched in an attempt to infiltrate working class communities. By the end of 1812, more than 12,000 troops were stationed in the most affected areas of northern England. To put the perceived threat into perspective, this was a greater force than Wellington had under his command in Spain. In Lancashire, in May 1812, a full 27 troops of guards as well as thousands of special constables were on active duty. Despite this army of occupation, the Luddites were able to continue to operate. This was only possible because of the protection they received from the wider working class community. The authorities offered very generous rewards to desperately poor workers for information, but in the main, they still failed to get workers to inform. When authorities were able to bring cases to court, trials were often moved to other areas of the country, both to ensure conviction and prevent unrest. Despite the efforts of the ruling class, the funerals of those executed for being involved in Luddism were turned into mass political rallies by the working class. All of this points to widespread working class support for Luddite aims.

By 1814, the economic and military power of the ruling class meant the odds began to be stacked against Luddism, and it declined in the face of massive Government oppression. However, as Luddism passed, the revolutionary atmosphere that it generated led to other forms of resistance. Working class clubs such as the Hampden Clubs sprang up, and there was an upsurge in the number of radical papers and periodicals being produced and distributed. The explosion of radicalism that had swept across the country maintained momentum up to the 1840s.

## **Analysis: Reform or Revolution?**

Clearly, Luddism developed and contributed important experience to working class organisations and tactics. It was a movement of the working class that united workers. It also employed methods of direct action in the struggle against capitalism. Luddism not only sought to make immediate economic gains, but also increasingly linked this struggle with the need for widespread social and economic change. Though the aim of the Luddite radicalism remained parliamentary reform, many of those involved equated parliamentary reform directly with revolutionary change. Luddism linked the short-term aims of reform with longer-term aims of revolutionary change. In short, the Luddites developed and practised some of the basic principles on which anarcho-syndicalism was later to be built.

The movement for reform was split into those who advocated change through peaceful constitutional methods and those who argued for insurrection as a way of bringing about change. While attention has been paid to the emerging politics of the former, the latter has been largely

forgotten or rejected in popular history. By way of example, the reformist leader Hunt has been virtually canonised by historians, while the insurrectionist advocate Thistlewood has been dismissed as a crank. The fact that Thistlewood's public popularity matched that of Hunt, especially within the working class, tells us more about the prejudices of historians than it does about history.

Much is known and written about the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which soldiers butchered peaceful demonstrators. However, the attempted uprisings in Derby and Huddersfield at the same time have been given little attention. With hindsight, and a modern perspective, the aims of the insurrectionists may seem confused. Indeed, the Derby and Huddersfield episodes were tragedies bordering on farce. However, it is clear that these events were a reflection of the genuine desire of many working class people for revolutionary change.

The extent to which organised insurrection was a possibility during this period is implied by the Government's response. In 1820, what became known as 'the six acts' were introduced. The first prohibited military drilling and training, while the second gave justices the power to enter houses without warrants if they suspected arms were being stored. The third banned meetings of over fifty people (except Parliament, of course!), the fourth increased the stamp duties on newspapers (in effect banning them for working class use), and the fifth and sixth extended the power of the Government over sedition. Following the six acts, the Government embarked on a highly sustained campaign of prosecutions. This ranged from attacks on the press and the imprisonment of leading reformers, to the execution of Arthur Thistlewood, the insurrectionist advocate. Once again, widespread brutality and repression by the Government dampened down the growing mass movement for change.

## Early General Unions

Amidst unprecedented Government repression, the unions attempted to organise in new ways. A combination of growing working class identity and solidarity in the face of government repression and the growing factory system, contributed to changes in the approach to workers' organisations. Up to this point, unions had been based on individual trades, often promoting the sectional interest of skilled workers (as in the guilds). Now, the idea of general unions began to evolve, within which all workers would be organised.

In 1817, even though unions were banned, an attempt to form a general union of workers was made in Lancashire. This was known as the 'Philanthropic Society' and it soon spread as far as London. Though it was short-lived, the idea of a general union did not die away. With the repeal of the combination laws in 1824, union organisation began to grow. Within a few years, another attempt at building a national general union was made.

Following a failed strike by cotton spinners in Lancashire, the Grand General Union of the Operative Spinners of Great Britain and Ireland was formed. After a conference in Manchester in 1829, it was decided to turn the union into a general union called the National Association for the Protection of Labour. In a short time it had gained 10,000 members covering twenty trades. However, the union was short-lived, and it collapsed in 1832 after a defeated strike. In 1831, the



London based Metropolitan Trade Union was organised, which federated a number of trades. This organisation, though again short-lived, is relevant because of its strong involvement with the National Union of the Working Class. This organisation went on to form the London Working Men's Association, from which the idea of a National Charter was to form.

As the 1830s progressed, the attempt to form general unions began to take on a more political-economic perspective. With influences from the philanthropist Owen, and the ideas of the political economist Ricardo, who argued that it is the workers who produce wealth, workers increasingly looked to the idea of replacing capitalism with a new system based on non-profit co-operative production. There are clear links here with the later development of anarcho-sindicalism.

## **The Grand National**

In 1831, The Operatives Builders Union was formed. This was a national organisation of builders unions who subscribed to the idea of co-operative production, and it went on to form the more general Grand National Guild. From this, in 1834, the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union was formed. The Grand National grew rapidly to over half a million members. These included workers who had not previously been organised, including agricultural workers and a small number of women workers.

The aim of the Grand National was the complete replacement of capitalism and the system of competition with a co-operative system based on workers' control. Here we see further key elements emerging of early anarcho-sindicalist ideas. In particular, that of one organisation uniting all workers with the aim of direct workers' control of industry – an organisation based on the ideas of solidarity and mutual aid.

Though the Grand National did not survive long, it was able to provide limited support for strikers, and was pivotal in organising a massive demonstration in London in support of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The idea that growing union organisation among agricultural workers had resulted in the spate of hay-rick burning organised by the "army" of Captain Swing instilled instant fear in the Government. The Government responded with brutal repression targeted at the new unions. Some 19 men were subsequently hanged for rick burning. A further 644 were jailed and 481 transported for being accused and convicted of the same offence.

Coupled with the Government repression, capitalist bosses also developed tactics aimed at curbing growing union organisation. They started to practise lockouts and use 'the document', whereby workers were forced to sign a pledge that they would not join or belong to a union. In the face of such Government and capitalist repression, and with its funds drained through the financial support given to strikers, the Grand National began to splinter, and collapsed around 1835.

## **Chartism**

The idea of a common interest of all workers that had underpinned the ideas of the general union continued in the growth of Chartism. As already stated, the idea of a charter came from the London Working Men's Association. It was given further popularity by the anger generated from the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, which attempted to force all

those thrown out of work (e.g. through factory closures or increased mechanisation) into workhouses. The Charter for the Emancipation of the People of the British Isles called for various reforms; annual parliaments, universal suffrage, secret ballots, equal electoral districts, no property qualification for MPs, and payments for MPs.

Though the Chartist movement's aim was the reform of parliament, there was a strong revolutionary current within it whose aim was insurrection. Many in the insurrectionist wing argued for the establishment of a French style Republic and this resulted in a split in the Chartist movement in 1839. From the insurrectionist side of the split, a Convention of the Industrial Classes was organised as a workers' alternative to Parliament, and a movement emerged which argued that the charter could only be achieved by force. It is important to note that although Chartism was a working class movement, even the insurrectionists did not generally aim to overthrow capitalism. Rather, the main aim was political reform and the establishment of a Government based on equal representation. This is hardly surprising, for within the British working class at the time, the struggle for change was still dominated by the idea that the working class should aim to win state power by gaining control of the Government. Equally important, however, is the observation that within Chartism there were those who viewed capitalism as an important source of working class oppression as well as unrepresentative Government. In particular, the unions involved in the Chartist movement contained currents of such awareness. These included followers of Thomas Spence, a revolutionary who argued that land and property should be forcibly taken from the aristocracy and returned to the people. It was from the Spencian current within Chartism that the idea of the general strike was developed as a means of achieving the charter.

The Grand National Holiday The first charter, containing over a million signatures, was presented to Parliament in July 1839 and its list of required changes were ignored. With its rejection, the Chartist Convention adopted the idea of a month long national holiday, during which all work would stop, thus forcing the reform of parliament. Spence had advocated the idea of a general strike in the form of a national holiday as a way to force land redistribution. The idea was made popular with the 1832 publication of a pamphlet entitled 'The Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes'. This was produced by the National Union of the Working Class (NUWC) and written by William Benbow, a follower of Spence. It was an instant success, and the tactic of a national holiday was endorsed by the London Committee set up to defend the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834.

In the pamphlet, Benbow argued for a month-long strike and the setting up of an alternative convention; a congress that would inspect the corrupt institutions of the British State and decide on how to rid the country of the misery which had been inflicted upon it. During the month, the people would be provisioned through 'an expropriation of the expropriators'. In essence, Benbow questioned the state's right to rule and argued the need for the people to create institutions of their own. In so doing, he was reflecting a radical tradition in Britain that had always had a deep-rooted antipathy to the state, dating back (at least) to the Diggers and Levellers in the English Civil War. The British State could not be trusted and a rival model was needed.

Benbow articulated the growing working class hatred of the capitalist class and politicians. He argued that to expect help from the existing political parties and the middle classes was 'sheer madness', and that the working class could only rely on themselves to bring about change. Although the Benbow pamphlet aimed at political change rather than the overthrow of capitalism, it represents one of the first documents in English that argues that the working class should utilise their growing industrial strength by the use of the social general strike to bring about revolution-

ary change. Furthermore, in calling for a national convention, Benbow was well on the way to arguing that the working class should set up alternative organisational structures to those of the state. As such, Benbow's pamphlet can be seen as an early exponent of two important ideas of early anarcho-syndicalism. For Benbow and for later anarcho-syndicalists, responsibility for the emancipation of the working class lay not with political parties and reform of the state, but with working class people themselves. It also involved the setting up of working class organisations outside those of the state.

In the event, the Grand National Holiday did not take place. Though the Chartist Convention had passed the idea, there remained deep divisions within the Chartism movement over its implementation. The more moderate elements feared its revolutionary implications, while many in the more radical wing argued that not enough preparation had been done to sustain a general strike. The Leeds based Northern Star argued: 'any attempt to bring about the sacred month (as the Grand National Holiday became known) before a universal arming shall have taken place, will ruin all.' Two days before the holiday was due to take place on August 12<sup>th</sup>, the Chartist Convention called the strike off. With this, a number of radical Chartists attempted an uprising, particularly in Bradford, Newcastle and, most famously, at Newport. Thousands of miners marched on Newport and were dispersed by soldiers. At least 24 miners were killed.

The Charter was again presented to Parliament in 1842. During this year, a limited general strike in support of the Charter took place in the midlands and the north of England. It started as a protest against wage-cuts and led to strikers pledging to stay on strike until the Charter was passed. However, it ended in failure, with the organisers being arrested and the strikers being starved back to work. Though the Charter was subsequently presented again to Parliament in 1848, this too largely failed.

With the failure of the Charter, the radical movement went into decline. Though the unions were to come to advocate the need to replace capitalism with socialism over the next sixty years, they were increasingly looking to winning state power through the use of the electoral voting system to bring about change. It was this trend that led to the unions setting up the Labour Party through which socialism was to be established.

## Conclusions

The period 1750–1830 saw the rapid rise of the market economy in Britain, so that by the early 1830s, full-blown capitalism had become firmly established. During this same period, as capitalism tightened its grip on the emerging working class, so the first signs of real resistance against this new form of economic oppression began to develop. During the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a radical period in Britain, and the working class started organizing themselves and trying out methods of resistance. Of these, one of the most significant was the idea of the Grand National Holiday – the forerunner of the General Strike. Although a coherent set of ideas and tactics was not yet developed, some important lessons were already being learned which would later contribute to the advent of early anarcho-syndicalism.

In spite of the demise of radicalism by the 1840s, the lessons, ideas and tactics developed in struggle by the early British working class were not entirely lost. The idea of forming an organisation of the working class, which sought to use the methods of direct action, most notably the general strike, were soon to be further developed by workers throughout the world, in what be-

came known as anarcho- syndicalism. The next stage of this development took place in mainland Europe. In Unit 3, we will trace that development, starting with the formation of the First International and the historic split between Marxism and anarchism. In subsequent Units, we will examine the birth of anarcho-syndicalist activity in France and follow its development back to Britain.

## Key points

- Historians have tended to portray working class unrest of the period as singular unplanned acts of desperation rather than as acts integral to the aims of organised, radical and often revolutionary groups
- The period 1750–1830 witnessed the rise of the market economy in Britain and by the early 1830s capitalism was firmly established
- During the period 1750–1840 resistance in the new working class took the form of radical reform and revolutionary movements
- The minimum wage campaigns of the early 1800s were based around working class organisation on a national level
- The Luddite movement was part of a highly organised, working class movement with revolutionary aims
- From 1817 there were a series of general unions formed, whose aims of working in the interest of the working class led to the Chartist movement
- A common division in working class movements during this period was between those who favoured reform through constitutional means, and those who favoured insurrection as a means to bring about change
- The ‘Grand National Holiday’, was an important fore-runner of the General Strike
- The ideas of using collective direct action and creating a structure of organisation for working class people outside of the state contributed to what later became known as anarcho-syndicalism.

## Checklist

1. Why might historians have characterised working class agitation against the oppressions of capitalism in the period 1750–1840 as acts of desperation rather than planned and organised protests?
2. What is the evidence for working class organisation and revolutionary aims during this period?
3. Why did the radical movement go into decline after the 1840s?

4. What were the main intentions of the Grand National Holiday?
5. What links can be made between developments in the working class resistance to capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later development of anarcho-syndicalism?

## Answer suggestions

*1. Why might historians have characterised working class agitation against the oppressions of capitalism in the period 1750–1840 as acts of desperation rather than planned and organised protests?*

Historians are as immersed in the assumptions of the present day as they are interpreters and (re)presenters of what happened in the past. They are susceptible, for example, to the myth of 'Englishness' which offers the image of a docile working class uninterested in revolution. Another reason they may be resistant to the idea of an organised working class in this period is that the idea itself may be too uncomfortable – especially for middle-class academics who benefit from capitalism. This is not to say that all academics take a middle-class perspective, nor that this is part of a conscious conspiracy. Marxist historians may be unhappy with the idea that the working classes knew how to organise before the period of their predestined 'consciousness' as prescribed by Marx, and before Marx even came along. Similarly, traditional Labour historians may choose, for obvious reasons, to emphasise the social democratic tendencies of workers by distancing trade unions from insurrection, direct action and revolutionary aims.]

*2. What evidence is there for working class organisations and their revolutionary aims during this period?*

Firstly, the sheer extent of government repression indicates how significant the movement was and what a threat the government felt it was – in other words, how revolutionary it was. Examples of specific evidence include: numerous Acts were passed designed to curb workers' organisations; the carefully planned so-called 'food riots' of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century indicates a high level of organisation; the refusal of farmers to send food to market for fear of working-class seizure of goods and their sale at a low price; the 1797 Act forbidding the swearing of unlawful oaths was directly aimed at working class methods through which protest was organised; magistrates proclamations against well-attended night meetings; handbills spelling out the aims of the meetings; the joining oath of the United Britons included commitment to the 'total change of the system' and willingness to 'risk yourself' (sic) for freedom – all revolutionary aims; the growth of a national organisation campaigning for a minimum wage; the existence of petitions with in excess of 70,000 signatures. These are just some of many elements of working class agitation that indicate the organisation and revolutionary aims of the working class in this period.

*3. Why did the radical movement go into decline after the 1840s?*

The radical movement went into decline largely through the failure of Chartism. The reasons for the failure of Chartism are both diverse and disputed. It can, however, be given a general cause, which is that of coercive government repression leading to arrests, executions and mass murder and the brutal techniques of lock out and starvation by capitalists who were backed by the government.

*4. What were the main intentions of the Grand National Holiday?*

The Grand National Holiday was a planned month-long strike. The Chartist Convention intended the strike to impact upon the government in such a way that it would force the reform

of parliament. Spence wanted it to be a way of forcing land redistribution. This time away from work was intended, by Benbow, a leading exponent of the Grand National Holiday, to be for the setting up of an alternative convention that would examine the corruption of the British State and decide how to act upon them. It was intended that people would be given provisions taken from the 'expropriators' i.e. the capitalist class. Benbow also indicated in a pamphlet explaining the aims of the Grand National Holiday that he was questioning the state's right to rule and argued for people to create their own institutions outside of it.

5. *What links can be made between developments in the working class resistance to capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later development of anarcho-syndicalism?*

The main links can be found in the ideas of working class organisations, direct action and in the revolutionary aims for the working class to build and organise outside of state structures.

## Some discussion points

- Are there any lessons to be drawn from the minimum wage campaigns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in relation to campaigning for a higher minimum wage level in the twenty-first century?
- What are the main differences between the government repression of working class agitation between 1750 and 1840 and current methods of class oppression?
- In which ways does an anarcho-syndicalist perspective shift your understanding of the history of working class people in this period?

## Further Reading

**E. P. Thompson. The Making of the English Working Class. Pelican. — LI- -BS — -SE-** This is a good all-round book covering the rise of the working class in England in 1780–1832. One of the few contemporary books to expose the genuine aspirations of the workers of the period, it takes a generally Marxist perspective. Well worth asking for at your library.

**R. F. Wearmouth. Methodism and the Working Class Movement of England 1800–1850. ISBN 0678 008299. -LI-** Written circa.1930s, Wearmouth details the working class revolts of the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Christian perspective, but nevertheless good descriptions of working class self-education and organisation.

**T. Lane. The Union Makes us Strong. ISBN 0099 086409. -LI-** Rigid orthodox Marxist perspective ties early union development to their stage in economic development. Nevertheless, good descriptions of workers' struggle at the time, especially on Luddism and Chartism.

**H. Pelling. A History of British Trade Unions. -LI-** Dominantly reformist perspective, but nevertheless gives some background to early unions and their part in the Chartist movement.

**D. Richards and J. W. Hunt. An Illustrated History of Modern Britain 1783–1980. -LI- -BS-** Typical general background text written from a reformist viewpoint. Nevertheless, readable and covers a wide period.

**Grand National Holiday. -AK- -SE-** Excellent pamphlet containing a reprint of the original Benbow pamphlet which explained the idea for a Grand National Holiday.

**W. Cobbett. Rural Rides. Penguin. ISBN 0140 430237. -LI- -BS-** Contemporary accounts of William Cobbet's jaunts around Britain observing rural working class life.

**W. Cobbett. Surplus Population. Pelagian Press. -AK-** More Cobbett, this time a cheap pamphlet available from AK. A focussed attack on Malthus' recent (at the time) theory of population.

Note: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. There will be many useful sources which are not listed here, and some of those which are listed may be difficult to obtain. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution under Course Member discount scheme (order through SelfEd), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 3: The First International

Unit 2 highlighted some of the tactics developed by the working class in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain that would later contribute to anarcho-syndicalism. However, during this time, the idea still dominated that political change would only come about through reform, in the guise of more representative government. Hence, the Chartists' main aim was greater political equality, through the extension of the vote. Many workers still mistakenly saw corrupt, unrepresentative government, rather than the inequalities of the economic system, as the main source of oppression.

However, as capitalist exploitation grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the focus shifted towards economic inequality. A growing number of workers realised that political reform was not enough, and that working class emancipation could only come about with the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by an economic system based on collective ownership. Increasingly, the labour movement of the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> Century was characterised by growing polarisation of two approaches; (1) political reform leading to economic change towards collective ownership, and; (2) the replacement of parliament altogether with a collective system based on direct control by the working class.

### **This Unit aims to:**

- Show how the First International developed
- Examine the differences between the libertarian (anarchist) and authoritarian (Marxist) wings of the International
- Discuss the development of a coherent anarchist political theory looking at the concepts of equality, freedom, society and organization
- Analyse the split and eventual demise of the First International.

### **Terms and abbreviations**

**Transitional period:** This was the time between the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a true communist society. During this period Marx argued that the state would have to be captured and used as an instrument of change. He said a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' would be established to create the economic conditions to achieve 'full communism'. In other words, the state would 'wither away' when the 'government of people' gave way to the 'administration of things'.

**Pan-German peoples' state:** The idea, strongly influenced by the intellectual currents of 19<sup>th</sup> Century nationalism, of uniting under common political institutions all people with a common language and belonging to a common race.



Social Contract: First introduced into political theory by Plato and since used to base all ideas of legitimacy and political obligation on a contract between the individual and the sovereign state. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, amongst others, used the idea in various ways. The classic liberal view is that the state is justifiable only as a system of constraints on the activities of individuals to protect their freedoms and rights.

## Introduction

Unit 2 highlighted some of the tactics developed by the working class in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Britain that would later contribute to anarcho- syndicalism. During that period however, the dominant idea was that political change would only come about through reform, in the guise of more representative government. The Chartists' main aim was greater political equality through the extension of the vote. Many workers recognised the corrupt, unrepresentative government, but failed to recognise the importance of the inequalities of the economic system as a major source of oppression.

However, as capitalist exploitation grew in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the focus shifted towards economic inequality. A growing number of workers realised that political reform was not enough, and that working class emancipation could only come about with the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by an economic system based on collective ownership. Increasingly, the labour movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was characterised by growing polarisation of two approaches; (1) political reform leading to economic change towards collective ownership, and; (2) the replacement of parliament altogether with a collective system based on direct control by the working class.

Much of the impetus for the second approach stemmed from disillusionment with the idea that changing the political system could bring real change to living conditions. In particular, there was widespread anger that the establishment of a revolutionary government in France in 1848 had resulted in yet more repression, not a more egalitarian society. Increasingly, workers rallied to the idea that "the emancipation of the workers must be the task of workers themselves". This led some of them to adopt and develop methods of direct action as a way in which the struggle against capitalism could be kept under workers' control, instead of relying on politicians to act on their behalf.

The founding of the First International is of crucial importance in the development of anarcho-syndicalism, for two reasons. Firstly, the ideas formulated by the anarchist wing of the International laid down some of the basic concepts of anarcho-syndicalism. Secondly, the split in the First International was not merely about abstract political argument unconnected with everyday reality; it was about two very different visions of a future socialist society.

This Unit examines the events around the First International, concentrating on the different approaches of the Marxists and anarchists. In doing so, we shall concentrate on the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin, one of the main protagonists in the anarchist side of the split. However, it is important to point out that Bakunin was not a leader of anarchist groups or ideas, nor did he see himself as such. In his writing, Bakunin simply articulates the ideas of the many workers who opposed the Marxist programme.

## **The First International**

The First International (or International Working Men's Association) was founded in London in 1864, largely at the instigation of Karl Marx and his followers. Although Marx was undoubtedly the 'midwife' in the International's formation, the idea for it had come from the workers themselves. As Bakunin wrote:

"The International Working Men's Association did not spring ready-made out of the minds of a few erudite theoreticians. It developed out of the actual economic necessities, out of the bitter tribulations the workers were forced to endure and the natural impact of these trials upon the minds of the toilers".

Within eight years, the First International attracted over a million members and was becoming a true force for revolutionary change. However, it was deeply divided. Although after some debate it unanimously endorsed the principle of collective ownership, disagreement as to how this would be achieved soon became evident.

Whereas the German, English and (German-speaking) Swiss groups favoured the Marxists' state-communist, centralist programme, the Belgian, French, Spanish, and (French-speaking) Swiss groups favoured the anarchist approach and argued for federalism, based on workers' direct control.

## **The Marxist position**

At the heart of the Marxist argument was Marx's idea that "the conquest of political power is the first task of the proletariat". They argued that this would lead to workers taking control of the state, through which capitalism would be abolished. The Marxists' main aim, therefore, was the formation of political groups whose goal was to capture state power through the establishment of a workers' government. Once in control of government, the workers would use the power of the state to expropriate land and industry from the capitalists and landowners. The economy would then be administered by the state for the benefit of the working class. If the workers could not win control through the electoral process, then there must be a political revolution to seize state power, establishing a government based on the "dictatorship of the proletariat". The concept at the centre of Marxist thinking was that social revolution could only occur after the political revolution, based on winning control of the state.

The Marxist German Social Democratic Party, founded in 1869, reflected these ideas. Their programme argued that "the conquest of political power was the indispensable condition for the economic emancipation of the proletariat" and so the immediate objective of the party must be to organise a legal campaign to win universal suffrage and other political rights. Their final objective was the establishment of a Pan-German peoples' state.

The idea that social revolution could come about through state control relied heavily on the Marxist doctrine of economic determinism. This is based on the premise that the nature of an economic system determines the nature of society as a whole. As such, political and social conditions are determined by the economy. To change the latter one has only to change the former and so the very act of the workers abolishing capitalism and taking control of the economy would automatically end exploitation and bring about social and political equality.

Determinism also extended to Marxist theories of the state. The state was seen as the agent of the dominant economic class, administering society on its behalf. Once capitalism was abolished, and the economy was under collective ownership, the state would become the tool of the workers, and could begin to administer the economy on their behalf. A further argument used by Marxists was that the economy would have to come under state control initially, as workers did not have the expertise to run society. They saw this 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as purely a 'transitional period', during which workers would be trained to take over the running of society directly. The state under socialism would eventually become redundant and 'wither away'.

## **Anarchist Collectivism**

The anarchist wing of the First International, although seeking the same end-point of an egalitarian society, proposed a very different method for achieving it. They opposed a purely political programme aimed at capturing state power, and rejected outright the idea that workers should support parliamentary candidates and campaign for political reform. They also rejected the notion of political revolutions aimed at establishing workers' government.

The anarchists held that political rights, such as freedom of association, should not be isolated from the economic struggle: these rights, they argued, could only be guaranteed through economic struggle. Therefore, they rejected purely political struggle such as formation of workers' political parties. Instead, they advocated workers' self-organisation into economic organisations (unions), which would use direct action to fight for economic and social change to collective ownership.

The aim of these unions was to constantly link the day-to-day struggle for improvements to the wider struggle against capitalism. In the short term, they would organise strikes and other direct actions against capitalism. In the longer term, this constant struggle would lead to the social general strike, during which capitalism would be overthrown and replaced with a society in which workers would control their industries and communities.

The anarchist programme was described by the Alliance, the Geneva section of the International:

*"The Alliance rejects all political action which does not have for its immediate and direct aim the triumph of the workers over capitalism. Consequently it fixes as its ultimate aim the abolition of the state, states, to be replaced by a universal federation of local associations through and in freedom."*

The emphasis on "freedom" in the Alliance programme is important, for this notion of freedom lay at the centre of anarchist thinking. It was also what distinguished anarchism from Marxism. Although anarchists within the International accepted Marxist economic arguments, they argued that not all inequality is rooted in economic inequality. It could also stem from unequal power relations under which an individual, or groups of individuals, could coerce others. They argued that to prevent this, society must be organised democratically, based on free association.

To the anarchists, the essence of a future society would be the ability for people to come together voluntarily, on equal terms, to decide what is best for them as a whole. They argued that if society was not based on free association, and if human relations were not conducted freely, equally and without coercion, then an unequal society based on unequal power relations would develop.

The anarchists argued that any new society, rather than being administered from the top down, must be administered directly by the workers from the bottom up. In other words, people must come together on equal terms to decide their collective needs and how best to meet them. If this process was not followed, and power remained in the hands of a few, then social inequality would persist.

In arguing that not all inequality originated from the economic system, the anarchists challenged Marxist economic determinism. They also rejected the idea that the state could be used as a tool for workers' emancipation. For the anarchists, the fact that a capitalist parliament would have been eliminated was not enough to guarantee that the state would act in the interests of workers. They argued that state control, by its very nature, was based on the rule of the minority over the majority.

Moreover, the anarchists scorned Marx's view that under the 'people's state' following the take-over he envisaged, 'the proletariat would be elevated to the status of the governing class'. If the working class (the overwhelming majority of the population) were to become the governing class, then who, the anarchists asked, would they be ruling over?

For the anarchists, the prospect of the state abolishing market capitalism and private ownership did not mean the state would act any differently towards bringing about social equality. They dismissed as naive and patronising the Marxist idea that, under the new workers' state, 'learned socialists' would administer society on the workers' behalf. Instead, they predicted, the 'learned socialists' would be more likely to use their power to form a new ruling elite and so the Marxist state would not be based on the dictatorship of the proletariat, but on the dictatorship of a new privileged political-scientific' class of learned socialists. According to the anarchists, while the current state exercised power over the majority based on their ownership of the economy, the new socialist dictators would also base their power over the majority on their ultimate control of the economy. The result would be that social equality would remain a workers dream.

The anarchists believed that state power, whether based on a constitutional assembly or a revolutionary dictatorship, was the rule of a minority over a majority, and was therefore undemocratic. No matter what form the state took, those appointed to run and administer it would function as a ruling class, assuming in the process the power and the privilege of a ruling class. As such, the state would not be merely the agent of the particular class that happens to own the means of production. Rather, the state was viewed as a class in itself, acting on its own behalf. Furthermore, a ruling class, based on state control, would have the means to become one of the most powerful elites in history, for the Marxist state would not only control the economy, but the whole state apparatus, including the army and police.

The anarchists argued that the programme that the Marxists wished the First International to adopt, based on "The Communist Manifesto" written by Marx and Engels, would not lead to workers' emancipation, but to their enslavement. As Bakunin pointed out;

*"the construction of a powerful centralised revolutionary state would inevitably lead to the establishment of a military dictatorship...it would again condemn the masses, governed by edict, to immobility...to slavery and exploitation by a new quasi-revolutionary aristocracy"*

This turned out to be a chilling prediction of the future Soviet state. For the anarchists then, the state is oppressive by its very nature, since it is based on the rule of a minority over the majority. Thus, the root cause of the trouble for people, as Bakunin put it;

*"does not lie in any particular form of government but in the fundamental principle of government and the very existence of government no matter what form it might take"*

## Anarchism & Individualism

The anarchist core beliefs of rejection of state power and emphasis on free association were developed at the time of the International and have characterised anarchism since. As a result, opponents have claimed that anarchism is nothing more than a radical form of liberal individualism, which places individual liberty before the needs of society as a whole. This misrepresents the anarchist arguments.

The anarchist notion of individual liberty was based on ideas put forward during the 1848 revolution in France, the rallying cry of which was 'the slavery of the least of men is the slavery of all'. They argued that individual liberty was based on collective liberty; because human beings can only confirm their humanity within society, so the freedom of others is merely a reflection of one's own freedom. In short, it is impossible to be free unless all others around you are free. In

Bakunin's words:

*"I am truly free only when all human beings are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary condition and confirmation."*

The anarchists dismissed the liberal notion of the individual, which, they argued, was rooted in the Christian idea that people were not created by society, but by God, outside of and apart from it. Accordingly, liberal social democratic thinking saw humans as pre-dating society: it was not society who created humans, but humans who created society. Within this thinking, society is merely a loose collection of individuals who come together to perform specific functions, such as work, etc. The most important function of society for the liberal is to limit the freedom of the individual. This is because our free will, motivated by pure self-interest, would lead us to attack others to meet our immediate needs. To ensure this, a 'social contract' between humans was observed and enforced, and so the state was created as an outside authority to regulate human relations. Should this authority be taken away, so the theory goes, then we would return to our natural state and chaos would ensue. Thus, liberal social democratic thinking based on individualism viewed society as a contract not to rip each other apart.

The anarchists, however, put forward a very different view of human development. They saw humans as a product of society, without which they could not exist. They argued that humans only emerged from a state of brutality through collective organisation and

labour, through which they were able to create the conditions that allowed their mutual emancipation. In other words, humans were only humanised and emancipated by forming a society. Humanity was therefore created by society and it is only in society that we become human. Placed outside of society we would not be human — alone, able to speak and think, but conscious only of (one)self. Bakunin summed up human development as follows:

*"Man becomes conscious of himself and his humanity only in society and only by the collective action of the whole of society. He freed himself from the yoke of external nature only by collective and social labour, which alone can transform the Earth into an abode favourable to the development of humanity. Without such material emancipation the intellectual and moral emancipation of the individual is impossible. He can emancipate himself from the yoke of his own nature, i.e. subordinate his instincts and movements of his body to the conscious direction of his mind, the development of which is fostered only by education and training. But education and training are pre-eminently and exclusively social, hence isolated individuals cannot possibly become conscious of their freedom."*

For the anarchists then, all human development, intellectual, moral and material, was the product of human society. As such, progress was based on co-operation within society. It was logical and natural for humans to come together in a free federation of common interests, aspirations and tendencies; indeed, this is the only way to create a society capable of collectively providing the education, training and material prosperity to ensure that each individual developed their faculties and powers to the full.

## **Anarchist Society**

Anarchism therefore rejected both individualism and state collectivism, since both suppress individual liberty. In an anarchist society, the full development of the individual would depend on the collective provision of the necessary means, and on full social and economic equality. However, the continuation and development of the collective society would depend on the individual being able to participate in it fully and equally, with the aim of developing their full potential. Without individual liberty, social equality would be unattainable, and without social equality, there could not be individual liberty.

In place of the all-powerful state that imposed authority from above, the anarchists of the First International developed a view of a society governed by natural laws, 'made up of customs, traditions and moral norms acquired and expanded through the ages in the course and practice of daily life'. By 'natural', they did not mean that society, or people, are somehow naturally 'good'. They argued that society could be either good or bad, and humans, shaped by society, could be good or bad. As Bakunin put it: "A man born into a society of brutes tends to become a brute; born into a society of thieves, he tends to become a thief". The 'nature' of society depended on the material, intellectual and ethical levels of its members.

Anarchism therefore viewed the society-individual relationship as a symbiotic, mutual one. Anarchists sought a form of society where the conditions are continuously being created for every individual to reach their full potential. In reaching their full potential, they would be expanding the sum of human knowledge, which would, in turn, expand the potential of the individual.

As the Alliance (of Geneva) argued within the First International: *"The children of both sexes must, from birth, be provided with equal means and opportunities for their full development, i.e. support, upbringing and education at all levels of science, industry and art. For we are convinced that next to social equality, it will lead to greater and increasing natural freedom of individuals and result in the abolition of artificial and imposed inequalities — the historic source of unjust social organisation"*.

Besides the need for society to provide the means for individual development, the point was stressed that individual development leads to greater freedom and to social equality. Although society could collectively provide the democratic structures through which, as

individuals, people could participate in the collective running of society, it was only when people felt equal that they could participate on equal terms. Therefore, the anarchists reasoned, it was only in a society that sought maximum individual development, that social equality could be ensured.

For the anarchists the starting point from which conditions of equality could be created was the overthrow of capitalism. From the initial onset of the revolution, society had to be run on democratic principles with the aim of seeking social equality. They argued that, rather than the

revolution leading to state control based on inequality, workers themselves should take over the practical running of society. Workers should;

*“..take possession of all the tools of production as well as all the buildings and factories, arming and organising themselves into regional sections made up of all groups based on street and neighbourhood boundaries. These federally organised sections would then associate themselves to form a federated commune.”*

## **Anarchist Organisation**

The anarchists argued for organisation at street, area, regional, national and international level. Each would retain the maximum degree of local autonomy, ensuring democracy and equality. Decisions affecting only those at street level would be made at street level; decisions affecting regional level would be made at regional level, and so on, from the bottom up. The basic democratic building block would be the meeting, with people coming together to decide their wants and needs.

As well as organisation by locality, anarchists also called for organisation based on industry and interest groups. Workers, for example in the rail industry, would meet in their immediate workplace to decide how best to run that workplace. They would meet with passenger groups to decide the level of service needed. They would meet with railway workers in the immediate area to co-ordinate local services, and railway workers at regional, national and international levels to co-ordinate a national and international service. They would also meet with other workers and passengers to co-ordinate an integrated local, regional, national and international transport system.

The society envisaged by the anarchists was highly pluralistic. People would organise themselves in a myriad of different organisations to cater for emotional, physical and intellectual needs. It would be a society in which ‘the infinite needs of man will be reflected in an adequate variety of organisations’.

However, while their view of the free society was far-reaching, they were not so naïve as to think it would emerge overnight. True equality based on free and equal association would not come easily. Their argument was threefold; that the fight for a new society would have to start immediately; that it must be built within the existing society; that the form and methods of workers’ organisations must reflect the society they hoped to build after the revolution. By constructing organisations on anarchist principles, workers would create, within the shell of the old society, the structure of a new social order. The unions and local organisations advocated by the anarchists were therefore much more than mere organs of struggle. They were the means by which workers would educate themselves and develop democratic structures and methods. They would develop a democratic culture based on egalitarian principles and so be used as the basis on which to create and administer a new form of society.

The anarchists therefore argued that the First International should be made up of economic organisations (unions) and run in a way that reflected the form of the future society they hoped to build. The International would then be in a position to bring together and organise the mass of the people, and to educate workers through linking the day-to-day struggle to the wider revolutionary struggle. Of this organisational concept, Bakunin wrote:

*“..trade sections and their representatives in the Chapel of Labour create a great academy in which all workers can and must study economic science; these sections also are themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world. They are creating not only the ideas, but the facts of the future itself.”*

## **Direct Action**

It was from this period of the First International that direct action became a key concept that separated anarchism from all other movements, both reformist and revolutionary. Rudolf Rocker provided a brief definition in 1936:

*“By direct action the anarcho-syndicalists mean every method of immediate warfare against their economic and political oppressors. Among the outstanding are: the strike, in all its gradations from simple wage-struggle to general strike; the boycott; sabotage in countless forms; anti-militarist propaganda; and peculiarly in cases..... armed resistance of the people for the protection of life and liberty.”*

While Rocker was writing many years after the First International, this definition remains true to the interpretation of the anarchists at the time. Indeed, it remains largely relevant today, although many more tactics can now be added.

## **First International: Death Throes**

The decisive split in the First International thus occurred over the confrontation between the anarchists who maintained it should be made up of unions in economic struggle, and the Marxists, who advocated political groups united by a political programme. The anarchists argued bitterly that the Marxist approach would turn the International into a mere talking shop, limiting activity to campaigning. Even more unacceptably to them, instead of a unified workers' movement it would create a party of elite workers, led by socialist intellectuals, separated from the workers' day-to-day struggles. They pointed out that these more 'advanced' workers would form the new elite in the future state system.

The central tenets of anarchism had been established — that the means must reflect the ends, and that theory and practice are interdependent and must be combined. The anarchists argued that only a democratically organised mass movement could lead to a democratic revolutionary society and predicted that the Marxist form of organising, in which advanced workers came together in a purely political organisation, was hierarchical and could only result in a future hierarchical society. On theory and practice, they maintained that anarchist ideas depend on, and can only be developed by, organisations whose day-to-day practice reflects anarchist principles.

Within the dying International, the administration of the Marxist and anarchist wings reflected their conceptual approaches. Peter Kropotkin provided an eyewitness account giving an insight into how the two wings operated. On arriving in Switzerland from his native Russia, Kropotkin first aligned himself with the Marxist group in Geneva. However, he soon became disillusioned with the way the needs of the politicians took precedence over those of the workers. After attending a meeting at which the leadership argued against a proposed building strike as it might affect electoral prospects, he decided to contact the anarchists in Geneva who were centred on the Swiss watch industry in the Jura Mountains. On his first encounter with them he noted:



*“The separation between the leaders and workers which I had noticed at Geneva in the Temple Unique (the Marxist section) did not exist in the Jura Mountains...the absence of division between the leaders and the masses in the Jura federation was the reason why there was not a question upon which every member of the federation would not strive to form his own independent opinion. Here I saw that the workers were not a mass that was being led and being made subservient to the political ends of a few men; their leaders were simply their more active comrades.”*

His brief stay with the Jura workers converted Kropotkin to the cause of anarchism. It is interesting to see that it was not just the ideas that attracted him, but the way the organisations conducted themselves, reflecting the fact that theory and practice are inseparable in anarchism. He summed up his conversion thus:

*“The theoretical aspects of anarchism, as they were beginning to be expressed in the Jura Federation, especially by Bakunin; the criticisms of state socialism, the fear of an economic despotism, which I heard formulated there; and the revolutionary character of the agitation, appealed strongly to my mind. But the egalitarian relations which I found in the Jura Mountains, the independence of thought and expression which I saw developing in the workers...appealed far more strongly to my feelings...my views upon socialism were settled; I became an anarchist”.*

The split within the First International came to a head in 1872. A conference at The Hague, amid various manoeuvres by the Marxists, expelled a number of anarchists. The events surrounding the Hague conference typify the differences between the two wings.

The defeat of the Paris Commune prevented the congress taking place in Paris in 1870 as planned. In 1871 the General Council of the International met in London. Bakunin and the anarchists of the Jura Federation were not invited and in the absence of opposition Marx was able to get the General Council of the International to accept appropriation of state power as an integral part of the programme of the International. The congress was moved to the Hague, where in 1872, Marx attended in person for the first time. Bakunin and many anarchists were unable to attend because of the dangers of crossing French and German territory. At least five of the delegates forming the Marxist majority, as the labour historian G.D.H. Cole observed, “represented non-existent movements or nearly so”. Marx and Engels accused Bakunin of being a Russian spy and unscrupulous with money. They also accused him of organizing a secret society to seize control of the International. Paul Lafargue, who happened to be Marx’s son-in-law, was the principal source of this information, none of which was ever proven. Lack of proof in relation to Lafargue’s claims, and his relationship to Marx engendered deep suspicion on the part of the anarchists.

The Congress endorsed the principle of political action through socialist parties. It also extended the powers of the General Council, controlled by Marx, and finally agreed to Marx’s proposal that the headquarters of the International be moved from London to New York to, as Marx stated, “guard the International against elements of disintegration”. There was opposition, not only from the anarchists present, but also from British trade unionists who, while they supported the anarchists in little else, were worried by the centralisation of power. Bakunin and a close associate James Guillaume were expelled. In the view of the Institute of Marxist Leninism this:

*“led to a clearly defined demarcation in the International between the genuine proletarian revolutionary forces and the various shades of petty-bourgeois sectarianism, pseudo-revolutionism and bourgeois reformism.”*

The anarchists were effectively barred from the International. The General Council removed itself to New York, where it was largely isolated from European worker activities. This split, and

the removal of the General Council, proved fatal to the International: without the anarchists' support, it collapsed. The Hague debacle of 1872 was to prove the last Congress of the First International.

## Conclusion

The split between anarchism and Marxism was inevitable. They provided two fundamentally different ways forward for the working class, which in turn led to the historical split in the workers' movement between Marxists, who favoured centralism and state control, and anarchists, who argued for federalism and direct workers' control. At first, the conflict between the two currents remained submerged as they fought together to establish acceptance for the idea of collective ownership. However, within the First International, the differences broke out into a bitter argument, leading to its collapse.

During the short life of the First International, anarchism continued to develop into an increasingly coherent set of ideas. After its demise, the anarchists set about putting these into practice. The immediate result was the rapid growth of an anarchist-influenced workers' movement that was eventually to number millions and extend to most parts of the world. Not surprisingly, it was confronted by both the state and the Marxists, and a pattern of workers' direct action and state brutal repression developed, starting in France in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Unit 4 charts this wave of French workers' struggle, and its contribution to the further development of anarcho-syndicalism.

## Key points

- The early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of the idea that revolutionary change, rather than parliamentary reform, was needed to establish a socialist society
- With the founding of the First International two distinct movements, one based on the writings of Karl Marx the other on anarchism, argued for fundamentally different approaches to how to achieve revolutionary change
- The friction between the two movements, one centralist and authoritarian the other federalist and libertarian, caused the inevitable split and subsequent demise of the International
- The basic tenets of anarchism were developed and defined during this period.

## Checklist

1. What were the main differences between the two wings of the First International?
2. Why did the anarchists find the Marxist position unacceptable, in spite of the aims of both wings to create an egalitarian society?
3. What, according to Christian-influenced liberal thinking at the time of the First International, is the main purpose of the state?

4. Why did Peter Kropotkin become disillusioned with Marxism? What reasons did he give for his conversion to the cause of anarchism?
5. What type of organisation(s) did the anarchists argue for?
6. Upon what, according to early anarchist thinking, did the freedom of the individual depend?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the main differences between the two wings of the First International?*

The Marxists favoured a state-communist, centralist programme and argued for the formation of political groups for the conquest of state power. This would see the establishment of a workers' government to bring about the economic emancipation of the working class. In the short term this included campaigns to win universal suffrage and other political rights. The anarchists favoured workers' control and a federalist approach. They opposed a purely political programme, rejected campaigns for political reforms and standing candidates for parliament, and stood against any notion of establishing a workers' state. Instead they proposed that workers' organisations or unions would agitate and organise strikes and direct action against the capitalist state. In the longer term these struggles would lead to the social general strike during which capitalism would be overthrown and workers' control of industries and communities established.

### *2. Why did the anarchists find the Marxist position unacceptable, in spite of the aims of both wings to create an egalitarian society?*

The anarchists could not accept the Marxist idea of establishing political parties to seize control of the state. They argued that this would create an elite group of intellectuals or learned socialists separate from the day-to-day struggles of majority of workers. They also stated that the seizing of state power would not lead to the state withering away and the creation of an egalitarian society. Rather it would see the construction of a dictatorship of the party over the workers.

### *3. What, according to Christian-influenced liberal thinking at the time of the First International, is the main purpose of the state?*

Liberal individualism saw humans as being created by God as free spirits and pre-dating any form of society. Motivated by self-interest, people would attack each other to ensure individual needs. A social contract is therefore needed whereby the state is able to regulate human relations to ensure the smooth running of society.

### *4. Why did Peter Kropotkin become disillusioned with Marxism? What reasons did he give for his conversion to the cause of anarchism?*

Kropotkin became disillusioned with the way the needs of the politicians seemed to take precedence over the needs of the workers. With the Jura Federation he did not see the divisions between the more active members and the mass of the workers. Besides this organisational aspect he was influenced by the revolutionary character of the agitation and was also swayed by the independence of thought and expression.

### *5. What type of organisation(s) did the anarchists argue for?*

They proposed organisations at street, area, regional, national and international level. They also argued for organisations based on industries, in the form of unions, and interest groups. These would be based on direct democracy with decision making taking place from the bottom

up. The basic building block would be the meeting where people would come together to decide their wants and needs.

6. *Upon what, according to early anarchist thinking, did the freedom of the individual depend?*

The anarchist notion of individual liberty was based on collective liberty. So, because human beings can only confirm their humanity within society, the freedom of others is merely a reflection of one's own freedom. In this way it is impossible to be free if others around you are not free.

## Some discussion points

- What are the implications for contemporary societies, of the idea of 'free association' as originally formulated within the First International?
- In which ways do the 'means' change the 'ends' in terms of projects that aim to bring about social equality for all?
- The Marxist misrepresentation, at the time of the First International, of the anarchists' aims and beliefs seem oddly persistent, and typical of the type of misrepresentation these are subject to even today. Why, do you think, is anarchism often misrepresented as 'each person for themselves' with the weaker members of society being left unprotected?

## Further Reading

**P. Kropotkin. *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. Black Rose. ISBN 0921 689187. £11.99. -AK-  
-LI-**

Excellent, eye witness accounts of the debate within the First International. Peter Kropotkin arrived from Russia a Marxist, visited the two sides of the split, and converted to join the anarchists. Detailed accounts of the debates and issues. Older prints may be found in libraries (eg. Constable and Co. 1971. ISBN 0486 224856 — same title as above).

**Sam Dolgoff (ed). *Bakunin on Anarchism*. Black Rose Books, 1972. ISBN 0919 619059. £12.99 -AK-**

Contains most of Bakunin's writing, with a commentary and introduction by Dolgoff. While Bakunin by no means a 'pure' anarcho- syndicalist (if they exist), he did nevertheless help formulate and record some of the key fundamentals, as contained here. Centres on the key arguments between the Marxist and anarchist tendencies within the First International.

**Daniel Guerin (ed), *No Gods No Masters Book One*, AK Press. ISBN 873176643. £11.95. -AK-**

Excellent new anthology which collects contemporary material from the period, including lots of previously unpublished works from the period by Bakunin, Proudhon etc. For example: Bakunin's writings 'On Co-operation', 'Worker Association and Collective Ownership', 'The Excommunication of The Hague' and 'Statism and Anarchy' and James Guillaume's 'Ideas on Social Organisation', written in 1876.

**Brian Morris. *Bakunin: The Philosophy of Freedom*. Black Rose Books. ISBN 1895 431662. £10.99. -AK-**

Historical biography of Bakunin, with short extracts of his work and ideas. Well written, accessible, and rare as a modern account written by a historian and thinker with a libertarian perspective.

**K. Marx. Political Writings Vol. 3: First International & After. Penguin Classics. ISBN 0140 445730. -LI- -BS-**

Marx on Marx — what more is there to say? The original, anti- anarchist perspective from the period of the First International.

**R. M. Cutler. The Basic Bakunin: Writings 1869–1871. Prometheus Books. ISBN 0879 757450. -LI- -BS-**

A special collection of Bakunin's writing's from the years of the First International. Unfortunately hard to find as it is printed in the US, but may be worth a search.

**K. J. Kenafick (ed). Marxism, Freedom and the State. Freedom Press, 1984. £1.95. -AK-**

Good vfm for a flimsy (but spined) volume with selections of Bakunin's writings and commentary, concentrating on the arguments between Marxists and anarchists in the First International.

**G. Woodcock (ed). The Anarchist Reader. Fontana. ISBN 0006 340113. -LI-**

While Woodcocks brand of anarchism may not be sparkling, this book is generally available in libraries and even second hand shops. You can always ignore his commentary, and turn to the extract of Bakunin 'Perils of the Marxist State'.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AKDistribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS – try good bookshops, -SE-ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 4: France 1870–1918 – Early Revolutionary Unions

In Unit 3 we examined how the conflicts within the First International contributed to the development of anarchism. Now we turn our attention to the years after the demise of the First International. This was a period of rapid growth of a new revolutionary movement, as the anarchists put their methods and ideas into practice. Although it would spread across the world, it was in France that this emerging workers movement first took off.

This Unit charts the efforts of the French working class who, during this period, were to take anarchism and fuse its methods and ideas with trade unionism to create revolutionary unionism – a forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism.

### This Unit aims to:

- Outline the social, economic and political conditions in late 19<sup>th</sup> France and how they contributed to the growth of anarcho- syndicalism
- Look at the extent to which trade unionism in France was influenced by anarchism
- Outline the rise of the Bourses du Travail and the formation of the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT) and examine the practice, theory and organisational structure of the early French unions
- Give a brief history of the development, and politics of the CGT and examine the reasons for the changes in outlook
- Look at the idea of ‘political neutrality’ and the problems it raised.

### Terms and abbreviations

**Federation du Parti des Travailleurs Socialiste de France:** Formed in 1880, this was the first socialist party in France. It was a Marxist party that believed in the primacy of political action and that by winning seats in parliament they could eventually declare a workers’ state. However it soon split into two factions.

**Guesdists:** The first faction was named after their leader Jules Guesde. They were of Marxist inspiration and had little faith in universal suffrage. The necessity of organisation was emphasised and they formed the Parti Ouvrier Francais in 1887. However later they modified their views and began to enter elections forming the Parti Socialiste de France.

**Possibilistes:** A second faction led by Paul Brousse. They believed genuine reforms could be achieved within the parliamentary democratic system but that attention should be switched from centralist state intervention to the opportunities afforded by municipal socialism.

**Allemanist:** Jean Allemane led a break away group from the Possibilistes. They thought that the party was too elitist and more emphasis should be given to the role of unions. Together with the Possibilistes they later formed the loosely organised Independents and by 1898 were the largest socialist grouping in parliament embracing a range of reformists and were later named Parti Socialiste Francais.

**Blanquists:** The main insurrectionary strand of the socialist movement inspired by Louis Blanqui. They sought to build a conspiratorial elite to prepare itself for the revolution and to form a temporary dictatorship to extinguish any remains of capitalism and imposing a revolutionary programme on the people.

**Section Francaise de l'Internationale Ouvriere (SFIO):** Formed in 1905 after a motion was passed at the 1904 Amsterdam Congress of the (Marxist) Second International demanding the unification of the French parties along the orthodox Marxist lines of the German SPD. It was made up of the Parti Socialiste de France and the Parti Socialiste Francais Later, without officially changing its position, it was to take on a new consensus based on a commitment to parliamentary action and the defence of the Republic.

**Bourses du Travail:** Local union organisations organised on anarchist principles. These came together in the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT) in 1892.

**Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT):** Union established in 1895 to organise workers on an industry-wide basis. In 1902 there was full integration between the FBT and the CGT.

Introduction In Unit 3 we examined how the conflicts within the First International contributed to the development of anarchism. Now we turn our attention to the years after the demise of the First International. This was a period of rapid growth of a new revolutionary movement, as the anarchists put their methods and ideas into practice. Although it would spread across the world, it was in France that this emerging workers' movement first took off. This Unit charts the efforts of the French working class who, during this period, were to take anarchism and fuse its methods and ideas with trade unionism to create revolutionary unionism — a forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism.

## The Paris Commune

It was no surprise that France should be the starting point for new revolutionary anarchist movements in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Certainly, it was no mere coincidence that French workers were amongst the first to be drawn to the revolutionary methods and ideas of anarchism. The French workers' movement had a long revolutionary tradition, with revolutions in France in 1879, 1830, 1848 and 1871, all of which had influenced and shaped subsequent tactics and ideas.

French workers had come to see revolution as the legitimate goal of working class struggle and advancement. For their commitment to the revolutionary cause, workers had already paid a high price over the years, against brutal state repression. As a result, for many French workers, the day-to-day struggle was naturally linked to the wider revolutionary aim of establishing an egalitarian society.

Sadly, part of this revolutionary tradition was the tradition of betrayal. Time and again workers had spilled their blood to establish a revolutionary Government, only to find that newly installed Governments were far more interested in re-establishing order through repression than creating a more just society. This tradition of revolution followed by Government repression reached a new peak in 1871 with the bloody suppression of the Paris commune. During a weeklong orgy of violence, Government troops murdered some

16,000 French workers in cold blood. The leader of the moderate Republican Government, Thiers, boasted about the human carnage, saying that, “the repression had been pitiless, the sight so terrible, it would serve as a lasting lesson to the workers”. Indeed the French workers did learn a bitter lesson from the butchering of the Communards, but it was not to have the intended effect. Instead this slaughter was the final act of class hatred that was to convince many workers that the state and the politicians who administered it were the enemy and could never be trusted to pursue the interest of the workers. For many French working class people, any so-called revolution aimed at replacing one Government with another had come to be seen as merely the substitution of one set of rulers for another.

The bitter experience of the French working class was a key contributory factor in the development of anarchism in practice — just as it had been in the development of anarchist ideas. It was the betrayal of the French workers by the newly installed Government after the 1848 revolution that had led people like Bakunin and Proudhon to turn their back on the idea of workers capturing political power by forming a workers’ Government. French anarchists within the international had sought to outline a programme under which workers did not have to rely on politicians and political parties to pursue their aims. Bearing in mind this double-betrayal by the state in a single generation, it is little wonder that French workers, whose bitter experience had contributed so much to the development of anarchism, would look to put anarchism into practice after 1871.

## **Economic Conditions**

Economic factors were also influential in making France an ideal place for the early rise of revolutionary unionism, in drawing the embryonic French trade union movement towards anarchism. The industrial revolution in France took a very different form to those in the rest of Europe and the USA. In Britain, Germany and the USA, industrialisation had resulted in economic centralisation, leading to the rapid growth of industrial towns and cities based on particular industries.

By 1911, Britain had over 47 towns with over 100,000 inhabitants while Germany had 45. By contrast, in France, the pace of industrialisation was much slower, dominated by a decentralised system of production based on small to medium scale factories. By 1911, with twice the land area of Britain, France still only had 15 towns with more than 100,000 inhabitants. To confront this more decentralised capitalist system required far greater flexibility on the part of workers and their organisations, facing a much more varied set of conditions. The federalised form of organisation advocated by anarchism allowed for far greater flexibility of action than that offered by the highly centralised forms of organisation put forward by the Marxists and social democrats. Local and regional workers’ federations could adopt and tailor the basic ideas and tactics of the union movement to suit their needs, rather than wait for inappropriate orders from the central committee or party.



It was the unique combination of anti-state attitudes born of bitter experience, and the relatively decentralised capitalist economy, which created for the French workers the social and political environment for the development of revolutionary syndicalism (syndicalism is derived from the French and Spanish words for Union).

## Early Attempts at Unions

Despite the existence of anarchist ideas in France, the first attempt to organise a national trade union had little to do with the ideas of anarchism, but was instead dominated by the socialists. Unlike in Britain, where trade unions preceded the formation of the socialist parties, in France, it was the socialist parties that came before the advent of mass union organisation. This order of events had a profound effect on French trade unionism.

The first congress of trade unions took place in 1876 and was dominated by the Marxist Guesdist group named after their leader Jules Guesde. The Guesdists argued that the unions should concentrate on the day-to-day struggle, but leave the wider political struggle to the leadership of the party. In 1880, the fourth congress, at Le Havre, adopted a programme drawn by Guesde in consultation with Marx, which stressed the primacy of the political struggle and the need to capture state power.

It also decided to form a new Marxist party, the Federation du Parti des Travailleurs Socialiste de France. This new party was considered by the Marxist leadership to be the main vehicle for workers' emancipation, with the union consigned to a merely supportive role. The new Marxist party was to stand in local and national elections to ensure the passing of progressive legislation and ultimately, to form a workers' Government. The slogan that this new party organised around was: "You working class! Send half of your deputies to Parliament plus one and the Revolution will be not far off a fait accompli".

Party unity didn't last long, and one party soon spilt into two. The Guesdists formed 'Parti Ouvrier', while the followers of Paul Brousse, a Marxist who argued that the party should concentrate on immediate reforms only, formed the 'Possibilist'. Over the following 10 years, two further socialist parties sprang up, the 'Allemanist' and the 'Blanquists'. For over a decade, the various socialist parties engaged in a bitter struggle to win control of the (still small) French trade union movement. The sectarian atmosphere this created in the union movement was summed up by Fernand Pelloutier (in Daniel Geurin Book One -see further reading):

*"..even when agreement had been reached, or dissuasions were wound up, more than a result of weariness than of conviction, someone would fan the spark: Guesdists, Blanquist die-hards and Broussists would jump up angrily to their feet to exchange insults and take issue...and this fresh outbreak of fighting would drag on for weeks, only to flare up again when scarcely it had finished".*

The sectarianism that the socialist parties brought to the union movement led an increasing number of unions to reject political parties. An increasing number of unions began banning the discussion of electoral politics at their meetings. Pelloutier wrote that an increasing number of unions decided that;

*"..from now on the political agitations would be none of their concerns, that all discussion, other than economic, would be ruthlessly excluded from their program of study and that they would devote themselves wholeheartedly to resisting capital".*

Nor was the weariness with faction fighting the only reason for increased disillusionment with political parties. The long French tradition of middle class politicians placing their personal ambition above the interests of the workers they had sworn to represent came to the fore yet again in the early 1890s. Socialist electoral success had been limited at municipal level, yet even where socialist gains were made, the promised benefits for workers turned into the reality of increased strike breaking by newly elected socialist deputies and town councils, as they tried to establish their power bases.

At national level, the socialist campaign was meeting with more success. By 1893, there were some fifty socialist deputies from the various socialist parties. In 1899, the unofficial leader of the socialist deputies in parliament was offered a post in Government, which he readily accepted. But this was not the victory the workers had hoped for. The fact that Millerand had been prepared to accept office and take his place in a Government that contained General Gallifet, the 'butcherer' of the Paris Communards, caused widespread disgust among many workers. In 1900, a number of strikers were shot and killed at Chalon-sur-Saone. Far from Millerand resigning, he actually endorsed the use of troops to break strikes. Such sharp reality rapidly reinforced the already deep suspicion that much of the French working class had for politicians.

## **Anarchist unions get organised**

The growing disgust with the socialist parties, and the latent anti-state attitudes of the French working class, were not in themselves strong enough reasons to open the eyes of large numbers of French workers to anarchism. Though increasingly distrusted, at least the socialists had a clearly defined strategy as to how they would bring about change. Though they had first raised the idea of using the unions as vehicles for change within the First International, the anarchists remained unorganised and with no clear idea of how their new libertarian society was to be brought about.

However, around 1900 this situation began to change. Groups of anarchists also active in the trade union movement began to put forward the idea of creating local union federations, called 'Bourse du Travail', which were to be organised along anarchist aims and principles. They were to be avidly anti-parliamentarian, remaining independent of all political parties and sects. As an alternative to party politics, they were to organise around daily economic issues, linking these to the wider struggle for social revolution. Their method of struggle at all times was to be direct action.

The anti-state emphasis and the argument that workers should confront capitalism directly, as opposed to placing their faith in politicians, proved an immediate success. The first Bourse du Travail was established in Paris in 1886. By 1892, fifteen were in existence and by 1908 there were some 157 Bourses spreading right across France.

## **Federation des Bourses du Travail**

In 1892, the 15 Bourses met to form a national federation, the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT). The influence of anarchism was clear from the outset. The FBT stated among its tasks;

*"..the instruction of the people regarding the pointlessness of a revolution that would make do with the substitution of one state for another, even should this state be a socialist state".*

The revolutionary aims and the form that this revolution should take were also quite clearly stated. It;

*“..should strive to prepare an organisation which, in the event of a transformation of society, may see the operation of the economy through the free grouping and render any political institutions superfluous”.*

The Bourse completely rejected the idea of capturing state power as means to bring about revolutionary change. It opted unequivocally for the anarchist approach, that workers should take over the running of industry directly.

During the 1890s, the Bourses rapidly grew to become the centres of working class resistance. They provided and co-ordinated strike action and strike support across the whole of the working class community. Outside the workplace, they involved themselves in a wide range of community struggles, such as the fight for better health and housing. The Bourse also placed great emphasis on the role of self-education, often building up local libraries and providing courses for workers on a wide range of subjects. They also provided limited strike and unemployment benefit, acting as an unofficial employment agency, and notifying unemployed workers of vacancies that existed both locally and in other areas.

Within the Bourse, the need to see the daily struggle as part of the wider aim of overthrowing capitalism was constantly stressed. Through this process of the daily struggle, it was expected that workers would gain the administrative and organisational skills necessary to run the future libertarian communist society. Furthermore, they would also develop an ever-stronger culture of solidarity and mutual aid, leading to the development and reality of non-hierarchical structures and practices.

The Bourses were the place where workers would develop the, *“moral and technical skills that would enable them to run the future society”*: They were the, *“nuclei, the cells around which the future society would be created”*. They were the social mechanism through which *“to constitute within the bourgeois state a socialist alternative”*.

In their role as the link between the old and the new society, it was expected that the Bourse would act as the administrative body in each locality, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. During this period, they would be *“co-ordinating production, and circulating information on productive capacity and consumer needs”*. Unfortunately, they never got to this stage! (However, a variation of the Bourse du Travail did briefly put similar plans into practice during the Spanish Revolution, as we shall see later in the course).

## **Direct Action**

As we have already seen, direct action was the chosen method of struggle that was to lead to the new society. This concept was briefly introduced in Unit 3, and deserves further mention here. For the FBT movement, the immediate application of direct action was to win partial and gradual improvements, which, as it made clear;

*“far from constituting a goal in themselves, can only be considered as a means of stepping up demands and wresting further improvements from capitalism, until the point is reached where workers will expropriate capitalism by way of the general strike”.*

Indeed, direct action was more than simply the chosen method of struggle, it was recognised as a method of ensuring democracy, since;

*“any attempt at revolution that did not really call upon the direct action of the workers themselves would inevitably lead to the re-establishment of hierarchical and authoritarian structures that would in turn once again enslave the proletariat”.*

Through direct action, workers were accountable for their own actions. Only by getting involved directly with the local Bourse and its actions could they ensure the democracy of the organisation. Without the involvement of all, the Bourse would drift away from democratic involvement, as fewer people made all the decisions. With direct action came direct democracy. Workers came together to decide their needs and pursue those needs without relying on others to act on their behalf.

Direct action amounted to “the putting into operation, directly without intervention from outside forces, of the strength which lies within the working class”. With no “outside interference”, workers could pursue their own struggle without “middle class politicians”.

The Bourse also saw direct action as a method of education in itself. Through the practice of direct action, workers would learn from each other “to reflect, to decide, to act”. The specific form of direct action varied according to circumstances, ranging from consumer boycotts and street demonstrations to strike action and the use of sabotage. Through direct action, the idea that the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the working class could be achieved.

The early practice of the FBT movement laid important foundations that defined the meaning and role of direct action – foundations that remain central to anarcho-syndicalism today. The importance of direct action is multi-faceted. It is both a method of struggle and the basis of a system of direct democracy – itself the opposite of the representative democracy of party politics. It is also the principal means of empowering people, enabling them to act on their own behalf. Direct action remains also a means by which people can build their own collective culture inside the capitalist culture of narrow self-interest, in practising direct action, people in struggle learn to give and receive solidarity and trust.

## **Marxists and Socialists**

The direct action methods and growing success of the Bourses du Travail attracted fierce criticism from the Marxist and socialist parties. In response, the FBT organised a national congress of the whole movement in 1894, which turned into a battle between those who favoured direct action and the advocates of political action. The conference overwhelmingly adopted the idea of direct action and the general strike approach, and rejected electoral politics. The Guesdists immediately walked out of the conference. The Bourses du Travail were now firmly established as the main union organisation in France.

For the next 20 years, the significant Marxist and socialist parties concentrated entirely on electoral politics and the need for political unity. In so doing, they rejected the unions and lost touch entirely with the workers they claimed to represent. Meanwhile, the French trade union movement grew in size and in the strength of its anti-political revolutionary syndicalism. After a number of bitter failures, the Guesdist Allermanist and the rump of the Broussists came together to form the Section Francaise de l’Internationale Ouvriere (SFIO). This comprised the French section of the Second International, formed by the Marxists after the collapse of the First International. It required all its members to endorse political action and was almost totally made up of political parties.

## Formation of the CGT

Freed from the influence of the political parties, the union movement began to strive to build greater internal organisation. In 1895, a further congress took place, at which the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) was formed. The CGT strove to organise workers within industrial sectors (in contrast to the local basis of organisation of the FBT). At first, the FBT insisted on maintaining its autonomy from this new national organisation. As a result, the CGT remained relatively weak, while the FBT continued to grow and remained the main national organisation with the French union movement.

However, growing industrialisation resulted in more industrial integration and it became increasingly clear that there was a growing need for workers to organise in industrial federations. In 1902, the CGT and FBT agreed to full integration, with the FBT continuing to organise workers on the basis of locality, while the CGT organised workers industrially.

The new organisation reaffirmed the primacy of the economic struggle and the rejection of political parties in favour of direct action and the general strike. The majority of the new CGT national officers elected by the founding congress were anarchist, or anarcho-syndicalist, as they were increasingly being called. However, even at this early stage, behind the unity of purpose in the economic struggle, there were already divisions emerging within the CGT.

With hindsight, the problem lay with the confusion between rejection of party politics and political neutrality. Neutrality masked divisions between reformist syndicalists and revolutionary syndicalists. The reformist syndicalists took the idea of political neutrality literally, arguing that the CGT should remain independent of both political parties and the wider political struggle, and concentrate entirely on improving workers' conditions.

The revolutionary syndicalist majority of the CGT interpreted political neutrality very differently. They meant that the CGT should remain opposed to all political parties and state control. Critically, they argued that the economic struggle must not be separated from the political struggle. In other words, the struggle for better conditions was not an argument, but a power struggle between workers and capitalists. Every action formed part of the wider class struggle – and these parts could not be separated without losing revolutionary potential. A complex but crucial element of anarcho-syndicalism was thus established. People had to organise as a class in an economic

organisation that would use its economic strength to bring about both political and economic equality, in a society based on libertarian communism. These anarcho-syndicalists within the CGT were far from being politically neutral (and neither are anarcho-syndicalists today).

In 1902, the reformist element in the CGT remained a minority. The majority was united around the principles based on anarchism, and furthermore, they were soon to put these principles into practice. A vigorous campaign launched by the CGT almost immediately met with growing success, and led rapidly to growing industrial unrest. By 1904, there was some 1026 stoppages taking place and almost 4 million days were lost in strikes during the year. Meanwhile, CGT membership topped 100,000.

As part of the campaign for the 8-hour day, the CGT raised the issue of the inequality of women. It adopted a progressive position, arguing for equal pay and rights, in preparation for a future non-authoritarian society in which women, relieved of the full burden of care and in possession of a liberated mind, would be treated equally to men. Increasingly, propaganda aimed

specifically at women was produced, and women were encouraged to run strike offices and attend picket lines. Women began joining the CGT in equal numbers to men.

The CGT also became increasingly involved in anti-military campaigns. In 1900, the FBT had launched an anti-military campaign centred on the anarchist aversion to authority and the idea that army life brutalised people. However, with the CGT's growing militancy, there was rapidly increasing use of the army by the state to put down strikes. The CGT's anti-military stance took on an increasingly militant tone, encouraging soldiers to desert and mutiny. Later on, as the spectre of the First World War grew, the CGT anti-military also argued for the general strike against capitalist wars. The CGT's anti-military campaign was to result in numerous CGT activists being arrested and imprisoned.

Another area where the CGT sought to have an impact was over the 'peasant question'. Within the First International, the anarchists had rejected the Marxist idea that the peasantry were 'petty bourgeoisie' and innately reactionary. They had predicted that the emphasis Marxists placed on the historical role of the industrial workers as the revolutionary class would lead to division

between the city and countryside. The CGT developed this position and argued that a non-authoritarian society could not be achieved without the involvement of the peasantry. They therefore set out to organise agricultural unions within the CGT. However, problems persisted with the CGT emphasis on collectivisation. The French activist peasantry was heavily influenced by the ideas of Proudhon, who had argued for wage slavery to be replaced by a system of individual ownership. They were suspicious of collectivism.

Nor did the CGT campaign for better working conditions have much immediate attraction for the peasantry, since it was centred on the fight for the eight-hour day and so was more relevant to the industrial workplace. However, the anti-military campaign had an immediate attraction, since the peasantry had an enduring hatred of military recruitment, and so it was through the anti-military campaign that the CGT was able to begin to attract the peasantry to its ideas and begin the task of making the CGT an organisation of both town and country.

Although it clearly led to growing influence, the increasing militancy of the CGT did not meet with the universal approval of all its members. The various reformist and socialist elements within the CGT were growing steadily more vocal and better organised, although it remained in total a small minority. In 1906, over 30% of all strikes were organised in support of the 8-hour day, including a one-day general strike organised by the CGT on May Day. This latter action was a major success, with public services being paralysed, and it remains a testament to the boundless confidence of the CGT at the time.

In 1907, the level of direct action increased further. Strikes were organised on the docks, the railways and in the postal services. Another strike, by electricians, plunged Paris into darkness. For the second year running, a general strike was organised on May Day. This time, it attracted even more widespread support among the whole of the French working class. Membership continued to grow, reaching over 300,000, and the CGT was beginning to exert an influence on working class life that far outsized even this level of membership.

However, along with this startling success, new problems were beginning to develop. Alarmed by the growing militancy, reformist elements attempted to gain some control at the CGT congress in Amiens in 1906. Auguste Keufer, a prominent voice of reformism, attempted to steer the union away from militancy and towards reformism. He had increasingly argued that that the CGT should model itself on the British trade union movement and concentrate on gaining reform. At the congress, he proposed that in all "philosophical, political and religious matters" the

CGT should observe “strict neutrality”. Furthermore, everyone should be free to “propagate these views but outside the syndicates”.

He made no attempt to define just which political viewpoint he was attempting to neutralise. However, he did argue that the “anarchist doctrines of anti-militarism and anti-patriotism” should be abandoned by the union and pleaded with the delegates to take the union out of the “control of the anarchist”. A motion was also raised at the congress that the CGT should affiliate to the newly formed SFIO and therefore join the Second International.

The reformist attempt to gain control failed completely. Arguments were put forward by the anarcho-syndicalists echoing the arguments of the anarchists within the First International. They pointed out that the state was not neutral and so it could not be used for the workers’ cause. Furthermore, they argued that the capture of state power, whether through parliamentary or revolutionary means, would not lead to workers’ emancipation, but the establishment of a new elite based on their own control of state power.

## **The Charter of Amiens**

Instead of moving towards reformism, the CGT moved further towards anarchism. The delegates voted by 834 to 8 in favour of what became known as the Charter of Amiens. This reaffirmed its commitment to anti-statism, clearly stating that the union should remain independent of the purely political struggle centred on the political party. The CGT was to remain an independent economic organisation, whose aim was social revolution to be achieved by the general strike.

The Charter also declared that the CGT;

*“..brings together, outside every political school of thought, all those workers conscious of the struggle necessary to obtain the disappearance of wage earners and employers”.*

The CGT was to be the organisation that united all workers with the common aim of overthrowing capitalism. In passing the Charter, the CGT had taken a significant step towards becoming a recognisable anarcho-syndicalist organisation.

Unfortunately, the Charter of Amiens was to prove a high point in the development of anarcho-syndicalism inside the CGT. From 1906 on, the CGT faced a massive wave of state repression vociferously targeted on its militant anti-state tactics of direct action.

## **The State Response**

In the years leading up to 1906, the increasing militancy of the CGT had already brought down Government repression on it. In 1905, the Paris Bourse had been evicted from its premises by Government forces. However, it was the May Day general strike that created abject alarm amongst the ruling classes. Even in France, historically the scene of so much revolutionary activity, the idea had always dominated that the mass of the working class had no real appetite for the revolutionary cause. Popular wisdom dictated that revolutions were due to a small conscious minority steering up the otherwise passive majority. Within this popular wisdom, the ruling class had become increasingly confident that superior state forces could put down any attempt by a small minority aimed at insurrection.

The state was confident that it could prevent armed insurrection as, since 1871, the state had made use of advancing military technology to reorganise and improve communications in the army. City centres had even been rebuilt to make street fighting easier to control.

The general strike turned the confidence of the ruling class in its defences into alarm, as its popular wisdom began increasingly to be shown to be false. The ideas that were bound up in anarcho-syndicalism, such as self-education, direct mass action, the raising of consciousness about the role of the state and the ruling class; all showed the state that this was a new path to revolution to that of previous insurrections. The anarcho-syndicalists openly rejected the idea that the spontaneity of the revolutionary act would steer the majority of the workers out of their passivity. They were arguing instead that day to day struggle would help develop the class-consciousness that would prepare them for the coming revolution. Instead of people being awakened by revolution, the anarcho-syndicalists were preparing for a revolution that would be made by the conscious majority. Furthermore, the main revolutionary weapon would be economic power rather than physical force.

The ruling class, whose whole strategy for defeating attempts at revolutionary change was that the workers would remain passive, began to recognise that this would no longer be true for the movement of the CGT. Also, they started to question their assumption that the troops would always be able to 'outgun' the workers and secure the continued running of the economy. The general strike, which was aimed at paralysing the economy, provoked real fear amongst capitalism.

Before May Day 1906, the ruling class had remained relatively unconcerned. While it remained an anarchist notion, they felt that workers would be both unable and unwilling to organise such a strike. When the prospect of it became a reality, and the date drew near, the ruling class panicked. On the day, some 75,000 troops were dispatched to Paris. The strike also caused panic among the middle class, as many fled to the countryside or across the channel to England. After the strike, a new Government was formed under the leadership of Clemenceau, a former socialist, with the aim of eradicating the growing threat of anarcho-syndicalism.

Over the next three years, the new socialist Government unleashed a wave of state repression. CGT members faced constant harassment and imprisonment. Troops were routinely used to attack strikers resulting in rising death and injury tolls among workers. In 1907 alone, strikers were murdered at Nsarbonne, Nantes and Roan l'Etape. The brutality of the state was such that an attempt to put down agrarian unrest in Midi led to the 17<sup>th</sup> Infantry mutinying.

In addition to physical force and victimisation, the state also began to increasingly use the tactic of mass dismissals to break strikes. A postal strike collapsed in 1909 when postal workers were sacked en masse. The Government also attempted to specifically identify and undermine the anarcho-syndicalist elements within the CGT. The press launched a hate campaign against prominent anarcho-syndicalists and in 1908, the Government ordered the arrest of the elected anarcho-syndicalist CGT officials Yvetot, Pouget and Griffuelhes. The reformists in the CGT attempted to take advantage of this situation, by arguing that it was the revolutionary aspirations of anarcho-syndicalism that were to blame for the Government repression, not the Government itself. The attacks from both inside the CGT and by the state and its press and army had a considerable impact. The mixture of threats and punishments began to cause elements of the CGT membership to waver in their commitment to anarcho-syndicalism. On their release from prison, the anarcho-syndicalist officials failed to get re-elected to their former positions. Those who re-



mained anarcho-syndicalist became increasingly contemptuous of the reformists, and the arguments between them became increasingly bitter.

However, despite the state oppression and the resultant divisions, the CGT was able to maintain its organisational unity. Membership continued to grow, reaching some 600,000 by 1912. The various CGT newspapers were read by hundreds of thousands of people, and massive public meetings were regularly held. Nor did the influence of anarcho-syndicalism decline as the reformists hoped. In fact, as the threat of war loomed, the CGT anti-militarist campaign was stepped up. As part of this, a successful 24-hour strike for peace was organised by the CGT in 1912.

## **The First World War and after**

While Government repression had had a weakening effect, it had failed to crush anarcho-syndicalism within the CGT. However, the outbreak of war was to deliver a hammer blow from which it would not recover easily.

In the first days after war was declared, the CGT called for demonstrations against it. However, a wave of patriotism swept across France and, in the face of widespread war fervour, they were soon to come out in favour of the war. Within days, they agreed to join the “Sacred Union”, an alliance of all political parties aimed at unifying France for the war effort. A new Government of unity was formed, in which the Marxist SFIO took a number of cabinet positions. A majority of the Bourses soon ratified the national committee decision to join the Sacred Union.

Behind the war hysteria, there remained those within the CGT who opposed the war. A general strike was called in Lyon, only to be called off after Government threats and the intervention of the CGT’s national committee. Pierre Monatte resigned from the CGT’s national committee in protest at the decision to join the Sacred Union. A number of demonstrations were called, but were prevented from taking place by the state.

Though the opposition to the war may appear to have largely evaporated as war broke out, this is in some ways understandable. The Government had in place a well-organised strategy to overcome opposition to the war. Martial Law was declared, with papers closed and strikes and demonstrations banned. An extensive list of CGT activists had been compiled in order to ensure that ‘trouble makers’ were amongst the first to be called up. As a result, many militants found themselves on the way to the front within days of war being declared – or forced underground.

Despite the Government’s efforts, however, the CGT slowly recovered its composure, and soon members were reconsidering the wisdom of accepting the war and joining the Sacred Union. They began to organise. A large pacifist group began to develop, centred on the powerful metal-workers federation. Anarcho-syndicalism began to re-assert an influence. Within a year, anti-war propaganda produced by these groups within the CGT began to appear, including a pamphlet entitled “This War”, written by Monatte, which argued that the cause of the war was rooted in the economic struggle between British and German capitalism.

As the opposition grew within the CGT to its pro-war stance, an anti-war group called ‘Comité de Defense Syndicaliste’ established itself. As the war progressed, this group was able to organise growing support against the war within the CGT. By the closing stages of the war in 1918, inspired by news of the Bolshevik revolution, an attempt to launch a general strike against the war was launched by a minority of militant syndicates centred in the anarcho- syndical-

ist stronghold of the Loire. The strike was only a partial success, but it confirmed the growing strength of militancy within the CGT once again.

With the end of the war, Monatte launched a new weekly paper. Its first issue carried extracts from pre-war writings of a number of prominent anarcho-syndicalists. It also announced:

*“We were revolutionary syndicalist before the war and we remain so. The trial of the war has only hardened our convictions..”*

The anarcho-syndicalist minority now set about changing the reformist post-war CGT. In 1919, at the congress in Lyons, the CGT reformist leader came under sustained attack for his class collaboration and the CGT’s failure to support an outbreak of strikes that had occurred across France earlier in the year. Immediately after the congress, the Comites de Syndicalistes Revolutionnaires (CRS) was formed, with the aim overcoming reformism and returning the CGT to its revolutionary roots. Over the next 2–3 years, the CRS grew steadily. Before long, motions put to CGT congress by the CRS were only narrowly defeated by the reformist majority. Fearful of almost certain loss of control, the CGT’s national committee attempted to stifle internal opposition and voted to expel the CRS.

The expelled CRS went on to form the Confederation Generale du Travail Unitaire (CGTU). This new organisation broadly reflected the revolutionary politics of the pre-war CGT. However, it was not about to mark the rebirth of anarcho-syndicalism in France. The reason was not that the French people had been won over to reformism during the course of the First World War — indeed, a large section of the working class remained revolutionary and opposed to parliamentary means. The primary reason why the CGTU was dogged with problems from day one was the events in Russia the year before.

Revolutionaries across France were unable to resist the apparent success of the Bolshevik revolution. It is hard to imagine now the sheer size of the impact the events in 1917 Russia must have had on revolutionary movements across the world at the time. Little matter that the events were of an insurrectionary nature, and that the Bolsheviks were quick to adopt Marxist power structures, and to crush any opposition from other workers’ movements throughout Russia. Revolutionaries only tended to get the good news delivered from Russia by the Bolshevik supporters, and they understandably rushed to support what appeared to be the creation of the first communist society. Since this communist society had been achieved through the Marxist idea of capturing state power, many who in the past had argued for direct workers’ control through direct action, abandoned anarchism and embraced Marxist communism, on the basis of this apparent success. The CGTU was no exception to this delusion, and it voted overwhelmingly in favour of joining the Bolshevik-organised Red Trade Union International, despite the fact that this organisation demanded the union strictly adhered to the dictates of the communist party leadership.

In 1921, the Red International launched an attack on the limited trade union independence that the CGTU had managed to retain. This caused a relatively small number of surviving anarcho- syndicalists to leave the CGTU. They set up the Confederation du Travail Syndicalist-Revolutionnaire, which reaffirmed its commitment to the Charter of Amiens and formed an independent anarcho- syndicalist organisation. However, this was the exception to the rule. Even after the reality of the Bolshevik state became known, the revolutionary movement in France was to remain in the grip of Marxism for the next 40 years.

## Conclusion

The influence of anarchism on the French workers' movement of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was significant, but unfortunately short-lived. Although the main militant French trade union federation of the period was the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) and it was the first such organisation to be heavily influenced by the emerging ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, it was not entirely composed of anarcho-syndicalists. Indeed, there was a large reformist element within the CGT, which grew to dominate during the First World War, helped along by state repression and socialist opposition to the anarcho-syndicalist revolutionary aims and tactics. Certainly, the CGT was a mass workers' organisation, within which the majority of workers were initially drawn towards anarchism because its ideas reflected their own experience, and offered practical solutions based on that experience.

The development of anarcho-syndicalism within the CGT was nevertheless a sign of great solidarity within the French working class, in the face of what became overwhelming adversity. The lessons learned were not lost and the experience of the CGT was sufficient to inspire other anarchist movements around the world. Unit 5 will look at the initial spread of anarcho-syndicalist ideas in working class movements outside France, starting with Britain.

## Key points

- The workers' movement in France had a long revolutionary tradition and, especially after the suppression of the Paris Commune, many workers had developed an inbuilt distrust of the state and politicians
- The industrial revolution in France took a different form to those in Britain, Germany and the USA
- The high degree of sectarianism evident in the socialist parties led to the early unions in France rejecting electoral politics
- Direct action was adopted as the means to achieve short-term improvements but also ultimately to bring about the destruction of capitalism through the social general strike
- The French anarcho-syndicalists saw the Federation des Bourses du Travail (FBT) and the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) as the social mechanisms with which to build an alternative to the capitalist state
- The concept of political neutrality masked divisions between the reformist and revolutionary syndicalists in the CGT
- Increasing state repression, especially after the outbreak of war, combined with the effects of the Russian Revolution weakened and eventually destroyed the anarcho-syndicalist influence on the French trade union movement.

## Checklist

1. What were the main contributory factors that drew the French workers towards the ideas and methods of anarchism?
2. Why did the trade union movement come to reject electoral politics and any interference from the socialist parties?
3. What was the role of the Bourses du Travail?
4. How did the FBT define the meaning and role of direct action?
5. How did the role of the CGT differ from that of the FBT?
6. What were the main factors in the decline of anarcho-syndicalist influence in the French workers' movement?

## Answer suggestions

*1. What were the main contributory factors that drew the French workers towards the ideas and methods of anarchism?*

Firstly there was the revolutionary tradition in the French workers' movement that led them to see revolution as a legitimate goal of working class struggle and advancement. They linked the day-to-day struggle to the wider aim of establishing an egalitarian society. Secondly the repression after the Paris Commune convinced the workers that the state and politicians could not be trusted to act in the interests of the workers. Finally the industrialisation of France took a different form to that of Britain and Germany. It was much slower and dominated by a decentralised system of production based on smaller factories. To confront this it required a greater flexibility on the part of the workers and the federal form of organisation advocated by the anarchists was best suited to these conditions.

*2. Why did the trade union movement come to reject electoral politics and any interference from the socialist parties?*

Unlike Britain, the formation of socialist parties preceded the advent of mass workers' organisations. There were many differences and splits in these parties and they battled constantly to gain control of the French union movement. The sectarianism and faction fighting that this brought into the unions meant that increasing numbers of unions began banning discussion of electoral politics at their meetings. In addition, when the socialists did have electoral success at municipal level the promised benefits to workers never materialised. The reality was increased strike breaking by the elected socialist deputies and town councils eager to build their own power base.

*3. What was the role of the Bourses du Travail?*

They were local union federations, organised along anarchist aims and principles. The Bourses du Travail organised around daily economic issues and seen as an alternative to party politics linking the day-to-day struggle to the wider aim of social revolution. They were also seen as future administrative bodies co-ordinating production and consumption in the immediate aftermath of revolution.

*4. How did the FBT define the meaning and role of direct action?*

The FBT was a federation of all the local Bourses and was dedicated to the idea of workers taking over the running of industry directly rather than capturing state power. It co-ordinated strike action and strike support and saw direct action as integral in attaining immediate improvements that would culminate in the social general strike. Direct action was also seen as a method to ensure direct democracy and that the workers were accountable for their own actions. In doing this the FBT saw direct action as a method of education whereby workers would learn, through practice, how to take decisions and act on their own behalf.

*5. How did the role of the CGT differ from that of the FBT?*

The CGT was established to organise workers within industrial sectors. The FBT continued to organise workers on the basis of locality even after full integration.

*6. What were the main factors in the decline of anarcho-syndicalist influence in the French workers' movement?*

There was confusion between the rejection of party politics and political neutrality. Reformists argued that the CGT should only concentrate on economic issues, concentrating on improving workers' conditions and staying independent of any wider political struggles. The revolutionary syndicalists however, saw the economic struggle and the political struggle as inseparable. Every action formed part of a wider class struggle and could not be separated without losing revolutionary potential. The reformists argued that the revolutionary aspirations of the anarcho-syndicalists were to blame for the increase in state repression, including the government's use of troops and arrests. With the advent of the First World War the reformists were able to win control of the CGT. The anarcho-syndicalists were eventually expelled and formed their own organisation, the CGTU, but the Russian revolution had the effect of persuading many of them to abandon direct action after seeing the Bolsheviks gain power. By 1921 those staying loyal to anarcho-syndicalist principles were few and, even after the reality of Bolshevik Russia became known, the revolutionary movement in France was to remain in Marxist hands.

## **Some discussion points**

- What do you see as the main differences between the concepts of a 'General Strike' and a 'Social General Strike' and what is its relevance today?
- How could the ideas of 'Direct Action' be put into practice today?
- What could anarcho-syndicalists do to prevent a drift to reformism in a revolutionary union now?
- If an anarcho-syndicalist union was formed in Britain today how could it resist attacks via capitalist propaganda, government legislation and probable state repression?

## Unit 5: Revolutionary Syndicalism in Britain, 1870–1910

Unit 4 is concerned with how anarchism developed within the French workers' movement to form the basis of anarcho-syndicalism. Units 5 and 6 chart the effect of these events in France as they spread to Britain, where similar ideas were put into practice, especially in the first years of the Twentieth Century. However, these events indicate that the development of anarcho-syndicalism during this period varied from country to country. Indeed, while anarchism emerged as a number of fundamental ideas, the actions that this body of ideas led to were adapted and developed in practical reality.

Thus, anarcho-syndicalism did not emerge as a rigid theory with a single blueprint for change to be applied regardless of current economic conditions. On the contrary, it emerged as numerous ever-changing tactics based on a set of basic principles. Hence, it is the application of these principles which has led to the use of a range of tactics to meet the human conditions in different places at different times.

### **This Unit aims to:**

- Outline the social, economic and political changes that took place in Britain round the turn of the last century
- Explore the arguments that took place within the trade union movement and the rise of 'New Unionism'
- Examine the factors in the growth of the syndicalist movement in Britain
- Explain the differences of approach within the syndicalist movement of the time.

### **Terms and abbreviations**

**Fabian Society:** Named after a Roman general Fabius Maximus who won his campaigns by slow attrition. The Fabians believed that socialism was best achieved by permeation, gradually reforming existing institutions and through constitutional government rather than through revolutionary upheaval.

**SDF:** Social Democratic Federation. Formed in 1884, it was always dominated by its founder H M Hyndman, a former independent Tory. Its strategy was based on a crude economic determinism that saw the collapse of capitalism as inevitable and the best that could be done in the meantime was to agitate for palliative reforms. Taff Vale Judgment: In 1901 the Taff Vale Railway Company successfully sued the Amalgamated Society of Railway servants that supported a strike.

The judgment made any trade union liable for the action of its officials, virtually destroying the right to strike.

**ILP:** Independent Labour Party. Formed in Bradford in 1893 with the object of co-ordinating the efforts of trade unions to gain parliamentary representation independent of Liberal support.

**LRC:** Labour Representation Committee. The ILP was instrumental, along with the Fabians and the SDF, in forming the LRC in 1900. When the LRC had twenty-nine candidates returned as MPs in the 1906 Election they immediately changed their name to the Labour Party.

**SLP:** Socialist Labour Party. Formed in Scotland from SDF dissidents in 1903, the SLP were followers of Daniel de Leon an American Marxist. They came to embrace a theory that change would come through industrial unionism and political power gained through elections would rubber stamp the changes.

**IWW:** Industrial Workers of the World. American syndicalist union formed in 1905.

**BAIU:** British Advocates of Industrial Unionism. Established by the SLP in 1906 as a propagandist organisation. In 1909 it was reconstructed to include a dual-unionist centre under the title of Industrial Workers Of Great Britain (IWGB)

**IUDA:** Industrial Union of Direct Actionists. An anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group formed in 1907 supporting a dual-union approach.

**Plebs League:** Formed by radical students and staff at Ruskin College who were unhappy with the paternalistic and anti-socialist leanings of the administration. After a strike they broke away and founded the Central Labour College in London in 1908. The objective of the League was 'to educate the rank and file as to his [sic] class position and his economic power.'

## Introduction

Unit 4 was concerned with how anarchism developed within the French workers' movement as a precursor to anarcho-syndicalism. Here, we turn to the continuing events in Britain, where similar ideas were put into practice in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The early development of anarcho-syndicalism varied from country to country. One common thread was that, although anarchism emerged as a cohesive set of ideas, the actions which occurred as a result were adapted and developed in practical reality, according to local conditions. So, anarcho-syndicalism did not emerge as a rigid theory with a single blueprint for change to be applied regardless of current economic conditions. On the contrary, it developed out of practical reality, with numerous ever-changing tactics, and based on a set of basic principles.

## Background

When the British labour movement split in two during the mid- late 19<sup>th</sup> Century there remained those who continued to argue that workers should concentrate on bringing about political change as a prelude to economic change. These people aimed to establish a socialist government, which would then take the economy into public ownership. This was the approach that eventually led to the establishment of the Labour Party. On the other hand, there emerged a group who spurned the idea of political reform. These people pointed out that workers could not trust governments to bring about change. Instead, they urged workers to organise themselves to

confront capitalism directly: this would lead to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.

The British workers' movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was shaped by Chartism and its eventual failure (see Unit 2). The downfall of Chartism was followed by 60 years of steady growth in trade unionism. The form of this trade unionism had little to do with the revolutionary ideas that were present among the Luddites or the direct actionist Chartists. The aim of the mainly craft-based trade unions, which dated back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century, was respectability within the established order. They did not seek to change the system, but to find a role within it. Unions sought to portray themselves as sober insurance societies whose affairs were business-like and entirely respectable. Improvements in conditions were to be achieved through industrial conciliation and union recognition through legal changes forced on capitalism by parliamentary lobbying. The great mass of unskilled workers and women toiling in sweated workshops were not organised and were largely ignored by the 'aristocratic' craft workers so that up until the 1880s, there were no permanent established unions for unskilled workers.

By the 1870s it seemed that the craft unions' reformist strategy was making some gains. The second Trade Union Congress held in Birmingham in 1869 claimed to represent some 250,000 workers. The campaign to win over the ruling class to the idea that there was a place for sober and responsible trade unions within society was meeting with some success. In 1871, the Trade Union Act was introduced, which gave unions partial legal recognition.

At the third Trade Union Congress in 1871 a "Parliamentary Committee" was set up to lobby MPs. This was to be the final push for full recognition for trade unions. It was hoped that, through better lobbying of Parliament, the 1825 Trade Union Act that still left unions open to criminal prosecution, could be overturned, granting them full legal status. The Parliamentary Committee met with immediate success. In 1871, Robert Applegarth became the first trade union leader appointed to a Royal Commission and the 1874 general election returned the two miners' leaders McDonald and Burt to Parliament as Liberal MPs.

The extent to which the TUC were concerned with the plight of unskilled workers in general, and women workers in particular, can be gauged by the fact that when middle-class women tried to voice the grievances of the working women they were attempting to organise, they were thrown out of the 1870 annual conference. Broadhurst, the Liberal MP and leader of the Parliamentary Committee, argued against the wisdom of sending women to Congress "...because, under the influence of emotion, they might vote for things they would regret in cooler moments".

The unions were instrumental in bringing about the notion of a 'family wage', which sought to imitate a middle-class model of family morals and economics. This model promoted as head of the family a male 'breadwinner' who kept his wife out of the workplace and in the home. Unions promoting this form of 'family wage' also pushed during the 1880s for 'protective' legislation that excluded women from certain trades e.g. the chain and nail trade of the Black Country and the pit brows at mines throughout the country. Women pushed out of these trades were left unemployed or forced to take employment in occupations that made it difficult for workers to become organised. This included domestic service – by 1911 39% of all women employed were found in service – and part-time and seasonal work was common. Union activity in relation to women was generally concerned with keeping women out of trades. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, the employment of women in any industry automatically brought wages down because women were paid less than men: secondly, it was claimed that the presence of women in some workplaces corrupted them. Unions cited both at the time as good reasons why women



should remain in the home. They were supported in this by middle-class reformers who saw the absence of women from the home as a major factor in the poor health of working-class children and insobriety of working-class men. In occupations where women were able to organise, most notably the Lancashire cotton industry, where the majority of workers and union members were women, there were very few women trade union officials. The men, workers and union officials alike, took care to keep women out of the most specialised and highly paid jobs in the industry and ensured they stayed in subordinate positions.

The adoption of the middle-class model of gendered relationships by unions meant that women were expected to find a husband or support a working father. The reality, however, never matched the image of the 'angel in the home' promoted by the middle-classes and the trade unions: it simply encouraged sexual discrimination and led to hardship.

## **Winds of Change**

However, the enclosed world of respectable trade unionism was soon to be hit by economic recession. The major depression of 1873-96 led to widespread unemployment and rocked the craft unions to their foundations. In the face of growing unemployment, workers increasingly began to challenge the "respectable trade unionist" strategy. Among them was Tom Mann, an engineer who was later to play a prominent role in British syndicalism. Writing in a pamphlet arguing for the eight-hour day in 1886, Mann summed up the growing mood of discontent with current union thinking thus:

*"To Trade Unionists, I desire to make a special appeal. How long, how long will you be content with the present half-hearted policy of unions... what good purpose are they serving now? All of them have large numbers out of employment... None of the important societies have policies other than endeavouring to keep wages from falling. The true union policy of aggression seems entirely lost sight of; in fact the average trade unionist of today is a man with a fossilised intellect, either hopelessly apathetic, or supporting a policy that plays directly into the hands of the capitalist exploiter."*

Mann was not alone in his anger. The depression saw a rekindling of socialism. A number of socialist bodies were formed, including the Fabian Society and the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF). The latter attracted a number of trade union activists and was prominent in organising large unemployment demonstrations in Trafalgar Square in 1886 and 1887. At both demonstrations widespread disorder occurred with police and property being attacked.

## **New Unionism**

The biggest threat to this genteel world of the established trade union order came from the hitherto-ignored unskilled workers. From the 1880s onwards, there was an explosion in unskilled organisation.

In 1886, a union of seamen was launched: by 1889 it claimed a membership of 65,000. A gas workers' union was established in 1889 and soon had a membership of 20,000, including many workers employed outside the gas industry. The gas workers embarked on a bitter struggle with the gas companies for the eight-hour day, which led to confrontations with the authorities in numerous towns. This struggle gained widespread publicity and helped spread the idea of unskilled

unions. Also, in 1889, a dockers' union was formed and it too began agitation for the eight-hour day. The port of London itself was soon paralysed.

The new unskilled unions were distinguished from the craft unions in that they often had the word 'general' in their title, indicating that they aimed to organise unskilled and casual workers. For instance, the General Railway Workers' Union was formed in 1890 to cater for casual railway labourers and others excluded by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. In order to attract low paid workers, these new general unions tended to have low entrance fees and unlike craft unions, did not depend on benefits to attract members. They relied instead on aggressive strike tactics to win concessions from the employers. From the outset the new general unions were more politicised than craft unions. Most of those organising new unions classed themselves as socialists and were often active in socialist political organisations. As a result general unions, unlike craft unions, began to argue for capitalism to be replaced by some form of socialist society.

The spread of unskilled unions became known as "New Unionism", and the new organisations rapidly became established throughout the industrial areas of England, Scotland and Wales. There was an increase in union membership from just over 750,000 in 1888 to 2.5 million by 1910.

The growth of this far more militant, politicised form of trade unionism did not win favour with established respectable unionism. Clashes began to take place between 'labour' and the 'trades' within the TUC from the 1890s onwards. John Burns described the differences as follows at the 1890 TUC congress:

*"Physically the "old" unionists were much bigger than the new...A great number of them looked like respectable city gentlemen; wore very good coats and high hats and, in many cases, were of such splendid build and proportions that they presented an aldermanic, not to say a magisterial form of dignity. Amongst the new delegates not a single one wore a tall hat. They looked like workmen, they were workmen."*

Clashes between new and old unionism occurred with increasing frequency over the next few years. But the days of "magisterial" trade unionism were numbered, not least because the introduction of new technology was undermining craft unionism, through the process of de-skilling. Craft unions had hitherto been dependent on the relative shortage of their skills to maintain their privileged position. While some craft workers attempted to cling to their privileges, many now looked to amalgamating their organisations with unskilled workers in order to maintain their industrial strength.

Amalgamation was already beginning to occur by the 1890s. In 1891, for instance, Tom Mann stood for secretary of the craft-based Amalgamated Engineering Union on a ticket arguing for the union to be opened up to less skilled workers. Though he was narrowly defeated, his campaign had its effect. The following year, the rules of the union were changed to accept less skilled workers.

## **Capitalism & Socialism**

It was not just de-skilling that propelled amalgamation. Unlike France (see Unit 4), where capitalism was slow to centralise, Britain saw capitalism coming under greater central control by 1890. Through an on-going process of business amalgamation, capitalist production was increasingly concentrated into larger units, which led to a far greater degree of concentration in the

patterns of ownership and control. The growth of employers' associations contributed to this centralisation.

This new world of highly centralised capitalism hastened the demise of the craft-based union, as capitalists became far more organised and able to co-ordinate their attacks on the unions far more effectively. The idea that workers should organise on an industrial basis began to be advocated by an increasing number of workers. For instance, in 1889, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain was established in order to resist attacks by the increasingly co-ordinated mine owners' organisation.

Another factor undermining the old craft unions was the spread of socialist ideas. The idea underpinning craft unionism was the need to protect workers' craft status, largely through ensuring only skilled workers could join the union and work in the trade concerned. By its very nature, this was a divisive idea. The spread of socialist ideas, which generally emphasised the need for workers' solidarity, inevitably undermined the notion that all that mattered was protecting sectional interests. Socialist ideas were spreading rapidly amongst the unions as can be seen by a resolution that was passed by the TUC in 1893. This resolution urged unions to support only parliamentary candidates pledged to the collective ownership and control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, much to the horror of the more magisterial members. This was seen as a turning point by many socialists and was to pave the way for the establishment of the Labour Party.

The birth of New Unionism was not greeted with much joy by the ruling classes. It was one thing to grant limited legal rights to the top-hatted gentlemen from the craft unions, but quite another to grant legal status to the likes of William Thorne, leader of the gas workers' union, who boasted of his part in leading an attack on scabs during a strike for the 8-hour day in Leeds. The sight of the 'great unwashed', organising and paralysing industry through militant strikes, coming under the influence of 'alien' socialist doctrines terrified the ruling classes into action.

The employers, backed up by the state, unleashed an attack on trade unionism in the 1890s. Striking miners were shot in Featherstone, Yorkshire, in 1893. In the same year, gunboats were anchored on the river Mersey during a dockers' strike. The police and army were trained in how to deal with demonstrators and began regularly practising baton charges.

In 1897, due to a strike in London by engineers and other unions for the 8-hour day, the newly formed Employers' Federation of Engineers Associations organised a national lock-out in a bid to break the increasingly militant engineering union. The dispute lasted six months and was the first large-scale national dispute in British history. The attacks on organised labour culminated in the Taff Vale ruling by the House of Lords in 1901, which in effect allowed employers to claim damages against unions, and in doing so removed the unions' limited legal protection.

## **Capitalism's New Face**

With the return of full employment around the turn of the century, the British ruling elite faced a growing crisis. The employers' attacks had proved only a temporary and minor setback to New Unionism and union membership continued to grow rapidly. This prompted a quite remarkable change of strategy by a large section of the ruling class. A number of capitalists and politicians began to argue that, rather than attempting to eradicate the unions, they should be 'assimilated' or 'incorporated'. Through apparently meeting some demands of the less militant leadership,

it was argued, the unions could be manipulated and used as agents to control the problem of growing working class militancy.

Sir Benjamin Browne, a powerful shipbuilding magnate, characterised this breathtaking change of attitude by a capitalist class hitherto ferocious in its commitment to the free market doctrine:

*“What we want is to negotiate with workmen as much as possible on equal terms...I am for all unions...if unions and employers were encouraged a little more, they would be able to do their work, so that stoppages would be the rarest thing in the world...I have always advised employers that we get on far better when we go through the unions than when we act independently from them.”*

This change of strategy was soon put into action. The first fifteen years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the introduction of a number of reforms as the British state took its first tentative steps toward establishing a system based on what was later to become welfare capitalism. The state introduced bargaining and conciliation mechanisms and they were soon being used throughout much of British industry. The aim of these new procedures was to channel workers' anger away from action and into negotiation, where their demands could be shaped and modified. The 'responsible' trade unionist, who was willing to negotiate and act in the interests of the industry as a whole, was to be the conduit through which management hoped to exercise control over the workers.

The reversal of the Taff Vale decision through the Trade Dispute Act of 1906 ensured that union funds were once again immune from prosecution. Similar immunity from prosecution was also given to trade unionists engaged in 'responsible trade union activity'. In 1908, Acts were passed which limited the number of hours worked in the mines. Trade boards were introduced in 1909 to regulate wages in sweatshop industries. In 1911, the Industrial

Councils were set up as a permanent institutionalised link between labour and capital. Between 1906 and 1914, various welfare programmes were introduced, which are still seen by many as the origin of the modern welfare state.

History books often give the impression that the initial trade union and social reforms were brought about by well-meaning, progressive, upper class reformists, who exposed the true horrors of working class life to a basically caring but ignorant ruling elite. Other sources point to the fact that reforms were introduced to ensure an adequate supply of labour. By the turn of the century, it was becoming increasingly clear that a modern industrial economy was needed to ensure a reasonably healthy and educated workforce. It was also apparent that this could not be left to the free market and that state intervention would be required. While both arguments have some weight, a factor not often taken into account by either is that it was the workers' militancy and the threat it brought that were crucial to bringing about these changes.

There was a fear among Britain's ruling elite, often bordering on the hysterical, that the uneducated masses could, at any time, embark on a revolutionary orgy. Through introducing limited reforms to eliminate some of the worst excesses of capitalism, and through union assimilation, it was hoped to shape working class culture away from revolutionary notions. It should be noted that even the welfare reforms that were introduced included a large element of social control. For example, unemployment benefit was denied to those dismissed for 'industrial misconduct' and those deemed 'guilty' of insubordination towards employers. The aim of welfare reform was to ensure a regulated workforce subject to state discipline. Reform was to encourage the idea of the responsible worker, while isolating and punishing those who argued for class conflict.

## **Economic Decline**

Another major factor increasingly exercising the minds of British capitalists was the deteriorating economy. The great depression of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century marked the end of Britain's dominant position in the world economy. From the 1870s onwards British capital was faced with increased competition from the high-tech, high investment economies of Germany and the USA.

During the period between 1870 and 1914, the heyday of British imperialism, the notion that 'population is power' had a major impact on women. The production of 'inferior' workers of poor stature and indifferent health was primarily laid at the feet of working-class women who were deemed poor or 'feckless' mothers. On the other hand middle-class women suspected of using contraception were deemed traitors to their class for refusing to produce enough babies of the 'superior' type to populate and maintain the British Empire and become the managers of British capital. The drive to produce better 'workers' and 'managers' for Britain's capitalist system weighed heavily on women who, as we have already seen, were already being excluded from trades and the workplace in general by unions whose interests mirrored the requirements of capital. Re-production became a by-line of capitalist production, and even this basic human function was appropriated to the needs of the state, within a sexist model of human reproductive responsibility. This model was supported by the predominantly male trade unions.

As it was, Britain was unable to maintain adequate levels of investment and productivity was lowered. The only way British capitalism could maintain profit levels was to force down wages. This posed a problem. How, during boom times, without unemployment to discipline workers, does capitalism control wages to compete with more efficient economies? It was a problem that British capitalism was to struggle with for much of this century, and part of the solution was found in the ongoing incorporation of the trade unions.

The initial incorporation strategy was to grant limited union power, in the hope that the workforce could be manipulated into accepting lower wages in exchange. According to economic orthodoxy, this would lead to greater investment and thus restore Britain's failing economic power. At first, this appeared to work. Even though the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw an economic boom, with both full employment and rising union membership, wages declined in real terms. Between 1900 and 1914, average wages fell by 10%. All seemed rosy for British capitalism. The 'golden era' of the Edwardian period was marked by growing inequality as rents and profits exploded, while working class living standards declined. It looked to some capitalist leaders as if Britain's economic decline could be reversed through this strategy.

## **Bureaucracy vs. Militancy**

In reality, any satisfaction British capitalism felt at its new-found profitability was short-lived. If anything, the increased use of bargaining procedures to control workers' militancy had the opposite effect. The spread of bargaining procedures required an increase in union bureaucracy to staff the newly formed negotiating bodies. This growing bureaucracy, enamoured by their new-found status, soon began to take on conservative attitudes. Union leaders became reluctant to call strike action that might jeopardise their good relations with the employers. The goal of ensuring union recognition and maintaining negotiating rights became an end in itself.

As a result, union officials came to be viewed with growing hostility by ordinary union members. They appeared remote, cut off from the shop floor, and increasingly lost any sense of militancy the deeper they became embroiled in bargaining structures. This resulted in the growth of a form of strike action that was later to characterise Britain's post-war industrial relations — the “unofficial” strike. As wages continued to fall, anger among workers grew due to the slowness and ineffectiveness of bargaining machinery. This quickly developed as the growing mistrust of union officials was combined with plunging living standards.

The state's attempt to portray itself as the workers' friend also proved not to be as popular as the protagonists of 'incorporation' had hoped. In retrospect, this was hardly surprising, given the historical distrust of the state among British workers; ever since feudalism gave way to capitalism, the state had been brutal in its support for capitalism against workers' interests (see Unit 1). Reforms such as the poor laws had been introduced, supposedly to relieve workers' suffering. Bitter experience to the contrary had led many workers to associate the state and its laws with working class oppression. At the turn of the Century, the hated poor laws were still in operation and still causing bitter resentment. The courts too were generally viewed by workers as far from neutral, perceived to be acting in the interests of the capitalists. As a result, anti-state feeling ran deep among Britain's working class.

The almost instinctive anti-state sentiments were found in much of Britain's early socialist thinking, most notably in the work of William Morris, who rejected incremental reform, arguing for autonomous workers being fully in control of all aspects of production. Morris and his associates in effect argued for direct workers' control as opposed to piecemeal reform by a benign state.

Mistrust of the state not only hampered the ruling elite's attempt to cast itself in a new light, it also caused considerable problems for the growing socialist movement. All the socialist parties and groups that emerged towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century — the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884, the Fabian Society (1886), the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1893 and, in 1900, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) forerunner of the Labour party — were fully committed to winning political power through the Parliamentary process. All these groups sought to cast the state as a neutral force that could be used for the benefit of the working class. This was in direct contradiction to many workers' instincts and experience.

This long held mistrust appeared to be well-founded when, in the 1906 Election, the return of twenty-nine LRC candidates, who immediately became the Labour Party, failed to become a new fighting force for the working class. On entering Parliament, these new MP's seemed quickly to forget their socialist ideas. Instead, they seemed more interested in tail-ending, and generally defending, the Liberal Party's welfare capitalism than promoting an independent socialist alternative. This sounds all too familiar today, with the current antics of New Labour and the inevitable actions of the various 'Socialist' left parties. whenever power is within their grasp.

## **Syndicalism in Britain**

Under the social and economic conditions described above, it would have been surprising if some form of syndicalist movement had not developed in Britain in the years leading up to the First World War. The existence of a powerful syndicalist movement in France had long cast a shadow over the British labour movement. The French CGT argued for direct action rather

than conciliation, it shunned parliamentary action and did not see the state as neutral but as acting in the interests of capitalism. This example of a different kind of workers' organisation just across the channel, coupled with the economic and political changes within Britain, helped in the emergence of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain.

In the event, the first syndicalist group to appear in Britain was more influenced by events in the United States rather than in France. In 1903, increasingly disillusioned with the SDF's exclusively political strategy, which ignored the workplace struggle, a group of workers in Scotland split away to form the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). The SLP was influenced by the ideas developed by the American socialist, Daniel de Leon. At this stage the de Leonist movement in Britain, as in the USA, was not syndicalist. Although the revolutionary potential of industrial conflict was not ignored de Leon looked to revolution primarily through political methods. However, as De Leon's moved closer to revolutionary syndicalism after 1904, so to did his British supporters, especially after his involvement in the foundation of the American IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) in 1905. We shall examine de Leon's ideas in more detail when we look at the history of American syndicalism.

It was no accident that the idea of industrial unionism developed in the US should prove attractive to British workers. The already mighty and more advanced US economy had gone through a process of capitalist centralisation earlier than Britain. American capitalists had used the concentration of power to unleash a bitter anti-union crusade. As a result, the idea of industrial unionism as a way of combating concentrated capitalist power was far more advanced. The formation of industrial unions, with their emphasis on local organisation, soon became one of the central themes of British revolutionary syndicalism.

In 1906, following the example of the American de Leonists, the SLP set up the British Advocates of Industrial Unions (BAIU). It was hoped this would lead to the creation of industrial unions in Britain. The SLP-BAIU published two monthly papers, *The Socialist* and *The Industrial Worker*, and began to expand throughout Britain. The organisation came to prominence during a bitter dispute in 1911 at the Singer sewing machine works, where it had considerable support among the mainly female workforce.

Though the strategy of building industrial unions proved to be relevant in Britain's centralised economy, the method of achieving it – the 'dual union strategy' – hampered the SLP-BAIU's progress. The idea of building entirely new revolutionary industrial unions made much more sense in the US, where union membership was still small. In Britain, there was a well-established existing union movement. The problem of creating new unions, plus the fact that the SLP-BAIU was still committed to parliamentary action, caused a split in 1908, which led to the formation of the Industrial League. One of its leaders, E J B Allen, published a pamphlet a year later, entitled *Revolutionary Unionism*, which laid out a different strategy to that of dual unionism. Allen rejected deLeon's idea of building a separate socialist party, arguing that the industrial unions should be independent of all political parties. Though he did not rule out parliamentary action entirely, he was unclear as to the extent unions should support it.

There was also a third group arguing for revolutionary unions in Britain in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. These were the anarcho-syndicalist groups, which had developed from existing anarchist groups and had begun to spread across Britain. In 1907, the anarchist paper *Freedom* launched *The Voice of Labour*, edited by a shop steward, John Turner, a former associate of William Morris. It railed against the "blight of respectability" that had fallen upon union officials, many of whose main interest was establishing a political career. The paper argued for

revolutionary propaganda within existing unions as a way of promoting industrial unions and of overcoming the sectionalism of the individual workers' organisations.

Along with this "boring from within" approach, there were other anarcho-syndicalists who advocated the dual unionism approach, most notably the Industrial Union of Direct Actionists (IUADA), formed in 1907 by Guy Aldred. Though there were differences over strategy among the anarcho-syndicalist groups, this does not seem to have prevented close co-operation between them. Anarcho-syndicalists worked both within existing unions and in alternative industrial groupings. Anarcho-syndicalist groups were formed in most industrial centres, with activities ranging from street corner speaking and providing social club facilities, to organising anarchist Sunday schools and rambles.

As well as the growth of groups arguing for some form of revolutionary unionism, a number of individual trade unionists were attracted to syndicalist ideas. An important vehicle in spreading these ideas was the newly formed Plebs League and Central Labour College. This formed a new working class education movement, formed after a dispute at Ruskin College. Influenced by syndicalist thinking, the new movement spread its ideas through a network of study groups, which was particularly strong among South Wales miners, where a number of activists adopted the ideas and practices of revolutionary syndicalism.

## **Tom Mann**

1910 proved to be a turning point in the development of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain. Tom Mann returned to Britain as a convert to syndicalism. This change of view had come about after his experiences of state-controlled industry and Labour administration in Australia, in particular during a strike involving the miners of Broken Hill in South Australia. Here the ruling Lib-Lab state government had sided with the mine owners and ordered in troops to break the strike, leaving many workers unemployed and imprisoned. Actions such as these by socialist politicians had left Mann disgusted with 'political methods' and 'state socialism'.

The backing of Mann proved a major boost to the syndicalist movement. Mann was a well-known national figure due to the prominent role he had played during the 1889 dock strike, and the fact that he had been the first general secretary of the Independent Labour Party. He was also well-known among workers' organisations, having written the original pamphlet advocating the 8-hour day. His conversion to syndicalism received widespread coverage. Although, upon his return, he briefly joined the SDF, he soon left, giving the following reason in his resignation letter:

*"I am driven to the belief that the real reason why the trade union movement of this country is in such a deplorable state of inefficiency is to be found in the fictitious importance which the workers have been encouraged to attach to Parliamentary action... I believe that economic liberty will never be realised by such means. So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation, not as a means, but the means whereby the workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system and become actual controllers of their industrial and social destiny."*



## Conclusion

The period 1870–1910 was characterised by major developments and shifts in the British union movement. Despite attempts to ‘incorporate’ it by the state, more radical elements remained, and these began developing growing revolutionary syndicalist organisations by 1908.

Both anarchists and Marxists were attracted to revolutionary syndicalism as they became more and more disenchanted with the attitude of the trade union leaders, the failure of the Labour Party and the sterile economic determinism of the orthodox Marxist parties.

The revolutionary syndicalist movement drew inspiration from both the French and American experiences, although, it did build on the ideas of the indigenous anti-state traditions that originated in Britain during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were differing views on how a syndicalist union could be established, given the history of the British trade union movement. However these differences, in the tactics and strategy, did not prevent anarcho-syndicalists co-operating closely and many anarcho-syndicalists worked within the existing unions as well as the dual-union groups.

Syndicalist influence had steadily spread up to 1910 when Tom Mann returned from Australia to throw his weight behind the movement. The Plebs League had already spread syndicalist ideas through rank and file trade unionists especially the miners of South Wales. In fact Mann, if anything, was a little behind much of British syndicalist thinking as initially he did not rule out parliamentary politics completely. What he was able to do was put his personal prestige and organisational ability into the formation of a coherent syndicalist movement.

British syndicalism mainly grew up in male-dominated industries such as mining, transport and on the docks. Consequently, it seems, the aims and objectives of anarcho-syndicalists at the time did not incorporate women or women’s issues. Histories of labour during this period tend likewise to overlook women’s contribution and roles in the development of the movement. Even anarchists writing in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century about the movement have automatically concentrated on men. This leaves us with the problem of the missing persons of history; women. Accordingly, the history of women in the early stages of British syndicalism, as with the early stages of syndicalism elsewhere, is a history still waiting to be written.

Many labour historians have argued that the British working class was, and still is, naturally conservative in its ideas and outlook. Consequently they argue that syndicalism was a foreign idea imported from the CGT in France by a few isolated revolutionaries and was always a small movement with little real influence. Other, usually Marxist, historians have conceded that syndicalism did have some influence but was an incoherent idea and was simply the fore-runner of a more sophisticated form of socialism that was to emerge with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. British syndicalism grew out of existing social and economic conditions and the attempts by workers to change those conditions. That is not to say that events in France did not influence the British workers’ movement. After all, there were many similarities between the conditions in both countries. But there were also differences, and these were reflected in the form that the British movement took. This movement was to grow and spread syndicalist ideas throughout the labour movement in the years leading up to the First World War. It is this period in British syndicalism is examined in Unit 6.

## Key points

- During the nineteenth century the trade union leaders in Britain increasingly sought respectability and acceptance by the state
- An increasing number of unskilled workers became unionised in what became known as New Unionism. These unions were often influenced by socialist ideas
- Changes in capital's relationship with the working classes impacted on women, who were seen by the middle-classes and by male trade unionists as;
  - better placed in the home rather than the workplace, and;
  - to blame for the lack of 'managers' (if middle-class) or inferior (if working-class)
- The state attempted to forestall militancy amongst the working class by introducing welfare reforms as a method of social control
- British syndicalism grew out of existing indigenous economic and social conditions but did draw on and adapt ideas from France and the United States
- The return of Tom Mann provided British syndicalism with a major boost due to his prestige within the labour movement.

## Checklist

1. After the end of the Chartist period what were the main characteristics of the growth of British Trade Unions and what were the factors that led to changes?
2. What was New Unionism and how did it differ from earlier trade unionism?
3. How did economic changes affect British capitalists and their attitudes to the working class?
4. What were the main causes of unofficial strikes?
5. Where did British syndicalism draw its inspiration from and what effect did this have on the methods of organisation?
6. Why was the return of Tom Mann important to the British syndicalist movement?

## Answer suggestions

*1. After the end of the Chartist period what were the main characteristics of the growth of British Trade Unions and what were the factors that led to changes?*

The growth in union membership in the mid-late 19<sup>th</sup> century was mainly in craft unions that sought respectability. They wanted to portray themselves as business-like and sober insurance societies and sought a role within capitalism. Improvements in conditions were to be achieved

through industrial conciliation and Union recognition through law changes forced on capitalism by parliamentary lobbying. Economic depression exposed the flaws in this strategy and this, coupled with the increased centralisation of British capitalism and the effects of de-skilling, saw workers becoming increasingly critical of the attitudes of the union bureaucracies. These workers were often influenced by socialist ideas that had witnessed a revival. The great mass of unskilled workers and women were not organised and were largely ignored by the aristocratic craft workers so that, up until the 1880s, there were no permanent established unions for unskilled workers.

*2. What was New Unionism and how did it differ from earlier trade unionism?*

New Unionism was the name given to the formation of general unions that organised unskilled workers and challenged the older 'aristocratic' craft unions. These unions were generally more militant and politicised and less inclined to seek any accommodation with the employers.

*3. How did economic changes affect British capitalists and their attitudes to the working class?*

Increased competition from the high investment economies of Germany and the United States saw profits decreasing. There was also economic depression and low productivity and so the employers tried to find some sort of accommodation with the unions. This led to the spread of bargaining procedures and some welfare reforms aimed at curbing union militancy and encouraging a 'responsible' attitude to industrial relations.

*4. What were the main causes of unofficial strikes?*

There was a growth in union bureaucracy and these bureaucrats, smitten with their new-found status, soon began to take on conservative attitudes. The Union leadership became reluctant to call any strikes that might upset their good relations with the employers. Union recognition and maintaining negotiating rights became an end in itself. As a result, the union officials came to be viewed with suspicion by ordinary union members. They appeared remote and cut off from the shop floor. This, added to the fall in living standards, resulted in the growth of unofficial strikes.

*5. Where did British syndicalism draw its and what effect did this have on the methods of organisation?*

British syndicalism drew on the indigenous anti-state traditions of the British labour movement as well as being influenced by the practices of the French CGT and ideas of Industrial Unionism from the United States. This meant that some syndicalists advocated a dual union approach by setting up revolutionary alternatives to the existing unions. Others sought to influence the existing unions from inside through amalgamations into industrial unions and through the spread of revolutionary propaganda. This however did not exclude many anarcho-syndicalists from working within both groupings.

*6. Why was the return of Tom Mann important to the British syndicalist movement?*

Tom Mann was a well-respected figure in the British trade union movement due to his previous involvement in the formation of the new unions at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While in Australia and New Zealand he had become disillusioned by reformism and parliamentarianism, and become convinced by syndicalist ideas and tactics.

## **Some discussion points**

- What are the similarities and differences between the problems facing the working class at the beginning of the twentieth century and today?

- What relevance do the two strategies of the British syndicalists, dual unionism and ‘boring from within’, have for anarcho-syndicalists in Britain today?
- What does the almost total absence of accounts about or from women in the early stages of British syndicalism either in original source materials or in late twentieth-century histories of the movement say about women’s position in society? What does it say, if anything, about early British syndicalism?

## Further Reading

**Bertrand Russell. Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism. Routledge, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1985 (orig. published in 1918). ISBN 0415098939. £7.50 -AK-** Detailed, readable and comprehensive, not anarcho-syndicalist in perspective but highly recommended as a contemporary, critical and engaging text.

**Bob Holt. British Syndicalism 1900–14. Pluto Press. 1963. ISBN 0904 383229. -LI-** Standard and probably the best all-round labour history book for the period covering Units 5 and 6. Good detail but easily readable and accessible.

**John Quail. The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists. Paladin. ISBN 0586082255. -LI-** The only book of its kind-British Anarchism from an Anarchist point of view-now sadly out of print. If you can find a copy, see especially chapter 13 ‘Anarchism and the Origins of the Syndicalist Revolt, 1889–1910’.

**John Lovell (ed). The World of Labour: G D H Cole. The Harvester Press, 1973 (first published in 1913 by G Bell, London). Part of "Society & The Victorians", no. 11. ISBN 0901 759805. -LI-** Comprehensive and contemporary, as with Russell’s text, this is commendable for the detail of labour history rather than for the anarcho-syndicalist viewpoint.

**Henry Pelling. A History of British Trade Unionism. Penguin. 1963. -LI-** General history of the trade union movement, both reformist and syndicalist, especially useful for the early period.

**Albert Meltzer. First Flight: The Origins of Anarcho-Syndicalism In Britain. KSL pamphlets. £1.00 -AK-** A brief sketch, from Chartism to the 1970s, which gives some context to the pre-war period in Britain.

**The Industrial Syndicalist. Spokesman. ISBN 085124081X. -LI-** Hardbound facsimiles of the famous monthly paper, now getting harder to find in second-hand shops and libraries. Worth the search though, if you are after direct source material.

**Anon. George Cores – Personal Recollections of the Anarchist Past. KSL pamphlets. ISBN 1873605056. £1.00 -AK-** Cores was a shoemaker, and anarchist activist from the 1880s until 1939. This is wide-ranging, but includes brief mentions of the Syndicalist Revolt and after.

**Unofficial Reform Committee of the South Wales Miners Federation. The Miners Next Step. Phoenix Press. ISBN 094898421X. £1.50 -AK-** Published in 1912, this is one of the very few English-language Syndicalist documents produced by workers, for workers, in a particular industry. A “Suggested Scheme for the Reorganisation of the Federation”. With an introduction from NUM activist Dave Douglass.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting

your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

# Unit 6: Revolutionary Syndicalism in Britain and Ireland, 1910–1917

The year 1910 proved to be a turning point in the development of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain, and the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War were a time of major development. During a few short years, a recognisable and co-ordinated movement for revolutionary change emerged and grew rapidly.

This Unit follows on from Unit 5, which described the development of the revolutionary tendencies within the British labour movement over the forty-year period 1870–1910. The conditions that proved to be appropriate for a major burst of revolutionary working class activity around 1910 are also discussed in Unit 5. Here, a more detailed account is presented of the critical 4-year period that followed.

## **This Unit aims to:**

- Analyse the tactics and strategy of the British syndicalists from 1910–1917.
- Look at the extent of syndicalist influence within the working class.
- Examine the impact of the industrial unrest of 1910 – 1914.
- Briefly consider the Irish syndicalist movement.
- Look at the reasons behind the regrouping of the syndicalist movement after 1913.
- Examine the impact on the syndicalist movement of the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.
- Discuss the successes and failures of British revolutionary syndicalism, its theory and tactics.

## **Terms and abbreviations**

**ISEL:** Industrial Syndicalist Education League  
**SWMF:** South Wales Miners' Federation  
**URC:** Unofficial Reform Committee  
**ASRS:** Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants  
**IDL:** Industrial Democracy League  
**BTCC:** Building Trade Consolidation Committee  
**BWIU:** Building Workers' Industrial Union

## Introduction

This Unit follows on from Unit 5, which described the development of the revolutionary tendencies within the British labour movement over the forty-year period 1870–1910. The four years that followed saw an unprecedented wave of industrial unrest sometimes called the Syndicalist Revolt. These years, immediately preceding the First World War, were pivotal in the development of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain, marking the emergence of a recognisable and co-ordinated movement for revolutionary change that was to grow rapidly in numbers and in influence.

## Tactics & Strategy I

The conversion of the prominent activist and former socialist politician Tom Mann to revolutionary syndicalism coincided with a turning point in the development of the movement (see Unit 5). Following a trip to France to visit the CGT (see Unit 4) by Mann and the well-known anarcho-syndicalist Guy Bowman, they launched the British syndicalist newspaper *Industrial Syndicalist* in July 1910. This was followed by the setting up of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) in January 1911. The ISEL and *Industrial Syndicalist* were important in that they drew together what had formerly been a scattered revolutionary syndicalist movement. The ISEL was also able to attract considerable support from outside the established syndicalist organisations, drawing activists from the wider trade union movement. The ISEL was an immediate success, part of which can be attributed to its adoption of a ‘boring from within’ strategy. With this strategy it envisaged growth through working within, and changing, the existing reformist unions, rather than the ‘dual union’ option of developing entirely new, revolutionary unions (see Unit 5). The ISEL acted as a propaganda group that sought to win over existing unions to syndicalism, and thus managed to expose syndicalist ideas to a far greater audience. The ISEL argued that the flaw in the dual unionist strategy that had been advocated by some syndicalist organisations up until this time was that it isolated syndicalist activists in the workplace.

The adoption of the ‘boring from within’ approach did result in some syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists refusing to become involved in the work of the ISEL. The SLP-BAIU, though present at the ISEL conferences, did largely boycott the organisation and became a constant critic of the League and Mann in particular. The SLP member and Durham miner George Harvey argued that what he referred to, as ‘Tom Mannism’ was “*nothing more than a federation of trade unionism on anti-political lines, whereas Industrial Unions were both political and industrial, having definite aims and methods.*” This charge was consistently levelled against the ‘boring from within’ approach to revolutionary syndicalism, and has been since by successive left-wing political historians.

How well founded are these charges? Well, the ISEL was certainly not an anarcho-syndicalist organisation. Its main attraction at the time was its core argument that workers had to organise into fighting industrial unions, based on the methods of direct action. These were the main concepts put forward and accepted by the delegates attending the ISEL founding conference. The arguments had considerable merit, given the ineffectiveness of the unions at the time and the fact that there were some 1100 unions in Britain, often competing with each other for members. However, the ISEL went beyond merely being an organisation arguing for greater union amalgamation and more direct action. As demonstrated by views of the *Industrial Syndicalist* at the time, there was considerable attention given to the necessity of linking industrial unionism with

the need for revolutionary change. Writing in the very first issue of *Industrial Syndicalist*, Mann made clarified Industrial Unionism by stating:

*“...the new general federation of workers of trade unions, which will unite all workers as a class, will be avowedly and clearly revolutionary in aim and method... revolutionary in aim, because it will be out for the abolition of the wage...thereby seeking to change the system of society from capitalist to socialist.”*

Amongst those historians attempting to cast British syndicalism of the period as reformist, much has been made of the issue of linking commitment for the need to limit state control with support for limited parliamentary action. Undoubtedly, initially, Mann and others still saw some role for socialist parties and parliamentary action. But by 1911, he had rejected the idea of state control of industry, declaring that syndicalism “means the control of industry by syndicates or union of workers in the interest of the entire community...”.

By 1912, Mann rejected parliamentary action outright, declaring, “political action is no use whatsoever”. In the same year, he charged himself with “foolishness in the past in looking to parliament for labour’s emancipation”. Though he was never completely convinced of the ideas of anarchism, there is little doubt that by 1914 Mann was very close to being, if not in all-but-name, an anarcho-syndicalist.

It would be a mistake to fall into the trap of equating the ISEL and Mann as one and the same. Within the ISEL, there were many experienced activists who, from the outset, clearly espoused anarcho- syndicalist ideas. For instance Allen, who had already written a pamphlet on revolutionary unions (see Unit 5), wrote in *Industrial Syndicalist* in 1910:

*“The industrial union is destined to become the most powerful instrument in the class struggle by showing the workers’ class how to hold in check the rapacity of their masters...by the direct pressure of their collective economic strength; which power reaches its highest expression in the complete paralysis of the whole of the functions of capitalist society by means of the general strike...a strike aimed at the direct and forcible expropriation of capitalism.”*

In fact, while the majority of those active within the ISEL did not start out as anarcho-syndicalists, the ISEL and British syndicalism in general were driven by prevailing economic and social conditions towards anarcho-syndicalism. Certainly, by the outbreak of the First World War, this journey was virtually complete. In this, Mann and the ISEL reflected large sections of the British working class. Faced with an increasingly better organised capitalist system, increasingly reformist unions unable to defend basic rights, and various socialist organisations who were ineffectual and virtually ignored the day to day economic struggle, many workers came to reject parliamentarianism and adopt the idea of direct action and workers’ control as an alternative. When faced with the working class unrest of 1910–1914, the state and capitalism were quick to drop their new found tolerance to trade unionism and unleash a wave of brutal repression. This had the immediate effect of awakening the latent anti-state sentiments within the working class, drawing more of them towards the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

## **Class Action**

As early as 1910, anger at falling wages and disillusionment with trade unions was already widespread. It led to an explosion of mainly unofficial strike actions that dominated British activism for the next 4 years. In the period 1910–14, some 10 million working days per year were



lost through strike action, and unions swelled from 2.1 million to 4.1 million members. Many of the strikes were unofficial and marked by their insurgent character, often resulted in civil unrest, and quickly began to pose a direct threat to the state. Outright defiance of police, magistrates and the military became a way of life for many workers.

Although the period of industrial unrest is usually dated from September 1910, with the beginning of the Cambrian Combine Strike in South Wales, there is evidence that tension had been growing in the years before this. The period of industrial peace that had begun in 1899 really ended in 1908. That year saw major disputes in the cotton, engineering and shipbuilding industries caused by imposed wage reductions and lockouts. In 1909–10 the north east of England witnessed a series of strikes by the boilermakers in the shipyards. In January 1910 the traditionally moderate Durham miners went on strike against an agreement already signed by their union. These disputes acted as a prelude to the full-scale working class revolt that was to begin in South Wales in September 1910.

## **South Wales Miners**

It was among the mining communities of South Wales that the first major wave of sustained strike action occurred. At first, the grievances were centred on wages and conditions in the mines of the Cambrian Combine. However, the strike took on an increasingly insurrectionary nature as it progressed. Syndicalist influence grew steadily. At least three syndicalists were active on the strike committee (Rees, Mainwaring and Smith), and well-known syndicalist miners, such as Ablett and Hay, helped to spread the dispute throughout Wales. Meanwhile, Mann and other ISEL members were frequent visitors to the area. The influence of syndicalist ideas was given added impetus due to the fact that the strike remained unofficial. The South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) refused to abandon its policy of conciliation as a means of settling coalfield grievances. Left-wing party political support for the strike was non-existent; indeed, the Socialist MPs consistently denounced it in Parliament.

The strikers used militant tactics such as mass picketing throughout the strike. Mass picketing was used against blackleg labour and trains carrying scabs were stopped and the scabs ordered off and sent home. Attacks took place on any collieries still operating and attempts were made to sabotage power houses kept going by the management. Physical and verbal attacks on mine managers were common and, on at least one occasion, an attempt was made to blow up a mine manager's house. In response, the state unleashed a wave of brutal oppression not seen since Luddism. Troops and police were drafted in as large areas of South Wales came under martial law. Clashes between strikers and the state forces were common, with troops even resorting to charging workers with fixed bayonets. The strike lasted ten months and ended in defeat for the miners. The death and injury toll was also considerable; by the strike's end, four strikers had been shot dead, one had died of bayonet wounds and countless men and women had been injured.

However, the strike was not entirely in vain, not least because the demand for a minimum wage for miners emerged from it — a demand that was to be taken up by miners nationally in 1912. A campaign to reconstruct the SWMF on fighting lines also emerged from the dispute, centred on the syndicalist-inclined Unofficial Reform Committee (URC), which argued for a realignment of the policy structure and ideological orientation of the union along syndicalist lines. The growth

of the URC reflected the growing strength of syndicalist ideas among South Wales miners, which led to the election of Noah Ablett and Noah Rees to the executive committee of the SWMF.

The work of the URC led to the publication of *The Miners' Next Step* in early 1911. This pamphlet was to become highly influential and represents the one of the clearest commitments of the working class to the cause of revolutionary syndicalism. It was drafted by Hay and Mainwaring before being sent out for discussion by miners' lodges. After further alterations, the pamphlet was placed before a conference in Cardiff.

*The Miners' Next Step* is of importance because it clearly demonstrates that a large section of South Wales miners had broken with reformism and state socialism. The pamphlet argued for a democratically controlled union, rejected the idea of nationalisation or state control of the mines and called instead for direct workers' control of industry. It explained that this would come about by an escalating campaign of militant industrial action, based on irritation strikes, lightning stoppages and sabotage. According to *The Miners' Next Step* this campaign would culminate in a final conflict with capitalism that would lead to the establishment of a co-operative commonwealth based on industrial democracy and common ownership.

The publication of *The Miners' Next Step* proved a considerable boost to the cause of syndicalism. By summer 1911, Welsh "missionaries" were sent to all the main coalfields in Britain to publicise syndicalist ideas and distribute *The Miners' Next Step*, paving the way for the national miners' strike, which was to break out the following year.

## Transport Workers

In summer 1911, unrest was already spreading from the miners to the transport industry, the dockyards and railways. The pace gathered between June and September, by which time largely unofficial and often violent strike action was felt in all main British ports and throughout the railway network. The disputes originated with a strike by seaman in Southampton, which spread quickly to Hull, Goole, Manchester and Liverpool. A strike committee was set up in Liverpool, which Tom Mann participated in. Mann's presence in Liverpool injected a syndicalist perspective into the dispute, as he argued for a direct actionist anti-state, anti-parliamentary, revolutionary approach. Addressing 3,000 strikers at Canning Place he said,

*"Seamen had tried to induce parliament to consider their case and rectify some of their grievances...but in effect had been told 'to go to the devil' ...they had approached individual ship owners and government departments and the board of trade and were given the same message... The board...was a body of permanent officials drawn from the capitalist set who administered in the interests of ship owners. The Board of Trade is the enemy of the seaman. The only way to remedy the situation was by direct action."*

The dispute soon spread to the dockers, who were at the time mainly employed by the ship owners. At first dockers came out in sympathy but soon put forward their own demands. Other groups of workers employed in ancillary jobs such as factories and processing plants joined the dispute. In Glasgow, police guarding the premises of the Clyde Shipping Company were attacked. George Askwith, the government's chief industrial conciliator, was given the task of resolving the conflict but, as he discovered the strikers, "had new leaders, men unknown before; the employers did not know how to deal with them." He reported the revolutionary mood in Hull with the total

hostility to the mediation of union officials. As Askwith later wrote, when he finally reached a settlement with the union leaders and it was brought before a meeting of fifteen thousand,

*“They announced the settlement; and before it was my turn to speak, an angry roar of ‘No!’ rang out – and ‘let’s fire the docks! I heard a town councillor remark that he had been in Paris during the Commune and had never seen anything like this ...he had not known that there were such people in Hull – women with their hair streaming and half nude, reeling through the streets, smashing and destroying...”*

Mass picketing techniques were widely used in Hull to spread the dispute. Attacks were also made on the offices of ship owners and on local Labour exchanges operated by the Shipping Federation. In response, troops and police were rushed into the area.

Apart from Hull there was militant rank and file action in most of the main ports. On Merseyside, where the organised syndicalist presence was particularly strong, Tom Mann had been invited to lead the strike effort at an early stage. Here his own standing was enhanced by his fiery and unequivocal hostility to the Shipping Federation.

The seamen and dockers strike ended in early July with a partial victory. However, no sooner had the strike ended than further strikes were called by London dockers, hitherto unaffected by the dispute. The London ports were booming at the time, and the port authorities, anxious not to have a reoccurrence of Hull, made significant concessions that were accepted by the unions. Still, rank and file activists, including a number of syndicalists, argued for continuation of the strike. Unofficial action was organised and strikes quickly spread until the docks were paralysed. Militants led the campaign for direct action. Prominent amongst them was Ted Leggat, a committed anarcho-syndicalist, who traditionally began his speeches with, “I’m Ted Leggat, the anarchist.” As food rapidly became scarce in the capital, the government intervened and Askwith was called in to mediate, with further concessions being won from the government.

## **Merseyside**

Just as the dockers strike ended, strikes began on the railways. Wages and conditions were particularly bad in this sector; it was not uncommon, for example, for rail workers to work straight 36-hour shifts. Workers had become fed up with the Conciliation Boards, set up in 1907, which had proven slow moving and ineffective.

The strike began on Merseyside, where 1,000 rail workers walked out in favour of higher wages and an end to conciliation in early August 1911. They had been encouraged to walk out by the Liverpool strike committee, which was still functioning even though the seamen’s strike was over. Within 5 days, the unofficial strike had spread to include some 15,000 railway workers and a further 8,000 dockers, who came out in sympathy. Within a week, the ship-owners imposed a general lock-out. This prompted the strike committee to call for an all-out strike by transport workers in Liverpool. Within days, over 70,000 transport and other workers were out on strike, and Liverpool was brought to a standstill.

A system of official permits was introduced, granting employers permission to move goods. The Post Office and many major companies were forced to apply to the strikers for permits. A real sense of the workers taking over the running of industry began to take hold. The transport permit system was seen as a real threat to the legitimacy of state power, implying an alternative form of social order based on priorities determined by the working class. The state was not slow to

react to this challenge. Some 3,000 troops and large numbers of police were drafted in. Gunboats were also sent to Merseyside, with guns trained on working class areas. A civil service corps made up mainly of middle classes was formed to act as strike-breakers in carrying out the jobs of transport workers and municipal workers who had joined the strike.

The strike brought a sense of solidarity for the working people of Merseyside. It also polarised class feeling as the working class backed the strikers against the middle classes and police authorities. The resultant heightened class solidarity even overcame the traditional sectarian hatred between Catholics and Protestants. As Fred Bower, a Liverpool syndicalist stonemason, later recalled in his memoirs, the sectarian divide was crossed as class solidarity took precedence. Of a demonstration organised by Mann in support of the strikers, which he participated in, he noted:

*“The Garston Band had walked five miles and their drum major proudly whirled his sceptre twined with orange and green ribbon as he led his contingent half out of the Roman Catholic, half out of the local orange band.”*

This demonstration, at which religious differences were temporarily overcome, was to prove a turning point. It was held on August 15<sup>th</sup> as a peaceful show of solidarity. The authorities unleashed a brutal attack on the 80,000 demonstrators, and thousands of police and mounted troops left large numbers of adults and children injured.

The attacks proved too much, even for the capitalist press. The Guardian described the attacks as a “..display of violence that horrified those who saw it”. Even after the demonstration was dispersed, the state forces pursued the unarmed families through the Liverpool streets, attacking them at will. However, when the pursuing forces followed people into working class areas, they were met with resistance. As the Liverpool Daily Post described;

*“..the residents took sides with the rioters against the Police, throwing bottles, bricks slates and stones from the houses and the roofs...bedding was set alight, so as to render the road impassable to the mounted police.”*

The battles between police and working class communities continued for several days of what The Times described as “guerrilla warfare”. In one of the more serious incidents, an attempt to free two “rioters” from a police van was met with characteristic panic by the troops, who shot two striking dockers dead and left several men and women injured, fifteen of whom were admitted to hospital.

The strike in Liverpool ended after the employers made significant concessions to the strikers. However, the wider influence of syndicalism was considerable, both during and after the strike. Strong solidarity and industrial unionism had been the driving forces behind the dispute, even enabling workers to overcome occupational and sectarian differences. The strike committee, run on syndicalist principles, had been the main co-ordinating body during the dispute. The permit system set up by the strike committee moved the strike closer to the concept of workers taking direct control of the running of society. Throughout the dispute, activists hammered the unequivocal syndicalist message home. To quote one leaflet produced by syndicalists during the dispute; “..the culminating object of the workers should be the capture of the means of production”.

In the wake of the Liverpool strike, a new monthly syndicalist journal, Transport Worker, was set up. By October, it already had a circulation of over 20,000 in the Merseyside area, and local syndicalist street and public meetings had become a regular feature.

The Liverpool dispute cast its influence across the country. Many trade unionists began joining the syndicalists, and an increasing number of Social Democratic Federation (SDF — see Unit 5) members were won over to syndicalism. This coincided with the SDFs increasingly reformist po-

sition, concentrating its activities on electoral politics and virtually ignoring trade union struggle. Syndicalism was now the only movement in Britain advocating revolutionary change.

## **Nationwide Rail Dispute**

In addition to the impact that the strike had in Liverpool there was a much wider knock-on effect as rail workers in other areas joined the dispute. Unofficial action in Hull, Bristol, Swansea and Manchester forced the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS – the main rail union) to call a national stoppage of all its members. Within days, all the rail unions had joined the stoppage, resulting in the first ever national rail dispute. The demands were centred on pay, length of the working week and an end to conciliation.

The national and general nature of the rail strike led rapidly to a new, strong sense of industrial unity among workers who, in the past, had been fragmented by sectional or regional interests. There was also a shift towards militancy in an industry where workers had hitherto had a reputation for moderation. Organised attacks occurred on parts of the railways still working. At Portishead, Bristol, over 1,000 workers launched an attack on a working signal box. Tracks were torn up and telegraph systems damaged. The military and police intervened, and the violence intensified. In Derby, troops were ordered in to defend the railway station, resulting in pitched battles, with the troops resorting to bayonet charges to repulse unarmed workers.

Reminiscent of the recent miners' strike, state brutality was particularly ferocious in South Wales. In Llanelli, troops were ordered to open fire on workers occupying a level crossing, leaving two dead. Many more were wounded as the troops followed up their attacks with a bayonet charge. The two killed were tin-plate makers who had come out in support of the rail workers – an indication of the extent of growing working class solidarity. Indeed, such solidarity was widespread. Sympathy strikes even broke out among school children in many railway centres (62 strikes by school children were recorded at the time).

In late August, fearful of the militancy of the workforce, union leaders called off the strike, and agreed to a Royal Commission, before which all the grievances were to be put. This move by union bosses caused widespread anger among rail workers, and many initially refused to return to work. In due course, the Commission decided to keep the conciliation system intact, albeit in a modified form. More workers' anger led to a ballot for a second strike, and further concessions were squeezed from the employers, as union leaders reached agreement with the employers without the ballot result being disclosed. The decision to come to an agreement caused yet more discontent among workers and over 100 branches of ASRS passed motions condemning the decision.

The syndicalist influence in the national rail strike helped pave the way for an industrial union of rail workers, and the National Union of Railworkers (NUR) was duly established in 1913. A new paper, *The Syndicalist Railwayman*, was launched, in opposition to the official *Railway Review*, and syndicalist activists were elected onto the ASRS executive. An indication of the syndicalist influence can be gauged from motions put before the annual union conference in 1911, which included calls for workers to take direct control of “the productive and distributive forces of society” and construct an “industrial commonwealth”. Another motion calling for an immediate end to “all conciliation schemes, which are imposed on the workers by the employing classes and

its capitalist backers, the state” was defeated by 37 votes to 19. As in the mines, syndicalism on the railways had made considerable ground in a very short length of time.

## Nationwide Miners’ Dispute

The next nationwide industrial dispute was in coal mining. The strike centred on a minimum wage for miners — a demand that dated back to the South Wales miners’ dispute. The Welsh miners’ efforts in touring meetings in coalfield areas and selling *The Miners’ Next Step* (the original 5,000 print run quickly sold out) arguably influenced the decision to call a national strike.

Even before the strike, the build up was enough to cause near panic among the British ruling elite. Troops were rapidly deployed to coalfield areas in response to a deluge of requests from local chief constables, magistrates and mine owners. Many units were issued with swords in case of hand-to-hand fighting, and arms were recalled from Territorial Army depots because of fears that the territorials might side with striking workers. Barricades were built around mine owners and managers’ houses. Even the massive military build up was thought to be inadequate. As Askwith remarked; “there are only 80,000 troops available for the purpose and the Territorials cannot be trusted”.

The syndicalist response to the military build up was to launch an anti-militarist campaign, centred on a leaflet entitled “Don’t Shoot”, written by a Liverpool building worker. Workers’ papers took up the cause and the campaign was publicised by Jim Larkin in *The Irish Worker* and by *The Syndicalist* (which had replaced *Industrial Syndicalist* as the paper of the growing ISEL). One issue of the latter carried an article by Ricardo Magon, a Mexican anarcho- syndicalist, who argued that the rifle that now served the capitalist could equally serve the workers.

Other workers took up these pleas. For example, in Ilkeston, Derbyshire, the monthly journal *Dawn* called for resistance against the civil power stating;

*“If blood has to be shed, I do not see why it should always be the workers’ blood... The master class has got everything in their own hands; they manipulate the political machinery. They are backed up by police and soldiers, by press and pulpit.”*

The impending strike action and anti-militarist syndicalist propaganda threw the ruling class into panic. Syndicalist dissidents were arrested. These included the militants from Ilkeston and Fred Crowsley, a railwayman who had distributed the Don’t Shoot leaflet outside Aldershot barracks. Some of the more prominent included Mann and Bowman, both of whom were sentenced to six months in prison under the Incitement to Mutiny Act 1797. This caused immediate outrage throughout the labour movement, and gave yet further publicity to the syndicalists. Indeed, the strength of syndicalism amongst miners is indicated by the numerous calls during the strike to make the release of Mann and Bowman part of the terms of any settlement.

After the build-up, the miners’ strike of 1912 was relatively peaceful compared with other disputes of the time. A Parliament fearful of unrest rushed through legislation agreeing in principle with a minimum wage for miners (though it did not set a rate). Nevertheless, the miners voted against this solution and for continued strike action, only to have their wishes overturned by union leaders, who ordered a return to work. As in the rail dispute, this caused outrage among rank and file workers, and many at first refused to return to work. This blatant sell-out by union leaders led to further increase in syndicalist influence following the strike, as syndicalist organisa-

tions swelled amidst calls for a revolutionary industrial miners' union based on the ideas outlined advocated in *The Miners' Next Step*.

## **Tactics and Strategy II**

By the end of 1912, syndicalism had become a household word. *The Syndicalist* had a monthly circulation of well over 20,000. There was growing tactical cohesion of revolutionary syndicalist ideas. The central aim was working class control of the social system, to be brought about by industrial unions through the use of the general strike. The first moves were being made to develop the ISEL from a propaganda organisation to a more formally constituted syndicalist organisation with a constitution and open direct democratic structure. Local branches were established and were active in all key industrial areas, especially London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Coventry. Prominent syndicalists helped spread revolutionary industrial ideas by speaking at many trade union branches and socialist groups.

However, 1913 saw the ISEL split tactically around the issue of trade union strategy and the proper organisational form of the revolutionary syndicalist movement. Those who supported 'boring from within' argued that syndicalists should aim to reconstruct existing unions on revolutionary lines while others, led by Guy Bowman, abandoned the traditional ISEL policy and united with those who envisaged the 'dual unionist' approach. The former group, including Mann, left the ISEL, while the latter, continued with the ISEL name. The dual unionists felt that the ISEL had lacked a clear-cut revolutionary identity and was submerged in radical wage militancy. The split fractured the growing revolutionary movement and, although the ISEL continued, it had less influence. Circulation of *The Syndicalist* fell, the number of pages were cut from 8 to 4, and it appeared less often.

The 'boring from within' split from the ISEL formed the Industrial Democracy League (IDL), with initial prominent members including Mann, Hay and Ablett, and the well-known anarcho-syndicalist activist Jack Tanner. The IDL had more success than the dual unionist ISEL and by 1914 syndicalism was regaining organisational strength. The IDL paper *Solidarity* steadily increased circulation over the next two years.

While it caused a short-term hiatus, the split did not prove the great hindrance to the spread of syndicalism that might have been expected. Syndicalist influence continued to grow on the railways, with both Mann and Bowman being regular speakers at branch meetings across the country. The creation of the NUR in 1913 boosted the syndicalist movement, and the 1914 annual conference was dominated by calls to end conciliation and adopt direct action methods towards the industry being directly controlled by workers. Similarly, in the mines, South Wales' syndicalists worked within the Plebs League and in producing the highly influential paper *The South Wales Worker*. Syndicalism also began to challenge the lib-lab dominance of the Durham Miners' Association, while the Yorkshire coalfield became a centre of syndicalist activity by the outbreak of the First World War.

## **Engineering Workers**

In 1913, revolutionary syndicalism began to gain ground in other sectors of industry, starting in engineering. Grievances among engineering workers had been growing for some time, espe-

cially in the largely female unskilled workforce, where women were generally paid half the adult male wages. Indeed, it was in this sector that a strike broke out in the Black Country in 1913. The strikers were organised in the Workers' Union, specifically formed to organise non-craft engineering workers in 1898. The strike took a militant course, with widespread pickets and sabotage attacks on factories. Troops and police were drafted in to break the dispute, while Mann toured the area on the invitation of the strikers. Support and solidarity from syndicalists in other areas significantly increased support for syndicalism within the Workers' Union, especially among West Midland Branches.

Syndicalism also grew within the Engineering Amalgamation Committee, the secretary of which was Jack Turner, now a member of the IDL. He and other syndicalists aimed to establish a network of further local amalgamation committees that would unite engineers from the various unions into one propagandist organisation. By early 1914, these had indeed been established in all the main engineering and metal work centres and led to a hitherto unknown level of co-operation between craft workers and semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

While not all workers within the amalgamation movement were syndicalists, the important role of syndicalism is demonstrated by the popularity of the pamphlet *One Union for Metal, Engineering and Shipbuilding Workers*, written by the syndicalists Watson and Young (editor of *Solidarity*). The pamphlet sold 10,000 copies within the first 10 weeks, and the influence continued to spread and grow, even within the craft-dominated unions.

## **Building Workers**

The building trade was another sector that saw rapid growth of syndicalist ideas and practice in the build up to the First World War. As elsewhere, there had been a syndicalist presence prior to 1912, with many active ISEL members in the building trade. However, this gathered pace with the growing amalgamation movement and the Building Trade Consolidation Committee (BTCC) established close links with the ISEL by 1912. The syndicalist influence in the building trade was given direction by these close links. This syndicalist influence was especially concentrated in the London area, where there was an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, the William Morris Socialist Club.

The BTCC called for an industrial union for all building workers, regardless of trade and, in 1913, building workers voted for the amalgamation by 31,541 to 12,156. The leaders of the various builders unions, who had set up the vote as a way of diffusing the issue, chose to ignore the result. There followed a rash of unofficial strikes, especially in the London area. At a meeting in December 1913, the employers warned the unions that if they could not discipline their own members and stop the rash of unofficial disputes, they would take action themselves. True to their word, they duly called a lock-out which affected some 40,000 building workers. The response of some union leaders was to blame the unofficial strikers. Organisation of the dispute was taken over by the syndicalists around the BTCC. This was no surprise — they had already organised numerous mass meetings, publicised the key issues through the pages of *Solidarity*, and especially written and distributed a syndicalist manifesto.

As soon as the lock-out was declared, a special branch delegates conference was organised, and rank and file control of the dispute secured. Assurances were made that any agreement would be put to a ballot of all building workers and that no union would negotiate separately.



Two attempts by union leaders to end the dispute in the first weeks were heavily defeated by 23,481 votes to 2,021 and 21,017 votes to 5,824 respectively. On the streets, it was marked by non-violence, mainly because there was virtually no scabbing.

After five months, employers offered a number of concessions, only to see their offer turned down by the strikers by 21,000 votes to 9,000. This proved too much for some union leaders, and they began to break ranks. Outraged building workers sent a flood of resolutions to union offices, and a mass meeting of 7,000 was organised in Trafalgar Square, at which no union leaders were allowed to speak. Nevertheless, the union leaders had effectively sold out the workers again, by cracking open the unity of the union organisations in the dispute.

The blatant undermining of the dispute by the union leaders led to a radical rethink by syndicalist building workers. The majority, previously committed to working within existing unions, decided to form a new revolutionary building workers' union, The Building Workers' Industrial Union (BWIU). This was an immediate success, with four existing building workers' unions immediately joining. During the next few months, the BWIU grew steadily, especially in Liverpool and London, where syndicalist presence among building workers was already strong. The growth of the BWIU was only halted by the outbreak of the First World War.

## **Irish Syndicalism**

In Ireland, as in Britain, the influence of syndicalism had grown since the turn of the century. Activists who had clear syndicalist leanings were household names by 1912, including Jim Larkin and his sister Delia, who was particularly active in the women workers' movement, and James Connolly. However, it must be noted that special conditions had developed in Ireland through the merciless oppression of Irish people by the British state, and that republicanism was therefore a dominant political current at the time. In addition, most prominent activists never broke completely with the idea of parliamentary action and a socialist party. Connolly was influenced by the ideas of de Leon (see Unit 5), and was instrumental in the formation of the Socialist Labour Party. Nevertheless, syndicalism was a major force in Ireland, and this force was felt in full during the Dublin Lock-Out of 1913–14.

The episode started when, in a bid to crush the growing militancy of the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union (ITGWU), 25,000 workers were locked out by management. As in Britain, the events were marked by brutal repression. At a demonstration following the arrest of Jim Larkin by the increasingly panicked state forces, police clubbed two workers to death and left over 400 injured.

In Britain, while the official union movement limited their solidarity to sending money, the rank and file members were prepared to go much further. In September 1913, over 10,000 rail-workers were involved in the blockading of Irish goods in support of the Irish workers. This action was entirely unofficial, being organised by local strike committees, and almost became a national sympathy strike after the employers sacked local activists for refusing to work normally. This led to a rapid spread of local strikes in protest at the sackings.

A return to work was secured by the union leaders, with vague promises of a renewal of action to be organised by the union. However, this never occurred, and further isolated sympathetic actions continued over the next few months. In South Wales, there was a mass walk-out of rail workers after two drivers were sacked for refusing to handle Irish goods. In many areas, union

leaders were struggling to keep workers from going out in support of their Irish comrades. Harry Orwell, a dockers' union official, declared:

*"We have had to rearrange the whole of our paid officials in London, placing them in certain centres with the express purpose of preventing any disorganised move. It has been with the greatest trouble, and some of us have received strong words, that we have so far held the men in check."*

Larkin embarked on a speaking tour in Britain, and 24,000 people in Manchester turned out to hear him speak. Similar numbers heard him speak alongside Connelly and the American Syndicalist Bill Haywood with over 7,000 turning out in Edinburgh, and a further 4,000 in Glasgow. These numbers demonstrate both the support for the Irish workers and the significance of the syndicalist movement in Scotland at the time. As Larkin's tour gathered momentum, his message became more explicit. In the past, he had limited himself to attacking the conciliatory trade unions and union leaders and calling for the organisation of "One Big Union" in order "to use our economic power for our salvation". At a meeting in Sheffield, chaired by Barton, a local syndicalist, his message that workers should "arm themselves" was met with sound applause. He also began to stress that working class organisation should have a strong social dimension.

At a special TUC conference called to discuss the dispute in Ireland the TUC leaders overwhelmingly cast their unions' votes against sympathetic action despite the support from the rank and file. In January 1914, with strikers beginning to return to work, Larkin, with no official support from Britain, was forced to declare the dispute lost. However, the ITGWU continued to grow, and the strike had radicalised the Irish workers' movement towards syndicalism. The 1914 Irish Congress of Trade Unions, chaired by Larkin, voted for the abolition of the capitalist system and supported specific plans for militant action. Though it did not rule out parliamentary action, it maintained that industrial organisation was a necessary pre-condition for effective political action, a position very near to both Connelly and Larkin's proposals.

## **The First World War**

The growing popularity and gathering organisational momentum of syndicalism was ended by the outbreak of war in 1914. Just prior to the war, the British economy was entering a downturn that was already forcing wages down and seeing a rise in unemployment. At the same time, the new excessively brutal state policy towards the syndicalist movement was causing heightened working class resentment and swelling the syndicalist organisations. In 1920, Ernest Bevin recalled the pre-war period:

*"It was a period which, if the war had not broken out would have, I believe, seen one of the greatest industrial revolts the world ever had seen."*

The wider issue of the political manoeuvring that led to the outbreak of war is outside the scope of this Unit but the timing dealt a crushing blow to workers' unrest across Europe. In the event, it had the desired effect. The forces of the state and the mass hysteria that greeted the outbreak of the war stopped the syndicalist movement in its tracks.

British syndicalists as a whole opposed the war from the outset. For this, they faced constant harassment from the police and organised mobs, which broke up syndicalist meetings. Prominent organisers were often the first to be forcibly enlisted and disappeared or were killed in action. By 1916–17, however, war weariness was growing and militancy was again on the rise. At the same time, the Russian revolution appeared to offer a major breakthrough for the workers of the

world. Many syndicalists were drawn to Marxist- Leninism, and this damaged any real hope of a revival of syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism after the war. The central ideas of syndicalism, such as direct action and workers' control, did not sink without trace. In fact, they continued to play a role in revolutionary thinking after the war, as we shall see in later units.

## **Conclusion**

The Industrial Syndicalist Education League, set up in January 1911, played a major role in shaping working class resistance to capitalism in Britain over a period of several years. The ISEL was certainly not an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, but its core argument was that workers had to organise into industrial fighting unions based on the methods of direct action. In the face of state oppression, British syndicalism grew rapidly into a mass workers' movement, which took on an increasingly revolutionary anarchist nature, and was only stopped by the outbreak of the First World War. Many of the criticisms levelled at this crucial chapter in British labour history are ill founded. Far from being concerned only with pay and conditions, it always contained and maintained a strong and overt revolutionary message. It was acutely aware of the need for politics and theory as a basis for effective strategy and action, and it rapidly developed a sophisticated analysis of the state, becoming increasingly anarchist as a result. With hindsight, this episode of British syndicalism was a crucial forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism, not least because it indicated the importance of community-based organisation alongside workplace organisation. This development, however, was not to occur until well after the First World War, and it did not surface in Britain.

## **Key points**

- The launch of the Industrial Syndicalist in 1910 and the formation of the ISEL in 1911 brought together the British syndicalist movement for the first time
- The ISEL grew through adopting the tactic of 'boring from within' rather the dual unionist strategy in regard to the existing trade unions
- Industrial unrest had begun to grow in 1908 and exploded during the years 1910 – 1914
- At key points during this period the actions of the union leadership often undermined the effectiveness of strikes and workers' solidarity
- Anger at falling wages and disillusionment with the union leaders proved a fertile ground for syndicalist ideas
- Syndicalism was based on the day-to-day struggle of the workers and not based on an amorphous theoretical model
- Industrial unrest was marked by a high degree of class conflict and widespread solidarity in industries and in the communities
- The outbreak of war in 1914 broke the momentum of syndicalism.

## Checklist

1. What were the differences between 'boring from within' and 'dual unionist' approaches?
2. Why did the ISEL prove more successful than previous syndicalist organisation?
3. In what ways did the development of Irish syndicalism differ from that in Britain?
4. What were the main features of the industrial unrest of 1910- 1914?
5. In which ways did the split within the ISEL affect British syndicalism?
6. What are the main reasons for the decline of British syndicalism at the end of the period 1910–1914?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the differences between 'boring from within' and 'dual unionist' approaches?*

'Boring from within' was an approach whereby syndicalists worked within existing unions in order to change their structures and practices through participation and example. 'Dual unionists' argued that the existing unions could not be reformed and therefore separate revolutionary unions should be set up as alternatives.

### *2. Why did the ISEL prove more successful than previous syndicalist organisation?*

The ISEL brought together the majority of British syndicalists and rank and file union militants in one organisation and was seen as an integral part of union activity. This strengthened solidarity amongst and between syndicalists and union members.

### *3. In what ways did the development of Irish syndicalism differ from that in Britain?*

Irish syndicalism developed alongside Irish republicanism and was more heavily influenced by the ideas of Daniel de Leon. For these reasons it never fully broke away from the idea of parliamentary action.

### *4. What were the main features of the industrial unrest of 1910- 1914?*

The industrial unrest of this period was marked by a high level of solidarity, community involvement in strikes and sabotage. It was also marked by state repression in the form of violence and coercion. During this period, British syndicalist speakers travelled around the country, speaking to encourage strikers and sympathisers and spreading the ideas of syndicalism.

### *5. In which ways did the split in the ISEL affect British syndicalism?*

The split in 1913 saw a minority of ISEL members turning to dual unionism due to their frustration with union leaders. This saw the majority form the Industrial Democracy League and continue the policy of 'boring from within'. After a short hiatus, British syndicalism continued its growth in numbers and influence.

### *6. What are the main reasons for the decline of British syndicalism at the end of the period 1910–1914?*

The outbreak of the First World War resulted in heightened state repression of anti-war organisations, amongst which was British syndicalism. Later the influence of the Russian revolution diverted the attentions and energies of many syndicalists. World War I provided the British government with an opportunity to get rid of prominent syndicalists, many of whom were forcibly enlisted, then 'disappeared', or were killed at the front.

## Some discussion points

- Are the approaches of ‘dual unionism’ and ‘boring from within’ still relevant for the twenty-first century?
- What do you think were the major weaknesses in the British syndicalist movement of this period and what lessons can we take from these today?
- Was British syndicalism, as suggested by many historians, lacking in a theoretical basis?
- It has been argued that a syndicalist inspired general strike would have occurred had it not been for the outbreak of WW1. What are the difficulties of speculating on what might have happened?

## Further Reading

Many of the further reading sources quoted in Unit 5 also cover the period and events discussed in this Unit. Therefore, refer generally to these in addition to the more Unit 6-specific sources quoted below.

**John Laurent (ed.). Tom Mann’s Social and Economic Writings. Spokesman. ISBN 0851 244688. £7.95 -AK-** A collection of Mann’s writings showing his political development from the emergent socialist movement in the 1880s, his time in Australia, and through ‘new’ unionism to Syndicalism, up to around 1915–16. Includes ‘The 8-Hour Day’.

**John Quail. The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists. Paladin. ISBN 0586082255. -LI-** The only book of its kind – British Anarchism from an Anarchist point of view, now sadly out of print. If you can find a copy, see especially chapter 14 ‘The Insurgent Virus’.

**Wilf McCartney. Dare To Be A Daniel: A History Of One Of Britain’s Earliest Syndicalist Unions. KSL pamphlets. £1.00 – AK-** Memoirs of an activist in the, pre-First World War, Cooks Syndicate. 38 strikes fought, 38 won! Here is a little gem, an easily read pamphlet which gives a case study commentary on an episode of struggle and the ‘down-tools’ methods that were found to be so successful.

**Ken Weller. Don’t Be a Soldier! The Radical Anti-War Movement in North London 1914–1918. Journeyman/LHWC, ISBN 0904 526569. £4.95 – AK- -LI – -BS-** Shows that, despite myths of the middle-class commentators, the real anti-war movement had its roots in a ‘rebel milieu’ of syndicalists and the radical wing of the women’s movement.

**Mark Shipway. Anti-Parliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers’ Councils in Britain, 1917–45. Macmillan Press. ISBN 0333 43613X. -BS- -LI-** Written from a ‘councillist’ point of view so not overly sympathetic to Syndicalism, but full of unique and fascinating detail.

**IRELAND James Connolly. The Lost Writings. Pluto Press. ISBN 0745 312969. £13.99 -AK-** Over 100 of Connolly’s essays and articles from Irish and political journals, including many from his more syndicalist period.

**James Connolly. Labour in Irish History. Bookmarks. ISBN 0906 024322. -LI-** Useful provided you ignore the Introduction, which attempts to crowbar Connolly into an SWP view of the world.

**Conor Kostick. Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917–1923. Pluto. ISBN 0745 311237. £13.99 -AK-** Described by Organise!-IWA as “a recommended antidote to the more common nationalist histories”. It is however marred by the tendency to claim that, if only a revolutionary (sic) party (like the author’s own SWP!) had been around at the time, then history would have been so much better.

For more on Syndicalism in Ireland (rather than the influence on Britain, as discussed in this Unit) write to Syndicalist Solidarity Network, PO Box 505, Belfast, BT12 6BQ.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## **Block 2**

# Unit 7: Mexico 1870–1920 – Colonialism and Revolution

Units 1–6 chart some of the important beginnings of anarcho-syndicalism in Britain and Europe. In Block 2 (Units 7–12), we turn our attention to case studies from around the world.

Unit 7 concentrates on Mexico, in particular, the Mexican revolution of 1910. In this brief overview of a critical period in Mexico's history, it becomes apparent that, like all revolutions, this was a time of great difficulty and complexity. To attempt to view this period in doctrinaire or simplistic terms would be wrong. Revolutions, far from being simplistic, are made by human beings, not by political theory. As such, they are complex social events that never conform to any master plan.

## This Unit aims to

- Give an overview of the development of capitalism and industrialisation in Mexico
- Look at the emergence of the anarchist movement at this time.
- Examine the cultural and political background of the Mexican revolution.
- Look at the various factions and alliances within the revolution.
- Analyse the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism as a force within the Mexican working class.
- Look at the ideas of the Zapatistas and agrarian reform.
- Examine the split in the anarcho-syndicalist movement over support of the Zapatistas.

## Terms and abbreviations

**la Sociedad:** La Sociedad Artística Industrial. The first anarchist organisation in Mexico established 1867 in Mexico City. This led to the el Círculo: El Círculo Proletario, set up in 1869 which formed the nationwide el Gran Círculo: el Gran Círculo de Obreros de México.

**la Social:** Workers' resistance societies which were based on the Bakuninist idea of forming secret societies of dedicated anarchist activists.

**el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana:** the first national labour organisation set up by anarchists.

**la Escuela:** la Escuela Moderna y Libre, a free school set up anarchists.

**municipio libre:** Autonomous villages set up on libertarian principles.



**Hacienda system:** A feudalistic system of land ownership.

**The Científicos:** The Científicos were descendents of the white settlers who had arrived in Mexico after independence. They considered the average Mexican too stupid to govern themselves and better off in a serf-like existence. Those not accepting the edicts of the Científicos were murdered, raped and often sold into slavery.

**Ejidos:** A system whereby families worked plots of land, while forest, water, livestock and tools were owned collectively

**Rurales:** The rural police.

**Sociedad de Resistencia:** Underground anarchist resistance groups.

**Organizadora del Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM):** Mexican Liberal Party that soon moved to be an anarchist organisation. **Gran Círculo de Obreros Libres (GCOL):** Union set up by workers in the textile industry.

**Confederación Nacional de Artes Gráficas (CNAG):** National Confederation of Graphical Arts, a large anarcho-syndicalist print union

**la Luz:** a group, formed In 1912, which aimed to establish an anarcho-syndicalist union that would also organise among the peasantry.

**la Casa del Obrero:**, a loose confederation of leftist unions including la Luz, which, under the influence of anarcho-syndicalists adopted direct action methods.

**División del Norte:** Northern Division, an armed force in the north of Mexico commanded by Pancho Villa.

**Regional Confederation of Mexican Labour (CROM):** Formed in May 1918 in the city of Saltillo it was attached to Obregon's political party. It managed to co-opt enough on the left to relieve radical pressure on the Mexican leaders. Its officials worked for a national consensus and accepted lavish rewards for their efforts.

**Confederation General de Trabajo (CGT):** General Confederation of Labour, an anarcho-syndicalist union.

## Introduction

Mexico was a colony and so differed fundamentally from the European countries examined in Block 1. Ruled by Spain for centuries at one point Mexico's native Indian population was almost completely exterminated and, from the 1860's, the emerging capitalist system was controlled by colonial powers. These factors led to a strong sense of nationalism, which influenced all aspects of the revolution, making it as much a struggle for national liberation. This inevitably impacted on those forces struggling for working class liberation. By 1910, 87% of Mexicans still lived directly off the land despite rapid industrialisation since the 1880's. For instance, in 1880, only 8,000 men and women worked in mills but, by 1910, there were 82,000. Similarly, in 1876 there were only 400 miles of railway but, by 1911, there were 16,000 miles. The industrialisation of Mexico was dominated by foreign capital and so excluded some of the powerful elites within Mexican society from access to this source of increasing wealth.

In order to regain their power, they attempted to enlist working class and peasant support through appeals to national sentiment and the need to throw off foreign domination. They were to be successful in this endeavour, and the story of the Mexican revolution, as is so often the case with national liberation struggles, is one of nationalist elites gaining power on the back of

workers' struggle. It becomes apparent that the Mexican Revolution, like all revolutions, was a time of great difficulty and complexity. Revolutions, far from being simplistic, are made by human beings, not by political theory. As such, they are complex social events that never conform to any master plan.

## **Mexican Anarchism**

Anarchist ideas first began to make inroads in Mexico in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century. The first workers to take up anarchist ideas were artisans whose independent way of life was threatened by a factory system based on exploiting cheap labour and resources by foreign capital free from state regulation. It was a barrack room system with working class families forced to live in company compounds, traded as virtual slaves by their foreign masters. This growing degradation of workers, seen as little more than animals by their European exploiters, proved fertile ground for anarchism with its emphasis on individual human development and dignity.

As early as 1867, the first anarchist organisation was formed in Mexico City when Spanish workers established La Sociedad Artística Industrial. By 1868, la Sociedad had succeeded in organising some of the largest textile factories in the Mexico City region and held a successful strike, which attracted more workers, leading in 1869 to a new organisation, el Círculo Proletario. El Círculo formed links with the developing anarchist groups in Europe and based its organisation and ideas on the writings of Bakunin. It published newspapers calling for the reorganisation of society, based on self-managed workers' control of production. El Círculo's influence was extended across central Mexico with the creation of el Gran Círculo de Obreros de México in 1871. In addition to el Gran Círculo, a number of workers' resistance societies were formed, known as la Social, which were based on the Bakuninist idea of forming secret societies of dedicated anarchist activists.

The growth of anarchism was reflected in the fact that, by 1875, el Gran Círculo had 10,000 members, mainly factory labourers. La Social had also been able to establish groups across Mexico and, in 1876, the anarchists set up the first national labour organisation, el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana. At the founding congress, la Social's five delegates included a woman, Soledad Sosa, whose presence was objected to by a vocal minority on the grounds of setting a "violated precedent". Though the move to bar her was heavily defeated, it does illustrate the status of women at that time within the Mexican labour movement and society in general. Anarchist influence also grew among the peasantry, spread by activists from Mexico City who recognised the need for workers and peasants to work together. This idea was to be crucial, as divisions between the Europeanised urban industrial workers and the largely non-Spanish speaking native Mexican peasantry, were particularly marked.

The tragedy of the indigenous people of what was to become Mexico is a familiar story. They had been devastated by the Spanish conquest, which saw the population drop from 25 million in 1519 to 1.3 million in 1630. From that point they slowly recovered and embarked on a long struggle against colonial exploitation. Their traditional society was highly communal. Families worked plots of land, while forest, water, livestock and tools were owned collectively. This system, called "ejidos", meant that the Mexican peasantry found that libertarian communist ideas were close to their own way of life. They had been able to preserve this society but, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was increasingly under threat as the railways opened up the countryside.

To build links with the peasantry, anarchists from *la Social* and *el Círculo* had gone into rural central and southern Mexico. As part of this campaign, a free school, *la Escuela Moderna y Libre*, was established at Chalco. In 1871, a former pupil, Julio Chavez Lopez, helped organise a peasant uprising and the peasant revolutionaries' manifesto, based on anarchist ideas developed at *la Escuela*, blamed the church, government and expansionist landlords for their hardships. It called for the overthrow of the government; for locally controlled land redistribution; for a decentralised system of autonomous villages, the "municipio libre"; and for a common defence force run on libertarian principles, "without recourse to the use of men who give orders and punishment". Despite Lopez's forces being smashed by the federal army at Actopan, these anarchist-based ideas formed the basis of a series of peasant insurrections, which kept central Mexico on a virtual war footing into the 1880's.

By 1879, anarchist ideas had spread throughout the emerging Mexican labour movement. *La Social* had 62 regional units and some 5,000 people attended its 1879 conference. Its paper, *la Internacional*, called for social revolution, social anarchy, the abolition of all governments and the creation of a "universal social republic", which would bring to an end all national boundaries. Anarchist ideas also continued to dominate *el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana*.

## **Diaz: The Selling of Mexico**

The rapid expansion of anarchism halted under the repressive regime of Porfirio Diaz, which had overthrown Lerdo's "nationalist" liberal government in 1876. Diaz argued that liberal government was outdated, that to transform Mexico into a modern capitalist state required widespread economic reform, based on a modern transport and communication network. Diaz had wide support among the liberal intelligentsia, the provincial elites of old established Mexican families, and especially the 'Científicos' who were descended from white settlers who had arrived in Mexico after independence. They thought that the common Mexican peasant was mentally and physically only suited to manual labour. Diaz was also supported by moderate trade unionists attracted by his modernist programme. Behind this modernism, however, lay foreign capitalism, namely US merchant bankers and Texan landowners, who supplied arms and military personnel.

On gaining power, Diaz quickly repaid his foreign backers by unleashing a wave of repression aimed at pacifying the Mexican working class into accepting a poverty wage economy. Workers fought back, but with strikes outlawed, and their organisations and newspapers closed down, the working class movement was soon driven underground, including the embryonic anarcho-syndicalist movement in the shape of *la Social* and *el Congreso General Obrero de la República Mexicana*, which were both disbanded.

In the countryside, Diaz moved against the growing agrarian movement. Diaz instigated a hacienda system by twisting the 1856 law originally made to break up large landed areas owned by the Catholic Church. In 1885 at least twenty percent of the Mexican population worked the land in their local *ejido*. By 1910 the figure had dropped to near two percent. The haciendas soon became slave camps. One of the worst was located in Oaxaca called *Valle Nacional* where the owners kept the workers in debt even to the point of babies born on the hacienda inherited their family debt. Local politicians would sell convicts to the haciendas for as little as forty-five

dollars. At the height the Valle Nacional hacienda, it would receive 15,000 new workers a year. Most would die within several months.

The anarchist-inspired central Mexican uprisings were brutally put down and many founders of la Escuela Moderna y Libre were executed. With the urban and rural working class pacified, talk of modernisation was soon forgotten and the economy was handed over to foreign capitalism.

Over 7,000-armed US settlers arrived in the northern Mexican states, evicting peasants and enclosing land with barbed wire. The Richardson Construction Company of Los Angeles took nearly a million acres belonging to the Yaqui who were then sold as slaves to plantation owners at \$95 a head. In the Papantia valley, Vera Cruz state, the whole population were exterminated by the rurales (rural police) for resisting forcible eviction. The valley that had supported 20,000 people became the property of one owner and, by 1892, more than one million peasants had their land stolen from them through such inhuman methods.

By 1906, falling profit rates at home resulted in massive quantities of US capital pouring into Mexico to join British, French, Belgian and German holdings in search of higher returns. The ownership of industry, transport, communication, banking and natural resources was transferred into foreign hands. Only in agriculture did the Mexican bourgeoisie retain any power. Even then, they depended on foreign-owned railways. By 1910, over 120 million acres of land were foreign-owned, and 90% of the eighty largest businesses, including nine of the top ten, were foreign-controlled.

As payment for selling off Mexico, Diaz and the metropolitan elite had grown rich. Corruption and bribery was the normal way for the state to function, and government officials and their families were “directors” and “counsellors” in foreign-owned companies. However, a large proportion of Mexican society, including powerful provincial elites, now excluded from power, small-scale domestic capitalists, the middle class, the intelligentsia and the working class, were all alienated by the Diaz regime, leading to a growing, if suppressed, nationalist movement, which in turn led directly to the 1910 revolution.

As discontent grew, so did the brutality used to maintain order. In one widely publicised incident, a liberal journalist, Ordoñez, who had set up a small school for peasants, was thrown alive into a lime pit. Those who organised workers were imprisoned, shot or “disappeared”. By 1893, over 50 newspaper editors and journalists were in prison. Laws were introduced to imprison anyone who used “moral or physical force to raise wages or to impede the free exercise of industry or labour”. Even these draconian laws were too liberal for foreign capitalists, and union organisers were simply shot without trial.

## **Working Class Conditions**

With growing foreign dominance of the economy came truly inhuman working conditions. Capitalism, free of state regulation, exploited mining, oil, agriculture and textile resources. A social structure with hospitals, welfare benefits, schools, housing and so on, was not considered necessary by foreign capitalists, who regarded the Mexican population as barely human. In mining areas, families were forced to live in caves. Company towns were built where whole families lived in small single rooms. These barrack towns were little more than massive prisons. Workers were barred from having visitors to prevent interchange and expression of ideas. Industrial pollu-

tion mixed with domestic sewage to create atrocious health hazards that brought epidemic after epidemic onto the working class. From 1895 to 1911, Mexico City's mortality rate topped those of Cairo and Madras. Conditions were so bad in some company towns that even the prospect of starvation failed to drive people to work there. The state responded by forcibly rounding up men, women and children, and transporting them to work as slaves.

Families were paid in 'scrip' or company money for exchange at company stores for company goods at company prices. Every aspect of work and living was controlled. Fines were imposed on workers who were then forced to take out loans to pay them off. Pay was docked for religious festivals and tax was collected for tools. In the event of death, loans passed to relatives who, to repay them, had to work as slaves, while high interest rates ensured they would never be free from debt.

Despite the brutal repression and harsh conditions, workers continued to organise. A number of secret workers' councils and underground unions were formed, often creating an alternative anarchist culture based on mutual aid, as workers attempted to survive in a brutal environment. By 1900, some of these organisations were strong enough to challenge the regime. At Puebla, where a textile strike quickly became a local general strike by 3,000 workers, the challenge, although repressed, proved to be a turning point in the struggle against Diaz, inspiring a number of strikes across Mexico.

## **Anarchist Opposition: the PLM**

In 1900, with unrest growing, Camilo Arriaga, who came from a powerful family and whose mining interests had been taken over by US companies, called for the creation of liberal clubs across Mexico. In doing so he hoped that a new liberal opposition party could be formed. It met with immediate success, and over 50 clubs were quickly established. These formed a focal point for opposition, and attracted a broad coalition from provincial and local village elites to peasants and industrial workers. The regime quickly closed the clubs down and many of the organisers were imprisoned.

Among the prisoners were Ricardo and Enrique Magon. Though not yet anarchists, they had been influenced by the writings of Kropotkin and Bakunin. On their release from prison, they launched the paper *Regeneración*, which became increasingly radical, calling for labour and agrarian reform. It was soon repressed, but the Magons continued to publish it, resulting in imprisonment three times in three years. In 1903, faced with constant harassment, they fled to the US, to continue organising against Diaz.

In exile, the Magon brothers broke with Arriaga's movement and formed la Junta Organizadora del Partido Liberal Mexicano (PLM). Though still calling itself a political party, the PLM moved towards anarchism. Despite constant harassment and imprisonment, the exiled PLM formed links with the US anarchist movement. Many PLM activists joined the newly created Industrial Workers of the World (IWW — see Unit 8), establishing groups in California, while many IWW members joined the PLM in the struggle against Diaz. These links led to the PLM taking up the cause of anarchism, which in turn brought condemnation from both the US liberal intelligentsia and much of the Mexican opposition.

The PLM's anarchism was reflected in its democratic structures and programme, which called for a workers' and peasants' insurrection and the establishment of libertarian communism. By

1908, the PLM had over 350 underground clubs and guerrilla units operating throughout Mexico. It was made up of town artisans and industrial workers and, to a lesser extent, displaced peasants. The guerrilla units operated on the anarchist principle of self-management, with recallable elected officers.

There were also women's clubs which worked within the PLM. One such club was the "Daughters of Cuahatemoc", a semi-secret organisation founded by Flores de Andrade. Its plan was to establish branches of the women's club in all parts of Mexico and in the United

States that would carry on propaganda and fight for anarchist ideas. Indeed, the role of women generally in the Mexican Revolution was crucial. Mexican women were directly involved and were known as the Soldaderas. Women went to the battlefields, engaged in combat and some assumed leadership positions. Mexican women's groups often travelled across the border to the US, to speak out on their political beliefs about the revolution and to enlist the support of radical women's groups in the United States.

The PLM was soon organising in Mexico's industrial heartlands. Most notably, they organised insurrectionary strikes at Cananea and Vera Cruz, which later were to become symbols of the 1910 revolution. At Cananea, in a mining and textile region on the US border, anarchists from the PLM organised a strike for better working conditions. The workers' demand for "Mexican jobs for Mexican workers" reflected the growing nationalism of the Mexican working class. The strike became a gun battle and, as heavily armed workers took control of the region, the government rushed in troops to reinforce the rurales. These troops were further reinforced by a volunteer force from the US, organised by Rockefeller, whose Anaconda mining company operated in the region.

The strikers were massacred, but the sight of government troops acting alongside the hated foreign capitalists to brutally put down Mexican workers led to a national outcry and fuelled growing nationalism. Ironically, the internationalised PLM was now seen by many as the only organisation of people willing to stand up against foreign domination. Cananea was followed by more serious unrest in the textile industry in Vera Cruz. The industry was owned and controlled by French capitalists, and was Mexico's most advanced industrial sector. Workers had been organised in the underground anarchist Sociedad de Resistencia for several years. Together with the PLM, they organised 'el Gran Círculo de Obreros Libres' (GCOL), which published an underground paper, *la Revolución Social*. This paper regularly denounced the church and government, and called for social revolution and workers' self-management.

The GCOL was effectively an anarcho-syndicalist union — and it quickly spread throughout the textile industry. Alarmed, the government sent in the rurales to raid homes and arrest militants. In protest, workers in Río Blanco declared a strike, burned down the company buildings and opened the prisons. Strikes spread across the industry until some 93 mills were involved. Company stores across the state were destroyed and armed workers quickly overcame the rurales. In response, troops were rushed in and, after days of unequal street battles, the workers were defeated. Some 800 strikers were murdered, hundreds imprisoned, thousands sacked, and thousands more fled to the US, where many joined the IWW.

After Vera Cruz, in June 1908, the PLM launched an uprising. However, the US and Mexican governments prevented PLM forces crossing the US border. Isolated, the PLM forces inside Mexico were defeated by the army. This uprising, though easily defeated, rocked Diaz. With growing economic problems and mounting unrest, he declared his intention to step down and his wish to see the creation of political parties.

## The 1910 Revolution

Francisco Madero announced his candidature for the presidency. Like Arriaga, Madero was from a wealthy provincial family whose fortunes and influence had declined as the power of foreign capitalism had grown. However, beyond the provincial elites and the intelligentsia, he had no real power base. To widen his support, he announced a mildly nationalist programme based on a US-style free market economy.

However, implicit in this was the idea of doing away with the outdated and corrupt power base of the Mexico City metropolitan elite that had prospered so much under Diaz. This proved too much for Diaz and his foreign backers. Alarmed at the popularity of Madero's campaign, he reversed his decision to step down, and in the run up to the election, had Madero arrested. On his release, Madero, his image greatly enhanced, fled to the US. Convinced that the metropolitan elite would never go peacefully, he made his historic call for a revolutionary uprising to begin on October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1910.

This was in effect a call for a national liberation struggle. In the San Luis Potosí programme, Madero went far beyond the moderate nationalism of his presidential campaign. It included agrarian and labour reform to attract the peasantry and workers who, until that point, he had virtually ignored. His revolution needed an army, and with the Mexican army still loyal to Diaz, he turned to the workers and peasants. Another factor was his fear that the revolution could lead to a PLM victory which was not what he had in mind. This was recognised by Diaz, who warned that Madero was unleashing uncontrollable forces. Nevertheless, Madero's support grew among the urban working class, with mass demonstrations turning into violent confrontations with troops and police. The peasants also showed support. In the south, an obscure sometime bandit, Emiliano Zapata, announced a revolution in concert with Madero's, while in the north, Francisco Villa also declared his support for Madero and organised a powerful peasant army.

Madero became a focal point for a mass movement against Diaz. The confrontation diverted the state's repressive forces from the PLM who, taking advantage, immediately launched their own uprising with striking success, capturing towns in Sonora and Vera Cruz states. In Baja California, they quickly defeated the state forces and declared an anarchist republic. Meanwhile, Madero's small forces suffered a number of defeats. Fearful of the growing power of the PLM he attempted to co-opt them, announcing that the future revolutionary government would be headed by both himself and Ricardo Magon. In response, Ricardo Magon, still languishing in a US jail, issued a rejection of any alliance:

*"I ought to say that governments are repugnant to me. I am firmly convinced that there cannot be good government...Government is tyranny, because it curtails the individual's free initiative, and the sole purpose it serves is to uphold a social system which is unsuitable for the true development of human beings. Governments are the guardians of the interests of the rich and educated classes...I have no wish therefore to be a tyrant. I am a revolutionary and a revolutionary I shall remain until I draw my last breath."*

## Madero Sells Out

With the PLM moving south from its northern stronghold and Zapata's forces gaining ground in the south, Jose Limantour, a leading Científico, who was virtually running the county and well

aware of Diaz's situation, sent an emissary to meet with Madero. In an attempt to stave off the revolutionary working class they signed a treaty whereby Francisco de la Barra, the Mexican ambassador to the United States, would serve as interim president until elections could be held. This agreement was known as the Treaty of Ciudad Juarez and called for the removal of Diaz by the end of May. Diaz did not wait and resigned on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May leaving for exile in France. On June 11<sup>th</sup> 1911, Madero entered Mexico City. However, the PLM refused to accept the revolution was over, stating:

*"The Mexican Liberal Party has no compromise with Madero and Diaz. The proposed peace treaty between Diaz and Madero will not stop the revolutionary activity of the PLM... We are convinced that political freedom is a lie where it concerns the working class...it is for this reason that the liberals are fighting for economic emancipation of the proletariat. Our objective is that the land and machinery of production will become the communal possession of all and every inhabitant of Mexico, with no distinction of sex."*

Madero became president on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1911 and quickly moved against the PLM with the full force of the Mexican army while attempting to stall Zapata in the south with empty promises of land reform and bribes. The PLM was defeated in Sonora and Chihuahua states. In Baja California, although reinforced by Italian anarchists and IWW members, the massively outnumbered PLM forces were driven across the US border, where they were promptly arrested. Throughout Mexico, PLM activists were rounded up and thrown into jail and, although many others continued the revolutionary struggle alongside Zapata, the PLM was never again to pose a real threat to Mexican capitalism. Madero then launched an assault on Zapata's forces who had taken his promise of land reform seriously by taking over large estates. In response, Zapata declared a revolution against the new government, condemning Madero as a "traitor to the revolution" and guilty of "bloody treason". He issued his own revolutionary programme, the Plan de Ayala, which argued for the land to be returned to the native Mexican peasantry.

## **Zapata & Agrarianism**

Zapata's position within the revolutionary movement of 1908–11 was complex. Though at first he looked to the state for land reform, he quickly became radicalised. As described by the PLM paper, *Regeneración*, in 1913:

*"The PLM and the Agrarians (Zapatistas) work in conjunction and good harmony...they as the PLM have burnt to ashes private property deeds...have thrown down fences that marked private properties, the jails have been destroyed, and everything has been turned into the property of all."*

At the centre of Zapata's project was land reform, for which he drew heavily on anarchist ideas. The Plan de Ayala was remarkably similar to ideas developed at la Escuela Moderna y Libre in 1906, and was partly written by the anarchist, Otilio Montano. The plan was issued in November 1911, and until 1918, represented the issues that Emiliano Zapata and his rural followers were fighting for. While a large portion of the Plan was reserved for attacks upon Madero for his failings to uphold his own plan, that of San Luis Potosi the document reveals the primary importance the Zapatistas placed on agrarian reform.

The Zapatistas sought to replace the great estates with a decentralised federation of free villages, with communally owned land. It was a radical programme and looked to improve the peasants' conditions, but without a clear opposition to the capitalist framework. Many of the



concepts and phrases were the same as the PLM had used in the 1911 September manifesto. Words like, “tyrants”, “usurpers”, and the “bosses” are used throughout the Zapata document and it was considered so extreme that “no other revolutionary group except the anarcho-syndicalists would advocate, much less adopt as a policy.” The ending motto of Zapata’s plan, “Liberty, Justice, and Law,” is very similar to the motto of the Liberal platform of 1906: “Reform, Justice, and Law.” He drew support partly from Indian “nationalism”, which wanted the land returned, and partly from a radical form of Catholicism.

Morelos state remained under Zapatista control for a further 4 years, and it was mainly here that the land reform plan was put into action. The great estates were divided into communes and co-operatives. Other land was under the direct control of the Zapatista general headquarters and helped to generate income for the war effort and to pay pensions to families of fallen soldiers.

Meanwhile, Madero’s campaign against the Zapatistas was largely unsuccessful, while in the north he made a fatal error in underestimating Villa. Having made him an “honorary general”, he ordered him to retire. An outraged Villa declared war on Madero and quickly reassembled a mainly peasant army. Though Villa argued for agrarian reform, he had no firm plans. He discouraged peasants from taking over land controlled by his army. Although he did take over the estates of some rich Mexicans, he often evicted any peasants who had seized the land before him. However he left US-owned land alone in the mistaken belief that this would carry favour with the US government. Though often brutal, there is no doubting his military effectiveness. Over the next two years, his forces increasingly operated as a traditional army, using trains to move heavy equipment, and defeating state forces in set-piece battle.

This contrasted with the Zapatistas, who operated as a “classic” 20<sup>th</sup> Century guerrilla army, mainly at night, and dependent upon the local population for support and supplies. Under attack from both south and north, Madero also alienated the same urban working class who had only recently welcomed him as a conquering hero. Buoyed by the defeat of Diaz, workers took the offensive against foreign capitalism. Between January and September 1912, the Madero government had to deal with upwards of 40 major strikes across the industrial heartlands of Mexico.

## **Anarcho-Syndicalism in Mexico City**

With Diaz and his brutal henchmen gone, anarcho-syndicalists in Mexico City suddenly found themselves able to organise relatively openly. A large anarcho-syndicalist print union, the Confederación Nacional de Artes Gráficas (CNAG), was established, which produced a paper and other propaganda from its own print works in Mexico City. In 1912, a new group, la Luz, was formed, which aimed to establish an anarcho-syndicalist union that would also organise among the peasantry, similar to the Spanish CNT. La Luz saw its role as “uplifting the workers through group example and education” until such time as labour could destroy the church, state and capitalism through the general strike and armed workers’ self-defence, and take over the economy for the benefit of all.

The ten points of the Manifiesto Anarquista del Grupo Luz were uncompromising: 1. To enlighten an enslaved and ignorant people. 2. To overthrow the tormentors of mankind: clergy, government and capital. 3. To not serve the ambitions of any political charlatan, because no man has the right to govern another. 4. To make known that all men are equal because they are all ruled by the same natural laws and not by arbitrary ones. 5. To demand explanations from the

opulent rich regarding their wealth, from the government regarding its lying authority, and from the representatives of the bandit god for his celestial powers. 6. To devastate the social institutions generated by torturers and loafers. 7. To gain freedom for the enslaved worker. 8. To use truth as the ultimate weapon against inequality. 9. To struggle against fear, the terrible tyrant of the people. 10. To march forward towards redemption, toward the universal nation where all can live with mutual respect, in absolute freedom, without national political father figures, without gods in the sky or the insolent rich.

La Luz joined with a number of socialists to form a new trade union organisation, la Casa del Obrero, a loose confederation of leftist unions, with the more anarcho-syndicalist influenced ones advocating the general strike and sabotage to destroy capitalism. La Casa grew rapidly and, in 1913, it launched a number of strikes in

Mexico City. Under the influence of anarcho-syndicalists, the *Manifiesto Anarquista del Grupo* expressed many of its most important ideas; La Casa adopted direct action methods, occupying factories and gaining support across the community. Crowds providing food and protection from the state authorities often surrounded occupied factories.

Madero responded to la Casa's growing strength by creating la Gran Liga Obrera, which proved a disaster. A number of anarcho-syndicalists stood for office in la Liga's first public meeting, stating they would disband it once elected. This duly happened, making it a laughing stock. It remained a paper organisation with no popular support, and the government resorted to its traditional means of control – brutal repression. Police raided la Casa's offices, shut down its papers, arrested prominent activists, and attempted to retake occupied factories. A series of street battles ensued with the cosacos (mounted police). These attempts to crush la Casa failed miserably. In fact the confrontations with the cosacos only enhanced its militant reputation among industrial workers.

## US Takes Control

Losing urban working class support added to the growing crisis facing Madero. Besides Villa's and Zapata's forces, a number of non-aligned peasants groups moved about at will, attacking and robbing wealthy landowners. There was so much conflict that the economy began to grind to a halt. This proved too much for the officer corps and, in February 1913, several army officers attempted a coup d'état. After a 10-day battle, troops loyal to Madero gained the upper hand. With victory assured, Madero made General Victoriano Huerta the new head of the army. Huerta immediately made a secret agreement with the US government and the defeated officers to overthrow Madero. On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, Huerta had Madero arrested and murdered.

With US support, Huerta immediately formed a military government, drawn from the same metropolitan elite that had sustained Diaz. In response, the alliance that had toppled Diaz declared against Huerta. Venustiano Carranza, a northern state governor and wealthy landowner, declared himself "first chief", announcing the formation of a "constitutional" revolutionary army. In the north, Villa, his forces now moulded into the highly effective and powerful *División del Norte*, also declared war on the new government. In the south, Huerta tried to enlist Zapata's support, only for his emissaries to be tried for "assassinating the revolution". Launching a brutal "slash and burn" counter-insurgency campaign against the Zapatistas, Huerta promised there would be no mercy. State forces burnt villages and crops, and shot villagers at will. This

only succeeded in driving yet more support to the Zapatistas, who slowly drove the government forces back.

In the north, Villa's army won a sensational string of victories. Alarmed, the US quickly dropped Huerta for Carranza's constitutionalists. At their instigation, a meeting was held between Villa and Carranza and the División del Norte was incorporated into the constitutionalist forces under the overall command of Carranza. In reality, Villa continued to operate independently so, with his forces threatening Mexico City, the US government sabotaged him by cutting off coal supplies and rail links, effectively sterilising the army. If Huerta's military campaign was going badly, his efforts to control the urban working class fared little better. With the economy crippled, the government had resorted to printing money to pay for the war, leading to hyperinflation. In response, in April 1913, la Casa del Obrero launched a wave of strikes among weavers, retail clerks and restaurant workers and called for the overthrow of Huerta. Government troops burnt down la Casa centres and rounded up activists, while many anarcho-syndicalists fled Mexico City to join Zapata's forces. By July 1914, with Zapata about to enter Mexico City and Villa approaching from the north, Huerta resigned and left Mexico.

His replacement, Francisco Carbajal, urged on by the US, sought to stall Zapata through lengthy negotiations, while awaiting General Alvaro Obregon's constitutionalist forces which had by-passed the stalled División del Norte. The Carbajal government quickly surrendered to Obregon. Though overall control of the constitutionalist forces was still with Carranza, divisions soon started to appear within them. Carranza, was a conservative committed to the patrón tradition of rural Mexico whereby power lay with the wealthy landowners. Moderates within the constitutionalist forces, however, realised that reforms were needed if there was to be any hope of avoiding Zapata and la Casa seizing power. This meant a modern Mexican state with guarantees for both capital and labour, and they began to introduce labour reform in areas under constitutionalist control. In Aguascalientes, this brought a 9-hour day and Sundays off for both workers and peasants. In San Luis Potosí, a minimum wage, a 9-hour day and a department of labour were promised. Carranza, who hated trade unions, opposed Obregon, leader of these reformers. Nevertheless, he embarked on a propaganda campaign stressing reforms already introduced by the constitutionalists and promising they would be extended across Mexico. He handed over buildings to the unions, distributed food and clothing and intervened in labour disputes, openly supporting workers against foreign-owned companies. He also froze prices of staple foodstuffs.

In a short space of time, Obregon established himself as the reforming hero of the urban working class. Meanwhile, Obregon also unleashed a ferocious propaganda campaign against Zapata and Villa, alleging that they represented the forces of reaction and were dominated by the Catholic Church. He sought to exploit cultural differences between industrial workers and peasantry. Not surprisingly, relations with Villa and Zapata deteriorated rapidly, but Obregon headed off conflict by arranging a constitutionalist convention on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1914, at Aguascalientes. The Zapatistas, who had never been a formal part of the constitutionalist forces, attended the conference without voting rights. Through force of argument, they won over many constitutionalist reformers to agrarian reform. As a result, a compromise candidate, Eulalio Gutierrez, a reforming state governor, was elected as convention president. A furious Carranza who, true to his background, opposed agrarian and labour reform, rejected the decision and stormed out, along with Obregon. Villa and Zapata entered Mexico City on December 14<sup>th</sup>. Though they both distrusted Gutierrez, they handed over the reins of government to him as per the convention's decision.

True to his constitutionalist roots, Gutierrez constantly undermined the efforts of Zapata's and Villa's forces over the next two years but it seemed only a question of time before the constitutionalist forces would be overcome. However, it was not to be. Instead, massive US intervention came to their aid. At Vera Cruz a training camp was established, protected by US forces, to train and reassemble the constitutionalist army. At the same time, they blockaded Mexico to halt the arms flow from US arms dealers to Villa and Zapata.

However, Obregon's efforts to woo the workers had convinced some in la Casa that the constitutionalist forces were the best hope of building a union movement. Support was split over the issue of supporting the constitutionalists. Many of those who were drawn into this disastrous route had been influenced by the sight of Zapata's army who, whilst occupying Mexico City, exhibited "religious devotion, acceptance of the clergy, and wore religious armbands and carried religious banners". The Anarcho-syndicalists did not agree on this in a solid bloc. When the forces of Villa and Zapata forced Carranza and the Constitutionalists to flee Mexico City, membership in the Casa split into three factions. Most of the membership left with the Constitutionalists, and to a lesser degree, many joined the Villistas and a handful joined the Zapatistas.

Zapata had attacked the timid reforms of the Carranza administration, stating that Carranza offered "freedom of the press for those that cannot read; free elections for those who do not know the candidates; proper legal proceedings for those who have never had anything to do with an attorney." Certainly this echoed the sentiments of la Casa, but the Zapatistas were very religious, largely catholic, which the Anarcho-syndicalists found repulsive. On November 7 1915 Zapata finally issued a proposed labour law but it merely exposed Zapata's lack of understanding of his urban counterparts. It included an eight-hour day, the prohibition of work for children under that age of fourteen, worker cooperative to run factories abandoned by owners, and a fixed minimum wage. But it failed to respond to some of the most important demands of the Mexican labour movement, which included, more control of foreign property, equal payment and treatment for foreign and Mexican workers, and extensive and clearly defined right to strike, and a guarantee of the status of trade unions. More importantly it came too late, the majority of the Casa forged an alliance with the Carranza's Constitutionalists the February before. Though none in la Casa had much time for Obregon, some reasoned that backing the constitutionalist army would allow them the time and freedom to build the union organisation and militias needed to carry out a new revolution under which true agrarian reform would be introduced, free from the influence of the hated Catholic Church. This decision to take up arms against the peasantry allowed the constitutionalists to divide the working class in order to defeat it. Some 7,000 urban workers left Mexico City and joined the constitutionalist army, forming seven so-called "red" divisions. Many workers were clearly aware of the stupidity of joining forces with the constitutionalists and this was reflected in mass meetings organised by la Casa when large minorities, and often even majorities, refused to join up.

Over the next year the constitutionalist forces, led by US military advisers, deployed tactics developed in the early part of the First World War against Villa. By 1916, the División del Norte had been defeated and Zapata's forces, though undefeated, had retreated to their southern heartlands.

## Postscript

With the victorious constitutionalist army now occupying Mexico City, the Carranza government quickly moved to eradicate the threat posed by its recent ally, the urban working class, through a series of raids on la Casa centres across Mexico. In response, a general strike paralysed Mexico City and the government, caught unawares, were forced to back down by releasing prisoners and opening up la Casa centres once more. The anarcho-syndicalist movement began to reorganise and meetings attracted thousands of workers and anarcho-syndicalist papers reappeared, while a number of anarcho-syndicalists were elected to prominent positions within la Casa. Anarcho-syndicalists also argued for militias to be formed for the coming revolution against the constitutionalists.

Alarmed by this threat, the government again resorted to repression but la Casa called a general strike for July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1916, which was an even greater success than the previous one, with a large part of central Mexico paralysed. The government was now better prepared and troops, brought into the city under cover of darkness, brutally put down the strike. Martial law was imposed and the death penalty was introduced for the offence of striking. With the peasantry and urban working class now all but defeated, the reformists within the constitutionalists led by Obregon, organised against the “outdated” elements led by Carranza. In May 1918 the Regional Confederation of Mexican Labour (CROM) was formed by a national labour congress and attached itself to Obregon’s political party. This labour union although spouting some revolutionary rhetoric would prove to serve a useful purpose to the Mexican political leaders for years to come.

In 1919, Obregon, backed by remnants of Zapata’s forces and younger army officers, marched on Mexico City, and Carranza fled. Obregon formed a so-called “revolutionary” government backed by the provincial elites, the more progressive elements of the metropolitan elite, domestic Mexican capitalism, the intelligentsia and much of the army. Strongly nationalist, they looked to the establishment of a strong state. Though at first resisted by the US government because Obregon’s nationalism was counter to US interests, it finally accepted Obregon’s forces and worked to maximise its interests through the Obregon administration. In doing so it ensured an attempted uprising by Adolfo de la Huerta, erstwhile supporter of Obregon, was doomed to failure.

This proved to be the last attempt of the revolution and Obregon and U.S. business and governmental had finally reached an understanding. Revolutionary opponents, like Zapata and Villa were now dead as was Ricardo Magon, who had died in a U.S. federal prison. Though minor agrarian and labour reform was introduced, the process was kept under strict state control. Anarcho-syndicalists managed to reorganise, creating the anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederation General de Trabajo (CGT), which at one point in the 1920’s numbered 50,000. However, a mixture of state repression and marginalisation by CROM, brought its eventual demise. The Mexican revolution ended in defeat for the Mexican working class and victory for the nationalist elites who still run Mexico.

## Key points

- The Mexican elite continuously used the language of national liberation to enlist the support of Mexican workers and peasants during the Revolution.

- Anarchist ideas spread because they were very close to the peasants' way of life in Mexico.
- The modernisation of Mexico was funded by foreign investment that alienated the traditional Mexican elites.
- The combination of the hacienda system and atrocious working conditions saw the working class and peasantry join together against the dictatorship of Porfiro Diaz.
- In the Revolution moderates continually attempted to enlist the support of the militant workers and, in the south, the Zapatistas.
- The United States constantly intervened in the revolution to protect its own interests.
- There were vital differences between the anarcho-syndicalists and the Zapatistas which was to prove fatal in the Revolution.
- Any or successes in creating workers' organisations or in agrarian reform were brutally crushed by successive presidents as soon as they were strong enough.

## Checklist

1. What were the main factors influencing the revolutionary movements in Mexico?
2. Why did anarchist ideas strike a chord with the Mexican peasantry and workers?
3. How did Porfiro Diaz set about the 'modernisation' of Mexico?
4. What were the main planks of the Zapatistas' policies?
5. How did the split between la Casa and the Zapatistas occur?
6. How did Alvaro Obregon manage to consolidate and institutionalise the revolution?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the main factors influencing the revolutionary movements in Mexico?*

Mexico was a colony and ruled by Spain for centuries and the Spanish virtually wiped out the native population. From the 1860's, the emerging capitalist system was controlled by foreign powers. American capitalism and the U.S. government continually intervened in Mexico to protect their interests. These factors led to a strong sense of nationalism, which influenced all aspects of the revolution, making it as much a struggle for national liberation.

### *2. Why did anarchist ideas strike a chord with the Mexican peasantry and workers?*

The Mexican peasant society was highly communal. They had a system called "ejidos" in which families worked plots of land, while forest, water, livestock and tools were owned collectively. This meant that anarchist ideas were easily understood. In the towns Spanish workers influenced by anarchism and the ideas of the Spanish CNT established the first unions.

### *3. How did Porfiro Diaz set about the 'modernisation' of Mexico?*

Diaz argued to transform Mexico into a modern capitalist state required widespread economic reform, based on a modern transport and communication network. Although Diaz had wide support among the liberal intelligentsia, the provincial elites of old established Mexican families and the 'Cientificos' behind this modernism lay foreign capitalism, mainly US merchant bankers and Texan landowners, who supplied arms and military personnel.

4. *What were the main planks of the Zapatistas' policies?*

The Zapatistas sought to replace the great estates, the hacienda system, with a decentralised federation of free villages with communally owned land.

5. *How did the split between la Casa and the Zapatistas occur?*

The Zapatistas had little understanding of the issues and problems faced by the urban working class and so alienated some of them with their primary concern of agrarian reform. Also the Zapatistas were, in the main, very religious and this clashed with the anarcho-syndicalists who saw the Catholic Church as one of the mainstays of the Mexican ruling class.

6. *How did Alvaro Obregon manage to consolidate and institutionalise the revolution?*

The major revolutionary opponents, like Zapata, Villa and Ricardo Magon were now dead. Minor agrarian and labour reform was introduced but the process was kept under strict state control. He built up the CROM to absorb any working class dissent and co-opted labour and capital into the state structure. Most importantly he reached an understanding with the American Government and American capitalism which ensured their interests were served.

## Some discussion points

- What are the problems in combining national liberation struggles with the struggle for a social revolution?
- Was Zapata an anarchist?
- What lessons can be learned from the split between the urban workers and the peasants during the revolution?

## Further Reading

**Ramon Eduardo Ruiz. Labor and the Ambivalent Revolutionaries, Mexico, 1911–1923. John Hopkins University Press, 1976. ISBN: 0-8018-1728-5. -LI-** Detailed text that portrays accurately the total confusion of the whole revolutionary period. Worth seeking out.

**John Mason Hart. Revolutionary Mexico. University of California Press, 1987. ISBN: 0-520-05995-6. -LI-** Like Ruiz, a rather academic text that does very 'academic' things like break out in Spanish without translating it. Nevertheless, useful and detailed.

**Colin M. MacLachlan. Anarchism and the Mexican Revolution: The Political Trials of Ricardo Flores Magón in the United States. University of California Press. ISBN 0520071174. £9.95 -AK-** The tragic story of Flores Magon, told from analysis of court records. Concentrates on his repression by the US, which led to his eventual death in a US jail in 1922.

**Brian Morris. Flores Magon and the Mexican Liberal Party. In: Brian Morris — Ecology & Anarchism, Images Publishing. ISBN 1897817800. £7.50 -SE-** Good primer chapter in an

excellent and far-reaching book that contains reviews and essays on many key figures and issues within the anarchist tradition.

**Ricardo Flores Magon — Land and Liberty! Cienfuegos Press, 1977. -LI-** Edited by David Poole, this is Magon's classic gut-wrencher of the Mexican revolution. Now sadly out of print but worth searching out.

**Fighting the Revolution. Volume 1. Freedom Press (pamphlet). £1 -AK-** Contains (among other things) 'Emiliano Zapata' which is the text of a talk by Jack Stevenson, and also a reprint of the original 'Manifesto to Mexicans' issued by Zapata in August 1914. Also contains stuff from Makhno and Durruti.

In Britain and in English at least, decent histories covering this critical period in Mexico are few and far between. It is worth checking libraries on the off chance, and looking in wider (e.g. central American) histories for material. As a starter, here are a few we haven't had chance to check out –

**J.D.Cockroft — Intellectual Precursors of the Mexican Revolution 1910–1913. University of Texas Press, 1968.**

**A. Gilly — The Mexican Revolution. NLB Press, 1983.**

**R.E.Ruiz — The Great Rebellion, Mexico 1905–1924. Norton, 1980.**

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), – BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).



## Unit 8: USA 1886–1930 – The Wobblies

The development of anarcho-syndicalism in North America around the turn of the last century was dominated by the fortunes of the revolutionary union Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). While the IWW never became explicitly anarcho-syndicalist as an organisation, the influence on its development was considerable, and many anarcho-syndicalists were involved in the IWW (a situation that still exists today). An overview and some analysis of these influences and other tendencies within the IWW is the central purpose of this Unit. In particular, we shall examine the conflicts that arose within the IWW over internal democracy and look briefly at the success of the IWW in creating a distinct ‘working class revolution’ culture. It was this cultural aspect which reflected and developed further the important anarcho-syndicalist concept of ‘building the new society within the shell of the old’.

### This Unit aims to

- Look at the development of anarcho-syndicalism in the United States.
- Give an overview and analysis of the influences tendencies within the IWW.
- Discuss the IWW attitude to political parties.
- Examine the conflicts that arose within the IWW over internal democracy.
- Look at the success of the IWW in creating a distinct ,working class revolutionary culture.
- Examine the reasons for its decline.

### Terms and abbreviations

**AFofL:** American Federation Of Labor. Reformist union federation that organized solely amongst the white working class in the United States.

**GEB:** General Executive Board. Executive of the IWW.

**SLP:** Socialist Labour Party. Party influenced by Daniel de Leon that sought to be the political expression of the IWW.

**SPA:** Socialist Party of America.

**WFM:** Western Federation of Miners. Union based in the Western States whose leader ‘Big Bill’ Haywood was to become the leading light of the IWW.

**IWW:** Industrial Workers of the World.

**PLM:** Partido Liberal Mexicano.

## Introduction

The US as a state began to develop a sense of its own self during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and rapidly extended this to an identity as a world-dominating power. By the turn of the century, the US economy was indeed the most powerful in the world. Its Gross Domestic product (GDP) exceeded that of Germany and Britain combined and US iron and steel production surpassed all of Europe's. The process of industrialisation led to capitalist power concentrated in ever fewer hands. To meet this power concentration, the impoverished workers began to consider seriously the idea of concentrating their power by organising one big industrial union that could organise all workers. At this point, revolutionary syndicalism started to play an important role in the development of industrial unionism in the US.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, European immigrants with anarchist ideas combined with strong anti-statist traditions of US workers to create a burgeoning anarchist current. By the 1880's, anarchist-influenced ideas dominated the emerging US revolutionary movement, with anarchist groups developing across North America, producing a diverse range of papers and magazines in a myriad of different languages.

Though many of these anarchist groups promoted the idea of insurrection and viewed seeking day-to-day improvements as reformist, industrialisation soon ensured that anarcho-syndicalist ideas began to take hold. One of the first solid indications of this occurred in Pittsburgh in 1886, where Johann Most, a former member of the Zurich Section of the First International (see Unit 3), organised a conference at which the International Working People's Association (the 'Black International') was launched. At the Pittsburgh conference a motion was passed stating that unions were both the instrument of social revolution and formed the nucleus of a new co-operative commonwealth. The conference rejected the idea of forming a revolutionary party of the proletariat, instead favouring direct action in industrial unions as a means of seizing power. These motions, effectively calling for an anarcho-syndicalist movement, become known as the "Chicago Idea" and were to become highly influential in the development of the IWW.

## US Anarcho-syndicalism

After the Pittsburgh conference, a loose federation of autonomous groups was organised, linked to an information bureau located in Chicago. These "syndico-anarchist" groups, as they were known, were soon producing a number of papers, including; "The Alarm", an English language weekly; "Arbeiter-Zeitung", a German language paper published on week days; "Verbote", published on Saturdays, and "Fackel", a Sunday paper.

It was no accident that anarchists in Chicago found themselves at the centre of the movement that looked to the unions as a means of bringing about an anarchist society. They had been active in the workplace struggle for many years, and had taken a prominent role in the struggle for the 8-hour day. They had organised a demonstration at Haymarket, Chicago, in 1886 as part of this campaign. At the demonstration, a police agent threw a bomb, killing a number of people. Eight anarchists were framed and arrested as part of a campaign to stem the growing power of the anarchist movement. They were duly convicted of murder and hanged. The victims were to become known as the Haymarket martyrs. The death of the Chicago anarchists led to the creation of May 1<sup>st</sup> as international Labour Day, as a monument to their life and in memory of their death.

It also influenced generations of militants. As Bill Hayward, a prominent member of the IWW, later wrote; “it was the turning point in my life.”

Anarcho-syndicalist ideas also developed in numerous anarchist groups across the US. In Paterson, New Jersey, the silk centre of America, Spanish and Italian anarchists produced the paper “La Questione Sociale”. Increasingly drawn to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, they published numerous articles reporting the development of European revolutionary syndicalism, and created a silk workers’ union which was to later join the IWW.

The Paterson anarchists were also important in helping to spread anarcho-syndicalism amongst western mine workers who were to play such an important part in the development of the IWW. After working with striking Colorado miners, one of their members, Pedro Esteve, undertook a speaking tour of mining communities in the western and eastern states. La Questione Sociale started carrying a regular column entitled “From the Mining World” and by the early 1900’s it was able to boast a readership among mining communities stretching from Colorado to Newcastle, Pennsylvania.

Emma Goldman was also a major influence on the growth of anarcho-syndicalism. She was a powerful speaker and nationally known figure, who attracted massive working class support and was imprisoned on a number of occasions simply for supporting causes ranging from birth control to anti-conscription, before eventually being deported. She had come in contact with the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism at an anarchist congress in Paris in 1900, and later wrote of it;

*“...in essence, it is the economic expression of anarchism. It represents the revolutionary philosophy of labour conceived and born in the actual struggle and experience of the workers themselves”...On her return to the US, she “...immediately began to propagate syndicalist ideas especially direct action and the general strike.”*

So, numerous anarcho-syndicalist tendencies and influences scattered across the US and Europe came together to play an important part in building the IWW. Many histories of the IWW play down the European syndicalist influence, arguing instead that the US struggle evolved as a direct result of the local social and economic conditions. They point to the fact that prominent members of the IWW often went to great lengths to deny they were syndicalists, preferring to call themselves Industrial Unionists. While anarcho-syndicalists in the US drew on ideas and experience from Europe they did not simply copy European syndicalism. They developed and applied them in the North American context. Thus, the IWW reprinted many of the articles and works of the European anarchists and syndicalists, absorbing the ideas of European syndicalism, such as the general strike, and further developing those ideas in the process.

## **January Manifesto: IWW**

Basic principles of anarcho-syndicalism were clearly evident at the meeting called on January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1905, that led to the creation of the IWW. The main purpose of the meeting was to establish industrial unions. However, the influence of anarcho-syndicalism was clear from the manifesto drawn up at the meeting, which went on to form the basis of the IWW preamble. The main author of the “January Manifesto”, as it became known, was Thomas J Hagerty, who had come across anarchist ideas during the 8-hour day struggle. He reported on the European syndicalist movement at the meeting. His anarcho-syndicalist influences are evident from his articles in the paper “The Voice of Labour”, which he edited, in one article he wrote;

*“..workers must organise in proportion to capitalist concentrations in industry irrespective of trade or tool, that when they shall have acquired a sufficient class conscious majority in every industry they may be able to take over and collectively administer the machinery of production and distribution in the co-operative commonwealth.”*

In the January Manifesto, he expanded on these ideas, producing an analysis of capitalism and the failing of craft unionism similar to that of the British Syndicalists (see Units 5–6). The craft union American Federation of Labour (AFofL) was attacked as outdated and lacking class-consciousness.

Instead, he argued, in the face of monopoly capitalism, workers should concentrate their economic power into “one big industrial union” embracing all industries. The original manifesto by Hagerty saw no role for political parties, arguing that workers should organise industrially to “take and hold that which is produced through an economic organisation of the working class”.

On the basis of the January Manifesto, a convention was organised on the 27<sup>th</sup> June 1905, again in Chicago. Among the 200 delegates were a number of anarcho-syndicalists representing various groups and papers. These included a number of Industrial Workers Clubs in California, which had PLM members who had fled repression in Mexico (see Unit 7), and who were later to form a Spanish-speaking local of the IWW in California. The prominent anarcho-syndicalist Lucy Parsons also attended as a keynote speaker, having been active in the Chicago labour movement for many years. The Western Federation of Miners (WFM), led by Bill Hayward, who chaired the convention, provided the largest presence. The WFM was a radical western industrial union that had in recent years been involved in a number of bitter disputes with owners who had engaged private armies against workers. There were also in attendance delegates from socialist organisations, including the two main US socialist parties (and bitter rivals), the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) and the Socialist Party of America (SPA).

The convention produced a preamble that sought to link the immediate struggle to the wider aim of overthrowing capitalism. The main tactic was unambiguous; the newly formed IWW was to set about organising workers into “one big union”, whose aim was revolution, after which the union would take over the running of society in the newly established co-operative commonwealth. In the build-up to the revolution, the IWW would wage class war against the capitalist class, developing workers’ revolutionary consciousness in the process.

From the outset, the new union condemned racism; in fact, the convention declared that any wage earner could be a member of the new organisation regardless of occupation, race, creed or sex. Anti-discrimination and internationalism quickly became part of its culture and two of its major strengths. Racism especially was recognised as a major factor used by capitalism to divide the working class, affecting both black Americans and newly arrived Europeans and Asians. The AFofL was openly racist – for example, it produced stickers drawing the consumer’s attention to those goods that had been produced by white workers.

From the earliest days of the IWW, one source of controversy that was to take up much of its time was its stance regarding political parties. The clause excluding a role for political parties in the workers’ struggle had been dropped from the January Manifesto prior to the conference on the insistence of Daniel de Leon, leader of the SLP. De Leon, a recent convert to industrial unionism, argued successfully for political action through the ballot box backed by the power of industrial unions. De Leon was much admired by Lenin, who was later to develop his idea of using workers’ economic power to win himself state political power during the Russian Revolution. De Leon succeeded against serious opposition. Hagerty argued that politics had nothing to do with

political parties, and that political ends could only be gained through economic action. As he argued:

*“The ballot box is simply a capitalist concession. Dropping pieces of paper into a hole in a box never did achieve emancipation for the working class and to my mind never will”.*

Lucy Parsons backed Hagerty. She argued for a form of general strike where the workers would occupy the factory “taking possession of the necessary property of production”. This call for the general strike tactic to be included in the IWW constitution was backed by Hayward of the WFM who, though an executive member of the SPA, saw the general strike as the principal revolutionary weapon. After much debate, a compromise was reached under which the general strike was included in the constitution as well as a role for political action.

Reflecting on Lucy Parsons’ views of the time, here is a striking example of how anarcho-syndicalism constantly evolves. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in Britain, the general strike was the “Grand National Holiday”, where workers were to leave the workplace for two weeks, thus causing the collapse of capitalism (see Unit 2). Later, the CGT in France developed the idea into “a peaceful folding of arms”, during which workers would lay down tools, causing production to stop and forcing capitalism to capitulate. Now, the IWW were to take the idea further. Instead of walking out, workers would seize control of production on behalf of the working class, effectively locking the capitalists out of the production and profit process.

The IWW that emerged from the convention was based on a structure which divided workers up into a number of industrial sections, under the control of a central administration. It should be stressed that the IWW was (and still is) an international organisation seeking to unite workers across the globe.

## **Political Parties & the IWW**

Following the compromise over the inclusion of political parties in the IWW, the first two years of the organisation were marked by decline and bitter infighting. The WFM, the biggest grouping, and in reality, the only industrial section, left the organisation. This was precipitated by the activities of de Leon’s SLP, who sought to gain control of the IWW. The SLP clearly intended to act as political mentors to the unions, and thus treated them in a similar fashion to the Marxist-Leninists after the Russian Revolution.

The SLPs antics led Emma Goldman, who remained a supporter of the IWW, to bitterly criticise it, declaring that it was becoming a “mere appendage” of the SLP. She went on to ask whether or not anarchists who have “aided so actively” in creating the IWW should remain as members. In reply, in the same anarchist paper, “Mother Earth”, Jean Speilman defended the organisation, arguing that although the infighting was problematic and the organisation was not “completely imbued with anarchist views”, anarchists should remain within it.

At the 1908 IWW convention, a Chicago motion was passed which called for all reference to political activity to be taken out of the constitution. In response, the SLP delegates walked out to form a rival IWW based in Detroit. The rival IWW had little impact, being little more than an extension of the SLP. The 1908 convention proved a turning point. Detached from the SLP, the IWW was able to develop its core revolutionary policies over the next few years.

The IWW strategy that emerged from the 1908 convention stated that, in building “One Big Union”, the IWW would seek to “form the new society inside the shell of the old”. In time, the

point would be reached where the workers' organisation would be powerful enough to use the general strike to take over the means of production and abolish the wage system. In a nutshell, this would lead to the establishment of industrial democracy, in a workers' commonwealth. The voting strength that had enabled the organisation to free itself from the influence of the SLP had come mainly from the west coast groups. Over the next few years, it was this vibrant part of the IWW which would create the culture of struggle that formed the central essence of the organisation.

## Culture: West and East

The pacific coast delegates at the 1908 convention attracted the nickname "Overalls Brigade" and were dismissed by de Leon. They had "rode the rails" from the west to attend the convention, covering 2,000 miles and holding 31 meetings along the way. Comprising miners, loggers, sawmill workers and seasonal harvest workers, this migrant workforce came from the most exploited sections of the working class. They were the product of a tough frontier culture, and had experienced an all-powerful capitalism, which aided by the state, had used private armies and state militia to imprison, deport to other states, physically assault and occasionally murder striking workers. Often politicised by anarchism, they despised both capitalism and the state. They also had a deep mistrust of politicians and leaders in general – a mistrust that extended to the leadership of the IWW.

The eastern-based newspaper "Solidarity" described the typical western US IWW member thus:

*"The nomadic worker of the west embodies the very spirit of the IWW...their frank and outspoken contempt for most of the conventions of bourgeois society, including the more stringent conventions which masquerade under the name of morality, made them an admirable exemplar of the iconoclastic doctrine of revolutionary unionism."*

The eastern-based radical intelligentsia did not always see the western workers so favourably. Nor was criticism of them confined to the socialist intelligentsia of de Leon. Writing in Mother Earth in 1913 one anarchist wrote:

*"I saw how little regard the delegates had for grammar and truth...I marvelled that this bunch of pork-chop philosophers, agitators who have no real, great organising ability or creative brain power, are able to frighten the capitalistic class more than any other labour movement in America."*

Ignoring their alleged lack of brainpower, the western workers went on to create a working class culture and build a mass-movement of unskilled workers, which did indeed seriously frighten the most powerful capitalist system in the world.

It was these western workers who made the IWW the organisation of the unskilled, the unorganised, the non-white, the "new" immigrant, the female, the child and, above all, the oppressed – all of whom were spurned by the likes of the socialist parties and the AFofL. At the founding convention, Hayward had argued that the

IWW would "go into gutter to get at the mass of workers and organise them". It was the spirit of the western workers that enabled the IWW to achieve this.

To organise unskilled workers in the west was no easy task. The western US was far less industrialised than the east. The workers were largely migrant and so had no permanent workplace through which they could be physically organised. As an alternative, western workers made

the “mixed local” the basis of their organisation. Centred on the union hall, the mixed local was a geographically based organisation, which included both the employed and unemployed. This contrasted with the workplace-based locals in much of the eastern IWW.

Being based outside any particular workplace type, the mixed locals involved themselves much more in community and social struggles, in addition to the workplace. For example, western locals became increasingly involved in birth control agitation. They circulated “Women Rebel”, printed the first 1,000 copies of “Family Limitation”, and challenged the legal prohibition against its distribution. The locals provided a network that actively sponsored rallies and meetings, and generated solidarity and support for legal defence of birth control advocates. Locals in California, Arizona and Texas also aided the PLM in Mexico (see Unit 7), providing support and protection from the authorities for PLM members as well as acting as recruiting centres for IWW members who joined the PLM guerrilla army.

The union hall began to evolve as the centre of working class organisational life, and developed into the local intellectual and cultural centre. Here was to be found the basis of an alternative working class culture centred on the idea of solidarity and struggle. Combining art and politics, the western IWW groups produced plays, poems, songs and cartoons. In meaningful, emotional and personal expressions, wobblies (as IWW members became affectionately known) sought to analyse the world from a working class perspective and create a rich culture of both unity and diversity.

It is difficult to overestimate how important this cultural anarcho- syndicalism was to the IWWs success (or indeed, how important it remains today). Through it, the IWW was able to unite migrant workers hailing from very diverse backgrounds. With 60 papers, a famous song-book, and many pamphlets and books, the IWW constantly hammered home the idea of solidarity as the founding principle on which the new world would be built, while exposing the hypocrisy inherent in the dominant values of civil society. Through practice, it proved the possibility of creating an anarcho-syndicalist culture within the current culture imposed on society by government and business elites. The wobblies saw this as not only crucial to the growth and integrity of the organisation, but as the beginning of the evolution of the culture of the future society.

So, with basic cultural and political tools, the IWW set about organising the migrant workforce within the so-called “jungles” that grew up on the outskirts of towns and beside railroads. As one commentator wrote at the time, the IWW “put a song in the mouth and solidarity in the heart of the hobo”. The IWW attracted the illiterate, despised, half starved migrant workers not so much on the basis of its economic power in the workplace, but through its ability to give the down-trodden a sense of worth, self-respect, hope — and even restore and engender confidence.

## **Free Speech**

From the culture of solidarity and self-respect emerged the famous free speech campaign which propelled the IWW to national prominence prior to the First World War. More specifically, it grew out of the struggle against employment agencies (or employment sharks, as they were more commonly known). These agencies operated out of gateway towns and cities for the mining, lumber, and agricultural industries in the west. They charged workers a fee for sending them to non-existent jobs, or to jobs where the manager would (for a cut of the fee) sack workers on their first day, in readiness for the next day’s supply (of workers and fees). These and many

other tactics of daylight robbery of the least well off led the local IWW to launch a campaign against the agency in Missoula, Montana and Spokane, Washington. They called for a boycott of the agencies and for workers to be recruited from union halls — in a similar fashion to the CGT’s campaign that had been recently successful in France. As part of the campaign “soapbox orators”, the most common form of IWW agitation, were set up outside employment agencies denouncing their corrupt practices. In response, the state police prohibited street speaking.

There followed a number of articles in the IWW paper discussing the tactics of French, Italian and Spanish workers in upholding free speech. Soon after, the tactic used by Italian workers was adopted, whereby workers were arrested until all the jails were full.

The call went out in the western-based paper *Industrial Worker (IW)* to all “who hate the tyrannical oppression of the police” to go to Missoula. In both Missoula and Spokane workers used songs, many rapidly written and tailored to the situation, to expose and ridicule the employment sharks. They were promptly arrested and the prisons rapidly became full, forcing the authorities to back down.

In the process of winning the campaign, the IWW was also able to expose the brutality of the US prison system. In Spokane, having been arrested, Elizabeth Flynn found that the police used the jail inmates as captive objects for their sexual gratification, and they routinely raped inmates. The resulting publicity caused an outcry, furthering the cause of the IWW and putting the state on the defensive.

The tactic of literally forcing their way into prison fitted the culture of the western IWW, as it enabled it to demonstrate its contempt for the capitalist and legal system. In the period 1908–16, the free speech campaign became the focus of a bitter battle between the IWW and the US state, during which some 5,000 IWW members were imprisoned. The battles became increasingly violent, as state and capitalist newspapers ran headlines such as “hanging is too good for them” and “they would be much better off dead for they are useless to the human economy”, thus whipping up racism and prejudice across North America. The state violence against the IWW was culminated in the Everett massacre in 1916, when police and vigilantes opened fire on unarmed workers in cold blood.

## **Industrial Direct Action**

The emphasis on community, culture and free speech did not prevent the IWW from also taking on the capitalists in the workplace. After a difficult few years, by 1910 the IWW had recovered some of its early strength and had organised at least 20 strikes, ranging from Mexican gas workers, to farm hands in Oregon, to window cleaners in Providence. Perhaps the most prominent strike of this year took place in Goldfield, Nevada, where the IWW had attempted to organise all of the 30,000 population. They won an 8-hour day and a minimum wage of \$4.50 in the town, before being brutally repressed by the state militia. By 1912, the IWW was strong enough to embark on what were to become 2 of the most famous strikes at Lawrence and Paterson.

Lawrence was a textile town in Massachusetts, where some 30,000 mainly newly arrived immigrant workers toiled in appalling conditions. Organising was particularly difficult, as the workforce was made up of men, women and children from over 12 countries, most of whom spoke different languages. Gurley Flynn, one of the main IWW organisers during the strike, estimated



that only 8% of the strikers were born in the US. At the start of the dispute, the IWW already had 400 members in the town.

Within a few months they were organising a dispute involving 30,000. The Lawrence strike took on an insurrectionary nature from the outset. The IWW made no attempt to play down its revolutionary ideas; on the contrary, they sought to raise revolutionary consciousness among workers. The state brought in 1,500 militia, backed up by the police.

During the months-long bitter dispute, these forces used guns; bayonets and clubs to try and force workers back to work, resulting in a number of deaths. Hundreds were arrested, some on false murder charges. Despite this repression, the IWW was able to organise a tremendous victory, with the pay of unskilled workers being raised by 25%. As a result, the American Woollen Federation was also forced to increase wages by 8% across 32 American cities. The strike sent shock waves across American capitalism and acted as a rallying cry for the unorganised.

Paterson was next, in 1913. As already noted, this silk weaving centre on the outskirts of New York already had a strong anarchist tradition. The IWW sought standardised improved wages and conditions for the town's 25,000 workers. However, after months of strike action, with ruthless state militia activity, several workers killed and hundreds imprisoned, the workers were forced to return to work and the strike ended in failure. This was a bitter blow for the workers, the consolation being that both Lawrence and Paterson had received national coverage, ensuring that the IWW was now seen as the formidable organisation of the unskilled worker.

## Centralisation

Behind the growth and success of the IWW, controversy was beginning to grow regarding internal democracy in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. The concern of the western locals was that the IWW was too centralised. At the 1911 convention, western delegates had attempted to pass resolutions calling for the power of the General Executive Board (GEB) to be reduced and devolved to the regions. Though defeated, the resolutions reflected a growing rift between the eastern and western wings of the organisation. Reporting on the convention, the eastern based IWW paper *Solidarity* argued:

*"We see in the west individualism...that scoffs at group initiative by general officers and executive boards...and conceives...of 'direct action' in all things through the 'rank and file'"* adding that; *"in the eastern industrial centres there is a need for a centralised union."*

At the following convention in 1912, centralisation again reared its head. This time the eastern sections put forward motions arguing for the free speech campaign to be brought under GEB control. This outraged the western delegation and reinforced their fears of increasing centralisation. However, soon after, the controversy regarding centralisation was temporarily dropped, as the west and most of the east coast united against moves to change IWW tactics.

The issue was whether to change the IWW approach of building one big new union to one of working within existing unions to make them revolutionary (the so-called 'boring from within' approach – see Unit 6). The British syndicalist Tom Mann, on a speaking tour of the US, raised it. Critics of the IWW's dual union approach pointed to the growing success of the British Syndicalists, whereas the dual unionist British section of the IWW remained tiny. However, as Hayward was quick to point out, conditions were different in the US in that the only major union federation, the AFofL, refused to organise unskilled workers. Thereafter, the attempt to alter IWW strategy

was soon defeated and, by the 1913 IWW convention, the bitter conflict over centralisation had resumed.

The 1913 IWW convention is often portrayed as a conflict between anarchist de-centralisers on the west coast and the more socialist centralisers of the east coast. This assessment is too simplistic. The division between east and west in many ways reflected two different cultures based on different conditions. To the eastern IWW, workplace organisation was far more important. They argued for far greater central organisation that would concentrate on workplace issues as a way to ensure a stable membership in the workplace. Though the IWW had steadily grown, its inability to establish long-term workplace membership once local disputes were over was of major concern to the eastern organisation. The west was far less industrialised, with a large migrant workforce who campaigned on a wide range of issues to recruit members.

Undoubtedly, anarcho-syndicalism was and remains anti- centralisation, so it is not surprising that many found the IWW over- centralised. That is not to say that anarcho-syndicalists would have backed many of the one hundred motions put forward by the western delegates at the 1913 convention aimed at curbing centralisation. If passed, these would have reduced the IWW to a loose-knit confederation of autonomous groups, with the attendant difficulties of maintaining organisational cohesion or theoretical and tactical unity.

The central problem for the IWW was that its constitution was hugely centralised, mainly due to the fact that it did not have a geographically based structure. The mixed locals were geographical in nature but they were only considered to be a transitional form of organisation. Under the constitution, workers with no existing industrial union organisation in the locality would organise in a mixed local until enough members were recruited to form the industrial organisation. Otherwise, all workers would be organised in industry alone. In the event, the 1913 convention ended in defeat for the western delegation. Not only did their motions fall, but also evidence that their fear of increased centralisation was justified can be gauged from the fact that a motion bringing all IWW publications under the supervision of the GEB was passed. Worst of all, due to the acrimonious nature of the debate, the whole organisation suffered, as the exchanges left the IWW deeply divided. These divisions never left the organisation, and would later rise again to the surface of acrimonious debate.

## **Rural Organisation**

Ironically, in 1914, the very tactics that the east had argued were preventing a long-term industrially based organisation led the IWW to establish its first large industrial section since the loss of the western miners. It began with the introduction of a new system of jobs delegates based on a decentralised system of collective leadership. The target was to organise the farm workers of the mid- west.

The mobile job delegates followed the harvest across the mid- west states, accompanying the seasonal migrant families, who worked in conditions that condemned them to virtual slavery. The IWW developed the idea of organising disputes just as the harvest was ripe, maximising their chances of forcing concessions from the farmers. The IWW also used a favoured tactic of western wobblies of organising IWW “Jungles”, where they attempted to improve the appalling living conditions. They also developed a system of only allowing IWW members to ride in IWW

box cars. Through organisation and strength of numbers, they were able to intimidate the railway police and rail bandits, ensuring that the IWW card became a passport for free and safe travel.

By 1916, the success of the campaign was evident. The IWW had raised living conditions of farm workers significantly, and the Agricultural Workers' Organisation of the IWW had grown to 18,000 members. Despite this, the campaign had its critics in the east, particularly from the GEB, who opposed the IWW agricultural workers' attacks on machinery during a number of disputes. By this time, Joe Hill, one of the most gifted of the many IWW songwriters and poets, had already had his song Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay taken out of the Little Red Song Book by the GEB.

## State Repression

The outbreak of the First World War in Europe led to increased economic activity and a shortage of labour. The IWW was able to take advantage of this to win concessions and recruit workers, and so entered its heyday period. By 1917, membership was at 150,000, with large industrial sections in mining, agriculture and forestry, as well as unions in marine transport, metal workers and railways. From this point on, its success and revolutionary politics combined to bring it into ever-increasing direct conflict with the state.

From the start, the IWW voiced its total opposition to the war. When the US entered the war in 1917, it again announced its opposition. Hayward declared that it was better to be a traitor to your country than a traitor to your class. The IWW continued to organise militant strike actions wherever possible. The state response was a wave of repression.

In September 1917, the state authorities raided all the national, regional and local offices of the IWW. They seized everything they could lay their hands on and arrested every IWW member they could find to serve a warrant on. Literally thousands of IWW members, along with other anarchists and socialists, were harassed, arrested, imprisoned and/or deported as the state attempted to destroy the IWW; 200 IWW members were given prison sentences of up to 20 years. In California, 43 IWW defendants sneered at the state and its laws and refused to bow to the court's authority; immediately after being sentenced to 10 years imprisonment, they left the court singing "The Union Makes Us Strong". The intense, sustained tide of state repression continued throughout the remainder of the war and after.

As well as direct state terror, the IWW was also subject to violence from state-backed vigilantes. In just one such example, 1,200 striking IWW miners in Arizona were rounded up at gunpoint by vigilantes and herded on a cattle train to New Mexico. At the end of the journey, they were placed in a Federal stockade with little food and regular beatings for 3 months. Being a wobbly during the war meant risking vigilante beatings, shooting or lynching.

In a cynical political move, the state moved to enrol the support of reformist trade unions, while simultaneously continuing the terror campaign against the IWW. Federal labour laws were introduced under which state mediation, the right to collective bargaining for AFofL affiliates; minimum pay and the basic 8-hour day were introduced. The reformist unions were quick to respond to the state attempt to win them over to the war effort. As one AFofL leader commented; *"...after the war we came out greater, grander and better understood than ever before."*

In 1919, 23 states introduced criminal syndicalist laws. Overnight, the IWW found itself liable to prosecution all over the country simply for existing. Over the next 5 years, in California alone,

500 IWW members were arrested, 164 receiving long prison sentences. In 1919 and 1920, the so-called “Palmer raids” took place.

Attorney General Palmer instigated raids on radical organisations across the US from coast to coast. In January 1920, in one raid, 10,000 people were arrested. Hundreds of IWW members, communists and anarchists were deported, among them Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.

The impact of the state terror campaign on the IWW was serious, but amazingly, not terminal. In May 1919, the membership was already down to 30,000, the majority being forestry workers. They still produced a Finnish daily paper, two monthly English magazines, plus a number of weeklies in various languages. They were also active in a wave of militancy that swept the US after the war, including the general strikes that occurred in Seattle, Vancouver and Winnipeg.

## Communist Takeover

Where state repression had failed to destroy the IWW, internal division was soon to succeed. The dispute was triggered by attempts by the communists to take over the IWW, which in turn opened the wounds of the bitter debate over centralisation. The western sections bitterly opposed the communist influenced GEB and their attempt to affiliate the IWW to the communist Third International in 1919, and they demanded the expulsion of all communists from the IWW. The communists concentrated their efforts on attempting to win over the eastern sections to the idea of statism, though ultimately they were to fail in this endeavour.

The GEB pursued a strategy based on the idea of left wing unity. In 1920, a communist who was attempting to take over the Philadelphia dockers’ local accused the IWW of loading arms for the interventionist troops in Russia. This was a long-standing local, which had been successful in uniting black and white workers. Though the accusations were later to be found groundless, the damage was done.

The GEB immediately suspended the Philadelphia dockers local who, appalled that they could have been suspended on the say of one communist, left the IWW stating:

*“The history of the Philadelphia longshoremen’s union is one of unswerving loyalty. Some have died while hundreds have been jailed as standard bearers of the IWW.”*

The IWW began to publish reports of the repression of workers in Russia, which had begun to appear in anarchist papers around the world. Those responsible were then condemned as traitors to the revolution by the growing communist movement within the IWW. The dispute came to a head at the 1924 convention, which soon descended into chaos as fighting broke out between centralisers and de-centralisers.

While the de-centralisers put forward the “Emergency Programme”, which advocated that the GEB should be abolished, the centralisers sought more control at regional and GEB level. The communists, who were now openly siding with the centralisers, made the atmosphere worse. Not surprisingly, the convention ended in a decisive IWW split, with a ‘real IWW’ being set up in Utah (while the Chicago based IWW continued). The split, so soon after the state repression, and coinciding with the growing popularity of communism, proved too much. While the Chicago-based IWW was able to resist communist infiltration and did go on to organise major strikes in the coalfields, in Colorado (1927) and Kentucky (1930), these were temporary high points in the decline of the IWW.

## Postscript

The IWW grew from humble beginnings and, in a few short years, was able to shake the foundations of the world's most powerful state and capitalism's powerhouse — the United States. In the process, it drew on anarcho-syndicalist ideas from Europe and adapted them to its own unique conditions.

The single greatest strength of the IWW was its emphasis on the culture of revolution. Unfortunately, in a relatively short time period this strength was overcome by a combination of state oppression and internal weakness. While the former was clearly inevitable and unavoidable, the latter was borne out of an uncomfortable alliance between an anti-authoritarian, pro-autonomy camp and a centralist camp — a situation made worse by the efforts of the opportunist authoritarian communists. In a nutshell, the IWW's apparent early strength of appealing to all sharing the same goals and economic tactics, irrespective of political agenda, soon turned into a fatal weakness, as party political opportunists sought to take over and undermine the deep revolutionary politics of the organisation.

## Key points

- The growth of the anarchist movement in the United States in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century was due to the combination of European immigrants with anarchist ideas and the strong anti-statist traditions of US workers.
- Anarcho-syndicalism developed through the central involvement of the anarchists in workers' campaigns.
- Anarcho-syndicalist tendencies and influences throughout the US and Europe came together to play an important part in building the IWW.
- The IWW was the only labour union to allow membership to all regardless of race or sex.
- In 1908 the IWW split over the issue of political action and political parties.
- There were differences in the IWW over the 'dual unionist' or 'boring from within' approaches.
- There was often a conflict of ideas between the eastern and western membership of the IWW around the issue of centralisation.
- After America's entry into the First World War the IWW came under increasing state repression.
- After the Russian Revolution the Communists tried to infiltrate and take over the IWW.

## Checklist

1. What influence did European anarchist ideas have on the development of the IWW?
2. How did the debate over the role of political parties affect the IWW?

3. What were the main characteristics of IWW 'western culture'?
4. In the Free Speech campaign what form of action did the IWW undertake?
5. What were the main arguments in the issue of centralisation in the IWW?
6. What were the major factors in the decline of the IWW?

## **Answer suggestions**

### *1. What influence did European anarchist ideas have on the development of the IWW?*

Many European immigrants brought with them anarchist ideas and ways of organising. They combined this with the anti-statism of many American workers to influence the growing revolutionary movement in the United States. The anarchists were in the forefront of campaigns such as the Eight Hour Day movement and developed anarcho-syndicalist ideas. 'Syndico-anarchist' groups were influential in the founding of the IWW. They also introduced many of the ideas that were developing in Europe of anarcho-syndicalist organisation.

### *2. How did the debate over the role of political parties affect the IWW?*

From the beginning political parties, such as the SLP, were involved in the founding of the IWW. Anarchists opposed their involvement arguing for a purely union-based organisation based on direct action. A compromise was reached but a split occurred over the role of the SLP. This was not serious as the Detroit IWW, controlled by the SLP soon faded into insignificance.

### *3. What were the main characteristics of IWW 'western culture'?*

IWW members in the west were the product of a tough frontier culture, and had experienced state aided capitalism using repressive measures such as, private armies and state militia to imprison, deport to other states, physically assault and occasionally murder striking workers. Politicised by anarchism, they despised both capitalism and the state. They also had a deep mistrust of politicians and leaders in general – a mistrust that extended to the leadership of the IWW. The workers were largely migrant and so had no permanent workplace through which they could be physically organised. As an alternative, western workers made the "mixed local" the basis of their organisation. Centred on the union hall, the mixed local was a geographically based organisation, which included both the employed and unemployed. The mixed locals involved themselves much more in community and social struggles and the union hall began to evolve as the centre of working class organisational life, and developed into the local intellectual and cultural centre.

### *4. In the Free Speech campaign what form of action did the IWW undertake?*

They adopted a tactic, first used by Italian workers, whereby agitators would set up on soap-boxes demanding the right to free speech and wait to be arrested. This would continue until all the jails were full.

### *5. What were the main arguments in the issue of centralisation in the IWW?*

The issue was based around the internal democracy of the IWW. The concern of the western locals was that the IWW was too centralised and they attempted to pass resolutions calling for the power of the General Executive Board (GEB) to be reduced and devolved to the regions. The eastern locals were then to argue for the free speech campaign to be brought under GEB control. This was a difference that was never resolved and at the 1913 Convention it reached a head. The

division between east and west reflected two different cultures based on different conditions. To the eastern IWW, workplace organisation was far more important. While the west was far less industrialised, with a large migrant workforce who campaigned on a wide range of issues to recruit members. In the event, the 1913 convention ended in defeat for the western delegation. Not only did their motions fall, but also evidence that their fear of increased centralisation was justified can be gauged from the fact that a motion bringing all IWW publications under the supervision of the GEB was passed.

6. *What were the major factors in the decline of the IWW?*

The issue of centralisation was never resolved and left divisions and distrust. Then, with the entry of America into WW1, state repression increased due to the anti-war stance of the IWW. This was to weaken, but not destroy, it. The success of the Bolsheviks in Russia in 1917 had a profound effect on the revolutionary movement in America as it did all over the world. Attempts were made by the communists to take over the IWW, which in turn opened the wounds of the bitter debate over centralisation. The communist influenced GEB attempted to affiliate the IWW to the communist Third International in 1919 and turn the IWW to statism. This was opposed and defeated but the dispute continued and came to a head at the 1924 convention, which soon descended into chaos as fighting broke out between centralisers and de-centralisers. The communists sided with the centralisers and precipitated a decisive IWW split, with a 'real IWW' being set up in Utah (while the Chicago based IWW continued). The split, so soon after the state repression, and coinciding with the growing popularity of communism, proved too much.

## Discussion points

- Was the IWW too centralised to be considered an anarcho- syndicalist organisation?
- What is the relevance of the IWW and its ideas for the present day revolutionary movement in the United States and worldwide?

## Further Reading

**Salvatore Salerno. Red November, Black November: Culture & Community in the IWW. State University of New York Press. ISBN 0791400891. -LI-** Especially covers the early period of the IWW, and outlines in detail the role of revolutionary culture in the organisation. A key text by any standards.

**Stewart Bird. Solidarity Forever. Lawrence & Wishart. ISBN 085315689. £9.95 -AK-** A collection of interviews with IWW members combine to form a useful and personal oral history of the wobblies.

**John Breche. Strike! South End Press. ISBN 0896083645. £14.99 — AK-** Somewhat of a classic American working class history. Well — written and hence readable, yet detailed, especially of the periods of mass-unrest.

**Howard Zinn. A Peoples' History of the United States. Harper Perennial. ISBN 0060926430. -AK- -BS-** Like Brecher, somewhat of a classic epic of American working class history, from a heavyweight thinker with a clear and quite accessible style.

**Paul Brissenden. IWW: A Study of American Syndicalism. Columbia Univ. Press (1919).** – LI- One of the first in-depth studies of the IWW, especially on the debates in the early years. Contemporary, and detailed in some areas, although rather patchy on the role of European anarcho – syndicalism in the IWW.

**Kornbluh. Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology.** -LI- Excellent selective reproduction of original IWW published material. Even includes some IWW cartoons, etc. – an invaluable primary source, though little critique (only an introduction has been added).

**Patrick Renshaw. The Wobblies. Eyre and Spottiswoode (1967).** -LI- Covers the whole period, including the post-First World War IWW. However, rather shallow and lacking in clarity compared to Brissenden.

**Sam Dolgoff. 'Revolutionary Tendencies in American Labour' In: Sam Dolgoff. The American Labour Movement: a New Beginning, LLR pamphlet. £3.95 -AK-** One of 4 essays which together contrast the revolutionary and conservative tendencies of the American labour movement. Good background and overview.

**Dean Nolan & Frank Thompson. Joe Hill: IWW Songwriter. Pirate Press pamphlet. £1 – AK-** Primer – sized biography of the life of Joe Hill – and tragic death at the hands of the state. Don't mourn – organise!

**Jon Bekken. The First Anarchist Daily Newspaper: The Chicagoer Arbeiter-Zeitung. Anarchist Studies, Spring 1995, Vol.3, No.1.** -LI- Fairly recent article about the famous anarcho-syndicalist daily paper in German.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), – BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).



# Unit 9: Anarcho-syndicalism in Argentina

## 1870–1939

This Unit sees the attention on world anarcho-syndicalism shift to South America – and the specific case study of Argentina. Virtually every South American country has had an active anarcho-syndicalist movement at some point, and space within this course simply does not allow the rich history of each to be uncovered in turn. So, a single case study it has to be. Why Argentina? Mainly because the Argentinean movement developed directly out of the existing anarchist movement. As such, it was more politically driven by anarchist ideas than the more economically-dominated syndicalism of some of the other movements in neighbouring countries. Thus, the development of Argentinean anarcho-syndicalism marks a critical stage in the development of anarcho-syndicalist ideas and tactics. It takes us closer to the emergence of modern anarcho-syndicalism – a working class movement which integrates economic and political struggle, within both workplace and the wider community.

### **This Unit aims to**

Give an overview of the conditions that encouraged the growth of anarcho-syndicalism in Argentina. Examine the theory and practice of Argentinean anarcho-syndicalists in the FORA. Look at the main issues that arose within the anarcho-syndicalist movement. Discuss the reasons for the decline of the FORA.

### **Terms and abbreviations**

**FOA:** Federación Obrera Argentina. The first Argentinean union federation that, initially, contained both socialists and anarcho-syndicalist factions.

**FORA:** Federación Obrera Regional Argentina. In 1904 the FOA formally adopted anarcho-syndicalist principles and changed its name.

**UGT:** Union General de Trabajadores. The socialist union federation formed after the split from the FOA.

**CORA:** Confederación Obrera Regional Argentina. A (majority) split from the UGT that moved towards syndicalism.

**FORA-IX:** 'Politically neutral' federation formed after the 1915 FORA conference split.

**FORA-V:** Anarcho-syndicalist federation formed after the 1915 FORA conference split.

**Patriot League:** A right wing militia formed in 1919.

**USA:** Unión Sindical Argentina. Formed in 1922 from an alliance of FORA-IX and other, non-aligned, unions.

**ACAT:** Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores. Latin American anarcho-syndicalist association.

**CGT:** Confederación General de Trabajadores. An amalgam between the USA and the socialist Confederación Obrera Argentina established after the military coup of 1930.

**ACP:** Argentinean Communist Party.

## **Introduction**

Until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, Argentina's economy was primarily based around agriculture for the domestic market, with exports being limited to primary resources. However, around this time, a major shift occurred, as agriculture was increasingly aimed at the export market. First, it was wool to feed the growing European textile industry and later beef and cereal to feed the population explosion that accompanied European industrialisation. It was the growth of this agri-export industry that led the industrialisation process and so, unlike in Europe where industrialisation had led to the demise of the landed classes, in Argentina it led to a new land owning class. Their wealth was based on the expulsion of native Indians from the land as they developed huge ranches to support the booming Argentinean agri-export industry.

The need to move agricultural produce to the ports for export led to the expansion of the railways and this, in turn, powered manufacturing industrialisation. Railroad expansion was rapid; from 2,516 kilometres in 1879 to 13,682 kilometres by 1902. Related industries saw similar expansion; ports were modernised and refrigeration factories were introduced across Argentina.

Much of the finance for Argentinean industrialisation came from Britain. As British capitalism declined from the 1880's on, British capitalists began exporting their capital around the world in search of higher returns, establishing London as the financial capital of the world.

## **International Labour**

The existing labour supply in Argentina was not large enough to support economic expansion and so it needed international labour as to attract more international finance and foster economic growth. The Argentinean government brought forward laws and inducements to attract foreign immigrants. Results were immediate, and the population rose from 2 million in 1869 to over 4 million by 1895. By this point, 50% of the population of Buenos Aires were immigrants. Some early influxes came from Northern Europe, but the main bulk originated in southern Europe – notably Italy and Spain.

The large influx of labour ensured that employers were able to impose terrible working conditions on the working classes. Agricultural labourers were barred from tenancy of the land and were the property of the ranchers – they were basically treated as slaves. The army was used to hunt down those who attempted to escape.

In the growing cities, the industrial workers fared little better. Immigrant hotels and “corticos” (beehives) were established, where living conditions were appalling and rents extortionate. Working hours were 5am to 6pm, and health and safety regulations were non-existent. Workers were not allowed to talk on the shop floor, work that bosses deemed unacceptable had to be paid for, and a system of fines and corporal punishment was used to discipline workers. Sexual abuse of women and use of child labour was widespread. A complaint meant instant dismissal, and

the employer would give the reason on the work permit, ensuring that others would not employ them. Wages were often paid in the form of “chits” redeemable only at the company store.

## Organising Resistance

Amid the horrific working conditions, the first workers’ movement began to emerge. From the outset, this resistance was heavily influenced by the ideas of anarchism brought in by some of the European immigrants. As early as 1872, a section of the First International (see Unit 3) was established in Argentina. Like its European counterpart, the International in Argentina quickly split into Marxist and Bakuninist sections. However, the influence of Marxism was to remain minimal in Argentina up until the Russian Revolution in 1917.

By 1876, the Anarchists had established their ‘Centre for Workers Propaganda’ in Buenos Aires, from which the anarchist newspaper, ‘El Descamisado’, and numerous other propaganda papers began to appear. Numerous languages were used, reflecting the multi-national nature of the Argentinean working class. In 1884, the ‘Anarchist Communist Cycle’ was established, which later became ‘The Circle for Social Studies’ and produced its own paper, ‘La Question Social’. By 1894, anarchist ideas had become well established amongst the emerging workers movement. At least three anarchist newspapers, ‘El Perseguido’, ‘La Protesta Humana’ and ‘El Oprimido’ had achieved mass circulation.

The anarchist groups were diverse in nature and many became well-integrated parts of Argentinean working class life. Amongst other things, they ran cafés, schools, libraries, study groups and provided free legal advice. They organised outings on weekends and cultural events such as plays, music and dance. Art and literature created by and for workers began to flourish, creating the beginning of a distinct working class culture separate from that of the dominant capitalist culture. In this way, over the first twenty years of the century, the network of solidarity within working class ‘barrios’ was increasingly cemented with a rich mix of social, political, educational and cultural activity.

Meanwhile, in workplaces, the anarchists began to organise unions. In 1886, a group of bakers formed one of the first unions to emerge in Argentina. The Italian anarchist Malatesta wrote its constitution and it was to form the basis of a number of anarcho-syndicalist unions in Argentina. In 1888, the bakers organised their first strike, securing a 30% pay rise from the employers. This success prompted the railworkers to announce a strike, which was also successful, and the process continued. In 1889, growing unrest resulted in fifteen strikes taking place in Argentina.

In 1890, the bakers union began publishing its own paper, ‘El Obrero Panadero’. The same year a group of Brazilian exiles started ‘L’Avvenire’. Along with ‘La Question Social’ and ‘El Oprimido’, these papers began to call for the establishment of a national federation of anarcho-syndicalist unions. Several newly created unions signed a solidarity pact as the first step to achieving this.

By 1896, there were some 27 unions functioning in Buenos Aires alone — including both the socialist dominated ones and those influenced by anarcho-syndicalist ideas. Twelve of the anarcho-syndicalist unions organised a national conference at which the general strike was adopted as the main method of struggle and the weapon to bring an end to capitalism. Within months, the anarcho-syndicalists attempted to put this weapon into practice.

The catalyst was a strike on the Buenos Aires-Rosario railway line, which quickly spread to the Buenos Aires-Tolosa line. Rosario anarcho-syndicalists then organised a general strike, and

workers in La Plata and Buenos Aires came out in support. Though it ended in failure, the action demonstrated the potential power of general strike solidarity and, in so doing; it had a profound effect on the emerging workers movement.

## FOA

With unrest growing, an attempt was made to organise a national union federation. In 1900, several unions came together to produce the joint paper 'La Organización'. This led to various discussions, culminating in a conference of 27 unions on the 21<sup>st</sup> May 1901, at which the Federación Obrera Argentina (FOA) was founded. Within months, the FOA organised its first dispute, when 1,000 workers struck at a sugar refinery in Rosario. A meeting was organised with management at which police attempted to arrest one of the FOA delegates. In the struggle, police opened fire, murdering one person and wounding several others. A general strike was immediately organised in Rosario, and workers held stoppages in sympathy across Argentina. Later in the year, the FOA organised a national strike of bakery workers in an attempt to force union recognition and negotiating rights. Alarmed at the militancy of the FOA, the government gave permission to the scabs to carry guns "for their own protection". Police raided the FOA offices and a number of activists were arrested, imprisoned and tortured. Despite this repression the strike successfully established the FOA as a national organisation. The FOA published its own paper 'Solidaridad', while various groups within it produced their own, such as 'Ciencia Social', 'El Rebelde', 'Nuova Civiltà' and 'El Sol'. This diverse and growing range of publications reflected the growing anarcho-syndicalist culture being established amongst the Argentinean working class — both in the cities and countryside.

However, division marked the FOA's second conference in 1902. Though growth was continuing (the number of unions had grown to 47), a dispute broke out between the socialist and anarcho-syndicalist tendencies. The socialists argued that the FOA should concentrate on winning reforms, while the anarcho-syndicalists held that revolution should be its major priority. Eventually, 19 socialist unions walked out.

Despite the 1902 conference the FOA continued to grow, with the 15,000 strong Cart and Coach Drivers Union affiliating to the new national federation within weeks of the conference. They launched a number of strikes culminating in a walk-out by Stevedores in Buenos Aires, over the excessive weight of cereal bags they were expected to carry. The strike led to two days of street battles between strikers and police, and soon spread to Rosario and Bahia Blanca. In response, the government introduced the Anti-Alien Act, under which the police could deport or prevent entry into the country any aliens which they deemed undesirable.

In protest at the imposition of the Anti-Alien Act, the FOA immediately set about organising a general strike, which duly took place in December 1902. This was the first national general strike in Argentina and it was a remarkable success, which brought much of the country to a standstill. Though still relatively small, the FOA clearly had widespread support across the Argentinean working class.

The state was clearly alarmed and responded with yet more repression. The City Centre was quickly occupied by troops and they patrolled the workers' quarters of Buenos Aires fearing that workers were about to launch an insurrection. The FOA offices were forcibly shut and the anarcho-syndicalist papers were prevented from operating.

Though state repression brought the general strike to an end, the experience further demonstrated the power of the general strike and the ability of the working class to organise. Spurred on, in 1903, the FOA organised several strikes, including one by 5,000 sailors in Buenos Aires port. Pitch battles were fought as the employers attempted to bring scabs in and strikers were shot.

Both the insurrectionary atmosphere and the state repression continued to mount throughout 1904, with some 188 strikes being recorded in one year. FOA organised a May Day demonstration at which mounted police led a cavalry charge, killing and wounding several demonstrators. In November, shop assistants in Rosario struck for the 8-hour day. When a striker was killed during clashes, the police stole the body. As demonstrators lay siege to the police station, the police opened fire, killing three people including a 10-year-old boy. In response, the FOA called a general strike, which paralysed much of Argentina. Again, the army was brought out onto the streets. This time the workers refused to be intimidated and the strike remained solid until the government gave in to their demands.

## FORA

The 1904 FOA conference was held in an atmosphere of heightened revolutionary expectations. It was also a highly significant event in the development of anarcho-syndicalism, as it was here that the FOA formally adopted the ideas of anarcho-communism, changing its name to Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA), to emphasise the international nature of the workers' struggle. The 1904 conference stated:

*"We as anarchists accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and must not forget that a union is merely an economic by-product of the capitalist system, born from the needs of this epoch. To preserve it after the revolution would imply preserving the capitalist system that gave rise to it. We as anarchists accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and we try to ensure that they should approximate closely to our revolutionary ideas. We recommend the widest possible study of the economic and philosophical principles of anarcho-communism".*

This statement is significant in two ways. Firstly the FORA clearly states that the unions were not the base of the future society. The syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations examined so far in Units 1–8 envisaged that all workers would join one union that would then administer the future society. In France, the Bourse de Travail had begun to be seen as bodies that would administer society outside the workplace, but they remained part of the union organisation. The FORA now recognised that although the unions would play a crucial role in the immediate aftermath of a revolution, as it developed, new democratic structures would be required to administer social organisation. Every individual must be able to participate fully in the new society on equal terms – whether they were previously waged workers or not.

Secondly the FORA placed new emphasis on the need for the ideas of anarchism to be part of day-to-day organisation. In order to begin organising the new society within the old, anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be run on the same principles and ideas that the future society would be organised. This preparation through practice would enable the working class to develop the democratic structures and organising skills that would be needed to ensure the success of the future communist society.

The FORA had developed anarcho-syndicalism an important step further. It was not enough that workers reject political parties and unite around the economic struggle. While in North America the IWW allowed members of various parties to join the union, confident that the needs of the economic struggle would unite workers despite their political differences, the FORA argued against this political neutrality, arguing that workers must explicitly adopt the ideas of anarchism.

Without this, the FORA were clear that the revolution would not succeed. Though the argument that 'all economic struggle is political and vice versa' had been implicit in anarcho-syndicalism, it was made explicit by the FORA. It was not enough to unite around a revolutionary-inspired economic struggle; workers must also unite around the ideas and principles of anarchism. By arguing that the union should seek to 'approximate closely to our revolutionary idea', the FORA sought to build an organisation that was so infused with anarchist ideas that the day-to-day running of the union used the same principles that would power the future society. This way, the economic struggle would not take preference over or become detached from the revolutionary goal. Anarchism and anarchist organisation would prevent a drift to reformism.

By 1904, the FORA had both ideas and commitment to action. This was a combination which the Argentinean state and capitalism viewed as a major threat. The success of FORA in organising the first general strike was enough to convince some within the army that the social democratic government would be unable to control the situation. A military coup was attempted in 1904, but was easily put down by government forces but, as is so often the case, this was enough to persuade the social democratic government that something had to be done to placate the military. The government therefore introduced a 'State of Siege'. Over the next forty years the Argentinean State instigated numerous 'State of Siege' episodes, and they became synonymous with state brutality. During this first episode, FORA offices were raided and activists tortured and then deported.

## **Rent Strikes**

The state repression brought misery to thousands of FORA activists, but it did not prevent the FORA from continuing to organise. In 1906, with the 'State of Siege' relaxed, 105 unions attended the FORA conference. By 1907, the FORA was able to turn its growing organisational strength into large-scale action. A 24-hour general strike was organised in support of the fight for the 8-hour-day, which was supported by the socialist union, the UGT. During the strike, marines stormed the dockers' union office in Bahía Blanca, killing a number of workers. At the funerals, police opened fire on the mourners, killing at least one person. This resulted in gun battles between workers and troops in most of Argentina's major cities. A revolutionary atmosphere once again gripped the country.

In 1907, some 231 strikes were organised in Argentina, one of the FORA-organised strikes, which 'went national', was a rent strike in Buenos Aires. Massive immigration had caused a housing shortage, which landlords had exploited by charging extortionate rents. Anarchists and socialists had long agitated against the rent increases, inciting people to direct action or electoral reform accordingly. It was this background that led to the mass-withdrawal of rents. Eduardo Gilimon, an anarchist activist in Buenos Aires gave the following account of the beginnings of the strike:

*“One bright morning, the inhabitants of one conventillo resolved not to pay their rent until it was reduced. This resolution was treated as a joke by half the population but the joking soon stopped. From conventillo to conventillo the idea of not paying rent spread, and in a few days the whole proletarian population had heard of the strike. The conventillos became clubs. There were street demonstrations in all areas, which the police could not prevent, and with an admirable spirit of organisation, committees were set up in all areas of the city.”*

The ‘clubs’ that grew out of the strike were turned into permanent bodies, adding further breadth to the working class culture developing within Argentinean society.

## **State Responses**

The combined workplace and community action of the anarcho- syndicalists only heightened the fear within Argentina’s ruling elite that anarchist revolution was not far away. They responded by attempting to discredit the anarcho-syndicalists through a counter- propaganda campaign. Police raided the offices of the FORA shoemakers’ union, claimed they found ‘explosive materials’, and arrested three FORA members. Within weeks, a bomb exploded on a train, the state claimed FORA was responsible, and a press campaign was launched. However, the fact that a number of FORA supporters were killed on the train undermined the states attempt to discredit the union.

In 1909, the state resorted to more tried and tested methods to crush the union. During May Day celebrations, the police murdered 8 people and critically injured 40. FORA again responded by calling for a general strike, which again was backed by the UGT. Over 250,000 workers participated, and this time all major cities were completely paralysed. The police responded by arresting 20,000 workers and closing all the FORA offices and workers’ centres. Three union activists were murdered during the arrests. After 8 days of strike, the state was forced to back down, releasing all the prisoners and allowing the reopening of the closed offices and centres. The victory proved a massive boost to the FORA. The growing strength of anarcho-syndicalism was reflected in the organisation of a further successful general strike on October 17<sup>th</sup> , called by FORA as a protest at the murder of the anarchist educationalist Francisco Ferrer by the Spanish state.

Anarchist ideas began to have an affect on the socialist movement. Many socialists had become disillusioned with a parliamentary politics strategy which had seen, since 1904, socialist members elected to parliament with little subsequent change. By 1906, this opposition was forced to leave the socialist party. Though it was a tiny faction in a party dominated by the middle class, it dominated the socialist union federation, the UGT. This led to a split, with the majority forming a new union (CORA) that moved rapidly towards a more syndicalist position.

In 1909, yet another ‘State of Siege’ was imposed by the state after the murder of Colonel Ramon Falcon, who had led the charge against the May Day demonstration. Union offices and centres were closed as well as the revolutionary press, including the now-huge circulation daily paper ‘La Protesta’. As soon as the State of Siege was lifted in January 1910, La Protesta reappeared, and was joined by another anarcho-syndicalist daily evening paper, ‘La Batalla’. Within weeks, the FORA announced a general strike for May 25<sup>th</sup> , the anniversary of Argentinean independence from Spain. At the same time, it called for repeal of the Anti Alien Act, the freeing of all political prisoners and the end of military conscription.

In the build-up to the strike, the authorities became increasingly alarmed that it would turn into an attempt by the workers to seize power. On May 13<sup>th</sup>, they began to arrest anarcho-syndicalists, including the editors and producers of *La Protesta* and *La Batalla*. As the day of the strike drew near, the number of arrests increased. By the eve of the strike, some 20,000 anarcho-syndicalists had been imprisoned. Despite the mass-arrests, the strike went ahead. The government responded with massive repression. The printing presses of numerous anarchist papers were destroyed and workers centres and FORA buildings were burned down. Martial Law was declared and the government passed 'The Law of Social Defence', under which any immigrants who had links with anarchist groups were refused entry, permission was needed to hold any form of meeting, and incitement to strike was made a criminal offence with those convicted sent to prison.

Anarchist organisation continued to function underground. The State of Siege was lifted in early 1913, and the unions emerged from their underground activity. However, two years of repression had left its mark on union thinking and many weary activists were growing impatient for a significant breakthrough.

## **CORA and Split**

After its formation, the CORA moved rapidly from a position of conditional acceptance to outright opposition of political parties. Instead of parliamentary action, they began to argue for political neutrality, under which workers would unite around the economic struggle. They called for unity and argued that the CORA and FORA should merge. FORA rejected the calls. At the 1914 CORA conference, it was decided to dissolve the organisation and for all members to join the FORA en masse. Most CORA affiliates were hostile to anarchism and so this move caused confusion and division in the FORA. The 1915 FORA conference became a bitter debate as to the nature of anarcho-syndicalism and resulted in a motion under which workers would unite around the economic struggle, staying aloof from party politics. This was the position of political neutrality, reverting to the stance of the FOA, toning down the commitment to anarchism. The move caused uproar and a number of unions walked out in protest, leading to a major split in FORA. The FORA-V refused to recognise the 1915 conference, arguing that CORA had hijacked it, while the FORA-IX adopted the political neutral stance passed at the conference.

Although the FORA-IX continued to grow it drifted towards reformism. Whether through devious tactics of party political socialists or too much concentration on day-to-day issues such as striking for better conditions, its watering down of anarchism also contributed directly to the drift. By 1917, its commitment to the general strike had been reduced from "a major resource of the proletariat in its revolutionary education and the means of destroying capitalism to be used without limitation", to a tool for use "only when it is exercised with intelligence and energy to repulse the aggression of capitalism".

This drift gathered pace after 1916, when electoral reform and extended voting rights led to the election of the Radical Party to government. The new government called on both the middle and working classes to support its bid to modernise the Argentine economy by opposing the capitalism of the conservatives and foreign elites. In response, the FORA-IX leadership decided to negotiate with this new government, which led to the development of relations between President Yrigoyen and the FORA-IX general secretary Francisco Garcia. As a result, limited ne-



gotiation mechanisms were re-established, under which joint manage-worker bodies were set up, where the government acted as arbitrator. Behind this new special relationship, the government aim was clear – to consolidate “moderate” unionism as a counterweight to the FORA-V.

By 1919, the international socialists had gained a number of seats on the executive committee and had formed a political group within the FORA-IX. This group was to split away to form the Communist Party after a bitter debate within the FORA-IX, which helped to contribute to its eventual collapse.

The strong anarchist commitment of the FORA-V prevented it from negotiating short-term gains by entering into agreements with bosses and the state. As a result, the FORA-V was unable to grow at anything like the pace of the FORA-IX. Nevertheless, whenever the opportunity presented itself, action was forthcoming. One of the principal successes of the FORA-V was in organising the meatpackers’ strike in Berisso. From the outset, strikers went throughout working class areas within the town explaining the situation and gaining the backing of the local community. As a result, local shops offered food and barber shops gave free shaves to strikers, while a boycott was organised of those businesses siding with the factory owners. Women made up a large part of the workforce and they organised a women’s support group, which organised mass picketing against the state’s attempt to move in scabs. Rail workers helped boycott the plants and other companies supplying fuel. Workers derailed scab trains manned by troops. By such methods, the FORA-V were able to unite workers in the locality against the capitalist class.

## **Class War and Backlash**

In early 1918, tension between the state and workers grew once more, as workers went onto the offensive, inspired by the news of the Russian Revolution. In January 1919, the police launched a fierce attack on strikers at the Vasena metallurgical plant in Buenos Aires, killing several workers. In response, the FORA-V called for a general strike against state repression. The following day a 200,000 strong march, led by the FORA-V general council and 200 hundred armed workers, was organised. At the Vasena plant, police opened fire on the demonstrators. The workers returned fire, with the police being eventually overwhelmed. In response, the Government ordered troops to march on the city.

Fearful of being outflanked, the FORA-IX called for a 24-hour strike, while behind the scenes they attempted to negotiate a deal to end it. However, the strike soon spread across the country. The state ordered troops backed by the newly formed ‘Patriot League’ (a right wing militia) to break the strike. They attacked working class areas throughout Argentina, burning and murdering as they went. As the Patriot League was sent into the mainly Russian born Jewish population, the cold-blooded slaughtering and burning grew to new heights. After a week of terror, the strike crumpled as workers were literally beaten back to work. Once the strike was over, the true horror of the police repression became clear. Over 700 workers had been murdered in 5 days, with thousands wounded and some 55,000 imprisoned.

In early 1920, equally barbaric state brutality spread to the countryside. With the end of the First World War, wool prices had fallen as the world economy went into recession, and this had led to widespread unemployment in rural Argentina. In 1920, shepherds in Patagonia launched a strike backed by FORA port workers (the FORA-V had always sought to organise agricultural workers and, by 1920, had 30,000 members).

One General Varela led the state troops into the area. What followed must go down as one of the worst episodes in the history of working class struggle. Varela got his troops to round up the workers and massacred them, after first forcing them to dig their own graves. Thousands of workers were put to death in a wave of killing that lasted several months. With the workers defeated, the British landowners of the area organised a reception for Varela, at which they honoured him and sang, "For he's a jolly good fellow".

After the strike, the right moved to consolidate their position. Backed by employers, the military, sections of the church, and even sections of the Radical Party, the Conservative opposition established the Patriotic League as a permanent organisation. The 'White Guard', as they became known, were recruited from the sons of the oligarchy, and became the assault guards of a new alliance within Argentina's elite. This new alliance preached a racist nationalism aimed at asserting Hispanic values against the 'flood' of foreign culture. It argued for a strong state and against parliamentary democracy. It increasingly identified with the fascist movement then being organised by Mussolini in Italy. If the new alliance thought its savagery of 1919-20 would destroy the revolutionary movement it was soon mistaken. In the months following, strikes increased, with some 259 strikes occurring, involving 100,000 workers. The repression had strengthened the position of the FORA-V, since it confirmed to many workers the reason and logic of the anarcho-syndicalist hostility to the state. The FORA-Vs membership grew rapidly, reaching 180,000 by 1921. At the same time, the FORA-IX's 'special relationship' with the Radical Party government during the repression discredited it in the eyes of many workers.

## **Drift to Marxism**

By 1920, the Russian revolution began to cause political confusion among anarcho-syndicalists, as we have seen elsewhere. The Argentinean labour movement was no exception. Where the state had failed, it was to be Marxism that was to succeed in putting a stop to the revolutionary zeal of the FORA-V.

When news of the Russian revolution first reached Argentina, it gave rise to widespread celebration among the working class. Initially, the majority of the labour movement supported the revolution, albeit from different perspectives. The socialists argued that it was a democratic revolution, and fervently supported Kerensky, while the anarcho-syndicalists saw it as a social revolution, in which the workers controlled the streets, making the constitutional government an irrelevance.

Even when news broke of the October 1917 revolution, under which the Bolsheviks seized power (see Units 11-12), the labour movement continued to demonstrate its support. The socialists switched their support to the Bolsheviks declaring them "the most daring socialist faction which best understood at the precise moment what the needs of the country were, and moved resolutely to serve them". The anarchists also at first supported the October revolution, seeing it as "a rising of the exploited", and arguing that its methods were direct action and insurrection rather than the adherence to the parliamentary system.

By 1919, splits within the Argentinean left led to the formation and growth of the Communist Party, which joined the Bolshevik International, The Comintern, in 1920. Meanwhile, the events in Russia had split the anarcho-syndicalist movement. As news came through about the real nature of the Bolshevik revolution, a number of anarcho-syndicalists began to raise doubts about

it. The most widely read anarchist paper, *La Protesta*, began to print articles condemning the Bolsheviks as creating a new form of dictatorship.

A large section of the anarchist movement reacted with fury at the publication of the articles in *La Protesta*. Outspoken amongst these was the large anarchist Russian immigrant population, who still strongly supported the Bolshevik revolution at this stage. In some cases, several years would pass before they realised that what the Bolsheviks had created in Russia was not going to emancipate the workers, rather, quite the contrary.

The fact that such false hope was placed in the Bolsheviks by so many has to be seen in the context of the period. A sizeable minority within the world's working class in the first years of the century believed in the need for and immediate possibility of revolutionary change. It was generally held that it was only a question of time before the revolution would take place. When news of the Russian revolution reached the revolutionary working class, it was naturally felt that this was it – the start of a revolution that would soon sweep the world. The euphoria with which the news was greeted, and the effect on the working class was summed up in 'Cuasimodo', an Argentinean anarchist review magazine:

*"Russia is something more than a national or geographic category; it is the great myth which has taken root in the spirit of the people and in the consciousness of each person."*

The sense of joy and the fact that the slogan "all power to the soviets" sounded like a call for an anarchist form of society was enough to convince many anarchists to support the October seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. A pamphlet appeared in Argentina entitled 'Anarchism and Marxism (Bolshevism)', written by Locscio (editor of the anarchist journal 'Via Libre'). It provides a telling example of how anarchists caught up in the excitement attempted to reconcile anarchism with the events in Russia. In the pamphlet, he sought to demonstrate the 'anarchist' character of the Russian revolution, endorsing the soviets as equivalent to the anarchist idea of the commune, which would federate both nationally and internationally to form a new society.

A majority of anarcho-syndicalists in Argentina held this pro-Bolshevik view up until 1920, as demonstrated by the fact that, at the 1920 FORA-V conference, the pro-Bolshevik tendency gained a majority, and the adjective 'Communist' was added to the FORA name. However, a year later, with news of Bolshevik repression filtering through (often via the same Russian immigrants who at first so avidly had supported the revolution) the anarcho-syndicalists began to reassess the Russian revolution. At the 1921 FORA conference, the idea of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' was roundly condemned, and the name was reverted back to the FORA-V.

Among many workers the anti-soviet line was far from popular, and the FORA-V initially suffered a decline in membership. However, it had recovered sufficiently enough by 1923 to organise a general strike in protest of the murder of Kurt Wilkens, a young (formerly pacifist) anarchist who had murdered General Varela, the butcher of Patagonia. In the same year, FORA-V also launched a strike in support of Sacco and Vanzetti, the two Italian anarchists facing execution on trumped up charges in the USA. The campaign to free Sacco and Vanzetti was truly international and, though it tragically ended in failure, it remains a timeless testament to anarcho-syndicalist internationalism.

On the other hand, the FORA-IX, already weakened by the pact with the radical government, was dogged by splits and infighting caused by the events in Russia. The formation of the Communist Party saw key leaders leave, further weakening the organisation. By 1921, on the brink of collapse, the FORA-IX sought an alliance with other non-aligned unions, changing its name to

the Unión Sindical Argentina. On this, the communists rejoined, only to split into three warring communist factions, leading to a further collapse in union membership.

## **1920s: Internationalism**

During the mid-late 1920's, a relatively booming economy brought respite from poverty, as wages and conditions began to rise. As the Argentinean economy began to move away from dependence on agri-exports, problems arose for the FORA-V over their method of organisation. In the face of growing industrialisation, the need for workers to organise on an industrial basis was becoming imperative. While the strength of anarchist ideas had enabled the FORA-V to resist the pull of communism and the Russian revolution, however, it also held a deep mistrust of centralisation, which led it to reject the idea of industry-wide union organisation. Indeed, at the 1923 FORA- V conference, the port workers union was expelled for organising in an industrial federation. This was to prove a costly mistake that was to later benefit the communists, who, with growing industrialisation, began to advocate industrial unions.

By the late 1920s, the economic downturn, which was to lead to, the 1930s slump, was in evidence. As working conditions came under attack and profits began to be squeezed, so predictably, the workers began to become increasingly militant. Throughout 1929, the Argentinean economy was hit by wave after wave of workers' unrest. The FORA-V again began to grow rapidly. Over 100 unions were present at the 1929 conference.

The first all Latin American anarcho-syndicalist conference also took place in Argentina in 1929. Groups attended it from Bolivia, Guatemala, Uruguay, Costa Rica, Brazil, Mexico and Paraguay. The result was the creation of the Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores (ACAT). In later years, many other Latin American countries were to join ACAT.

Buoyed by this new alliance of Latin American states, the FORA-V's newspaper (now entitled 'Organizacion Obrera') announced a new dawn for Latin American anarcho-syndicalism. Sadly, this optimism was short-lived with regard to FORA-V. In 1930, the troops led by General Uriburo staged a coup and overthrew the Radical Government. The aim was to install a full-blown capitalist corporatist system under which only state-controlled unions would be allowed.

## **Military Coup**

The coup leaders quickly moved against the FORA and unleashed yet another wave of repression. Right wing death squads were used to hunt down anarcho-syndicalists. The death penalty was imposed for the crime of distributing subversive literature. All the FORA buildings were either evicted or burned down. Printing facilities were closely targeted in an attempt to silence the rich diversity of the anarchist press.

The FORA, again forced underground, still managed to produce a paper called 'Rebelión'. The penalty for distribution was summary execution. Unknown numbers of anarcho-syndicalists were murdered, deported or forced to flee. This time, the sheer unadulterated scale and brutality of the repression was such that it virtually wiped out the FORA as an organisation.

While brutally repressing the FORA, the coup leaders allowed a new moderate trade union movement to organise — the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT). The new union declared itself neutral regarding the coup and stated that it would seek a "professional relationship"

with the state forces (which were still systematically murdering members of the FORA). While the CGT made its peace with the brutal coup leaders, working class conditions plummeted. By 1932, wages had dropped by over 25%. The 8-hour- day, which had been won after prolonged struggle by the FORA, came under attack across the country. The right to Saturday afternoon off was lost, and unemployment soared.

## **Communist Party**

By 1935, a new force was beginning to make its mark within the Argentinean labour movement – the Argentinean Communist Party. After numerous splits, it had established a form of unity around strict centralised control. Like other Communist Parties around the world, the ACP had, by this time, rejected class struggle as ‘ultra left’ and instead adopted the ‘popular front’ strategy, which sought to build alliances with socialists and social democrats. As part of this strategy, the communists entered the CGT, arguing for the creation of industrial unions to match the growing centralisation of Argentinean capitalism. By 1941, the communists dominated the four largest industrial unions, accounting for 95% of union growth between 1936 and 1943.

The emergence of these industrial unions made the communist party the most influential force within the Argentinean working class by the late 1930s. However, this position of strength became a disaster for the working class, as the communists obediently followed the line dictated by Stalin. The communists announced in 1941 that there was “no opposition between capitalism and workers, only between those supporting democracy and those serving Nazism”. This led to the absurd position of distinguishing between ‘Nazi’ firms, such as Siemens and Beyer, and democratic firms such as the British- owned railways.

The ACP called for workers to make sacrifices and actively undermined disputes in the democratic allied owned firms, while seeking to organise workers’ unrest among German companies’ workforces. Thus, as the Second World War continued, the communists aligned with the pro-British and rabidly anti-union Argentinean land-owning classes, while alienating themselves from workers in the largely German-owned manufacturing sector. It was this absurd position that Perón was to exploit, as he sought to build a nationalist-based trade union movement, which was later to help propel him to power, before coming under his strict state control.

## **Postscript**

The FORA developed a highly sophisticated brand of anarcho- syndicalism, which combined agrarian, industrial, and strong political and cultural elements, as well as intense solidarity and fighting spirit. Despite withstanding several brutal periods of state repression and coming out fighting, the FORA in Argentina was eventually subdued by a mixture of post-Russian Revolution communism, and a particularly barbaric mass slaughter of many hundreds of anarcho-syndicalists by the military in the 1930s.

By 1940 it had been able to re-establish itself in a number of industries, but suffered from its refusal to countenance industrial unions and from a long-term drift of the wider labour movement into reformism. In the 1940s, it again came under systematic attack by the state, this time the Perónist regime, in what was to become a familiar pattern for most of the post war period; brief periods during which the FORA began to organise, followed by brutal repression. The FORA has

managed to survive throughout, and is still active today, both within Argentina and the wider International Workers' Association.

## Key points

- The growth of the agri-export industry led the industrialisation process in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the economic expansion required international labour to attract more international finance and foster economic growth.
- Anarchist ideas were at the forefront in the Argentinean labour movement and anarchists established the first labour organisations.
- The anarchist groups became well-integrated parts of Argentinean working class life. Solidarity within working class 'barrios' was increasingly cemented with a rich mix of social, political, educational and cultural activity.
- The FOA became a specific anarcho-syndicalist union federation changing its name to the FORA.
- The FORA argued that the unions were not the basis of the future society. They placed great emphasis on the need for anarchism to be part of day-to-day life. To begin organising the new society within the old, anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be run on the same principles and ideas that the future society would be organised.
- Internationalism was important to the FORA and they were present at the founding of the IWA in 1921. They also organised the first Latin American anarcho-syndicalist conference, which took place in Argentina in 1929. The result was the creation of the Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores (ACAT).
- A deep mistrust of centralisation within the FORA led it to reject the idea of industry-wide union organisation. This was to prove a costly mistake that was to later benefit the communists, who, with growing industrialisation, began to advocate industrial unions.

## Answer suggestions

### *1. How did the anarchist movement establish itself within the Argentinean working class?*

From the beginning anarchists established their 'Centre for Workers Propaganda'. Anarchist newspapers began to appear in numerous languages reflecting the multi-national nature of the Argentinean working class. By 1894 at least three anarchist newspapers had achieved mass circulation. The anarchists remained well-integrated within Argentinean working class life, organising and running cafés, schools, libraries, study groups and providing free legal advice. They organised outings on weekends and cultural events such as plays, music and dance creating the beginning of a distinct working class culture separate from that of the dominant capitalist culture. In workplaces, the anarchists began to organise the first unions and so the network of solidarity within working class 'barrios' was increasingly cemented with a rich mix of social, political, educational and cultural activity.

*2. What were the main differences between the FOA and the FORA?*

The FOA contained both socialist and anarcho-syndicalist unions. It stressed that unions were the natural organisations for the struggle against the state but there were divisions between those who saw the unions' priority as gaining reforms and those who saw it as fermenting revolution. After the split the FOA changed its name, adopted a specific anarcho-syndicalist constitution and the aim of anarcho-communism.

*3. What were the major contributions to anarcho-syndicalist theory that the FORA made?*

The FORA developed anarcho-syndicalism by arguing that it was not enough that workers reject political parties and unite around the economic struggle. They argued against political neutrality, saying that workers must explicitly adopt the ideas of anarchism. In doing so they saw that in order to begin organising the new society within the old, anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be run on the same principles and ideas that the future society would be organised. This preparation through practice would enable the working class to develop the democratic structures and organising skills that would be needed to ensure the success of the future communist society.

Without this, the FORA were clear that the revolution would not succeed. Though the argument that 'all economic struggle is political and vice versa' had been implicit in anarcho-syndicalism, it was made explicit by the FORA. The FORA also clearly stated that the unions were not the basis of the future society. Syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations at the time envisaged that all workers would join one union that would then administer the future society. The FORA recognised that although the unions would play a crucial role in the immediate aftermath of a revolution, as it developed, new democratic structures would be required to administer social organisation. Every individual must be able to participate fully in the new society on equal terms, whether they were previously waged workers or not.

*4. How did the Argentinean state react to the militancy of the FORA?*

Successive governments introduced 'States of Siege'. This gave the state power to arrest militants, deport immigrants, close down union offices and workers' centres and suppress anarchist newspapers and periodicals.

*5. What effect did the Russian Revolution have on the FORA?*

In common with many other anarcho-syndicalists the FORA welcomed the revolution and became influenced by Bolshevik ideas. A majority of anarcho-syndicalists in Argentina held pro-Bolshevik views up and, at the 1920 FORA-V conference, the adjective 'Communist' was added to the FORA name. However, a year later, with news of Bolshevik repression filtering through the anarcho-syndicalists began to reassess the Russian revolution. At the 1921 FORA conference, the idea of 'the dictatorship of the proletariat' was roundly condemned, and the name was reverted back to the FORA-V.

*6. What were the main causes of the decline of the FORA?*

The leaders of the Military coup used right wing death squads were to hunt down anarcho-syndicalists. The death penalty was imposed for the distributing subversive literature. All the FORA buildings were either evicted or burned down and printing facilities were closely targeted in an attempt to silence the anarchist press.

The FORA was forced underground. Unknown numbers of anarcho-syndicalists were murdered, deported or forced to flee. While brutally repressing the FORA, the coup leaders allowed moderate trade unionists to organise. The CGT declared itself neutral regarding the coup and sought a "professional relationship" with the state. The Argentinean Communist Party, like other

Communist Parties around the world, had, by this time, rejected class struggle as ‘ultra left’ and instead adopted the ‘popular front’ strategy, which sought to build alliances with socialists and social democrats. As part of this strategy, the communists entered the CGT, arguing for the creation of industrial unions to match the growing centralisation of Argentinean capitalism. The FORA, who had a deep mistrust of centralisation, had rejected the idea of industry-wide union organisation. This was to prove a costly mistake that was to benefit the communists.

## Discussion points

- What can be done to prevent the situation that arose when the CORA joined the FORA en masse in present-day anarcho-syndicalist unions and organisations?
- How important are cultural issues and aspects of anarcho-syndicalist unions in maintaining influence and relevance within the working class?

## Further Reading

**P. Yerrill and L. Rosser. Revolutionary Unionism in Latin America: The FORA in Argentina. 1987. ASP, BM Hurricane. — AK-** Excellent — using direct historical sources, the authors cram a surprisingly detailed history of anarcho-syndicalism in Argentina in only 48 pages. The perspective is generally revolutionary syndicalist, although the pamphlet also deals with more individualist revolutionary currents.

**Ronaldo Munck. Argentina; From Anarchism to Peronism Workers, Union and Politics 1855–1985. Zed Books. 1987. ISBN 0-86232-570-6. -LI-** In-depth, albeit general view of Argentinean labour history. Academic view, balanced perspective during early period, but tails off after 1911, with over-emphasis on reformist unions.

**A. Hobart. Organised Labour in Latin America. Spalding. 1977. ISBN 0-8147-7787-2. -LI-** Good overview. Detailed and relatively comprehensive — as close as any book has got to a full coverage of the huge Latin American revolutionary labour movements in English.

**Charles Bergquist. Labor in Latin America. Stanford Press. 1986. ISBN 0-8047-1253-0. — LI-** Demonstrates a very weak understanding of anarcho — syndicalism, but otherwise a fair coverage of the general background to the Argentinean labour movement.

Note 1: For more general sources on Argentina, and central and south America, try AK Distribution (PO Box 12766 Edinburgh EH8 9YE, 0131 555 5165, ak@akedin.demon.co.uk). Note 2: Books on the subject are not plentiful, but it is worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK — available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), — BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).



## Unit 10: Sweden – 1889–1939

In this Unit, we trace the development of anarcho-syndicalism back to Europe. As with Argentina in Unit 9, Sweden is chosen here as a case study, to give an example of anarcho-syndicalism in Europe up to the Second World War. As in South America, virtually every European Country had an anarcho-syndicalist movement. We have dealt with France and the early period in Britain, and we shall be dealing with Russia, Spain and Britain again.

It is worth noting here that the character and size of the anarcho-syndicalist movements in Europe varied widely. Examples of other European countries where large, prolonged periods of such organisation existed include Italy, Germany, Poland and Norway (see summary chronology in Unit 13, forthcoming).

### This Unit aims to

- Provide an overview of the development of anarcho-syndicalism in Sweden.
- Look at how the ideas and tactics of the SAC developed.
- Examine some of the criticisms made by anarcho-syndicalists of the SAC.

### Terms and abbreviations

**SAP:** Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti, the Swedish Social Democratic Party,

**LO:** Landsorganisationen, the central trade union confederation.

**SUF:** Socialistiska Ungdomsforbundet, young socialist league).

**SUP:** Sveriges Ungsocialistiska Parti, the Young Socialists' Party).

**SAF:** Svenska Arbetsgivareforeningen, Swedish employers federation).

**SAC:** Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation, Swedish central labour organisation).

**SAF:** Syndikalistiska Arbetarefederationen, syndicalist workers federation).

### Introduction

Unlikely though it may seem, some of the earliest traces of anarcho-syndicalism in Sweden appeared within the Swedish Social Democratic Party, the Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti (SAP). The SAP hoped to bring about change through parliamentary democracy. In 1897, it returned a member to the Swedish Parliament and began to gather growing support from the developing urban working class. As Swedish industrialisation took hold, the SAP was able to exert a great deal of influence over the embryonic trade union movement. The SAP encouraged the birth of a national social democratic union federation and, in 1898, a central trade union confederation was formed, the Landsorganisationen (LO). From day one, the LO tended towards

centralism and worked in a strategic partnership with the SAP to negotiate on behalf of the entire working class.

Almost immediately, a left wing emerged within the SAP, the Socialistiska Ungdomsforbundet (SUF, young socialist league). Though more radical than the mainstream of the SAP, the SUF was originally still reformist, looking to Parliament to bring about change on behalf of the Swedish working class. But, by 1903, the SUF paper, *Brand*, began to debate anarcho-syndicalism. As in many other labour movements, this debate stemmed from the growth of the CGT in France (see Unit 4).

Anarcho-syndicalism grew rapidly within the SUF, so that by the 1905 congress, declarations were made that the general strike and not parliamentarianism was the most effective tactic in the struggle to free the working class. By 1908, the SUF position had moved much further still towards anarcho-syndicalism. Later in the year, after a number of SUF members had been expelled from the SAP, the remainder decided to break away and form a new party, the Sveriges Ungsocialistiska Parti (SUP, the Young Socialists' Party).

The SUP took on a decidedly revolutionary syndicalist tone from the outset. Announcing that parliament could never serve a revolutionary working class, it argued that the unions were the instruments of struggle through which fundamental change must be brought about. Following such change, the unions would run industry themselves in a new communist society.

## **Under Pressure**

The young socialists' move towards anarcho-syndicalism coincided with wider changes in Swedish society. Industrialisation had brought greater centralisation of capital and the growth of a number of Employers Federations. The most powerful and best organised was the Svenska Arbetsgivareforeningen (SAF, Swedish employers federation). Unlike many such federations who were openly hostile to unions, the SAF sought agreements with them – but on SAF's terms. In 1908, as the Swedish economy entered a recession, the SAF attempted to gain no-strike agreements with the unions. The main weapon of the SAF was the lockout, and it duly threatened to lock out some 220,000 workers.

Concessions from the LO and the intervention of the Swedish government prevented it from taking place but, spurred on by their success, the SAF increased their attacks on the working class. In response, the LO made more concessions, until 1909, when growing unrest among members of the LO forced the unions to make a stand. On August 4<sup>th</sup> 1909, the LO announced a general strike involving 300,000 workers. The SAF responded by announcing a lockout. The action lasted a month before the LO announced a gradual return to work and the SAF began to end the lockout. While neither side had won, the stalemate came at great cost to the many working class activists who faced the sack after the strike ended.

## **Questions of Tactics**

The general strike and the SAF tactics sparked off widespread debate within the Swedish working class. The majority view was that workers should form industrial organisations to combat the growing centralisation of capitalism. Others argued for a decentralised union structure, with centralised strike funds and greater international connections. The relationship of the LO to the

SAP was also keenly debated, with a number of trade union papers arguing that the LO should adopt a position of neutrality towards political parties.

During the general strike, the SUP had argued for an extension of the aims of the action. In the aftermath, they fiercely criticised the LO leadership's cautious and deferential approach. The general thrust was that they appeared more concerned about the strike threatening the established order than winning the dispute. Despite their criticisms, however, the SUP continued to argue for a 'boring from within' approach, and sought to establish a revolutionary syndicalist group within the LO.

The SUP stepped up their campaign for revolutionary syndicalism, and began to publish and distribute articles and pamphlets of the French CGT. They also became more militant, calling for more strike action, and the use of sabotage. One of the new campaigns of the SUP was in opposition to fixed term contracts. These were increasingly being negotiated by the LO. However, the SUP argued that such contracts tied the hands of workers and could only lead to the trade union movement being incorporated into the capitalist system.

Although most militant socialists remained committed to working within the LO, almost inevitably, some began to advocate 'dual union' strategy, involving the setting up of an independent revolutionary syndicalist union, in opposition to the LO. In 1909, a group of young socialists from Skane who were proponents of this approach, attended a union meeting in Lund, where they were able to persuade local trade unionists of the need for a separate syndicalist organisation. The so-called 'Lund Committee' was formed, to begin to organise an attempt at starting a revolutionary syndicalist union.

## **The SAC**

Although a group of its members had been active in the events in Lund from the start, the SUP as a whole greeted the Lund proposals with relative indifference and their paper, *Brand*, barely commented. The social democratic papers ignored the news altogether, while a few trade union papers reacted with fury, denouncing the move as disruptive and treacherous.

Meanwhile, the Lund Committee worked tirelessly throughout 1910. Pamphlets were written and distributed among trade unions and young socialist clubs outlining basic revolutionary principles, tracing the development of revolutionary syndicalism internationally, and placing their ideas within a Swedish context. In June 1910, a national congress was called, with the aim of setting up a new revolutionary syndicalist union. While some argued for delaying this move in favour of unorganised opposition with the LO, this idea was firmly rejected by most delegates. Duly, the conference announced the setting up of the Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation (SAC, Swedish Central Labour Organisation).

Many who attended the founding conference felt that, given the discontent of delegates at the last LO conference in 1909, LO members would transfer to the SAC in large numbers. They were sorely disappointed. In its first year, SAC membership struggled to 1,000. The basic organisation of the SAC was the local federation or Lokalsamorganisationer (LS), which brought together SAC members within a given locality. It also had industrial sections, organising workers nationally within a given industry. Thus, from the outset, SAC recognised the need for workers to organise in their locality, united across all sections of industry, as well as vertically by industry.

The founding principles of the SAC argued for a militant union founded on the basis of continuous class struggle, with the aim of destroying capitalism and the state to make way for a new and free society. The social general strike was stated as the key to this revolution, and the declaration of principles stated that syndicalism was merely a tool, through which workers could organise to achieve economic liberation from capitalism and establish a new society based on libertarian communism.

Through its newspaper, *Syndikalisten*, which was first weekly, then twice-weekly, the SAC set about arguing for and developing Swedish anarcho-syndicalism. A wide range of pamphlets were produced and distributed throughout the country. Speaking tours were also developed as a method of recruiting workers and educating new members in the principles and methods of revolutionary syndicalism.

From the outset, the SAC opposed parliament and refused to participate in parliamentary debate. Although it sought extra-parliamentary activity, its position was in fact one of anti-parliamentarianism. Parliament was seen as a corrupting force that could only lead to a stifling centralised bureaucracy. Instead, it argued for self-government, under which the conventional political sphere would be replaced with a system of direct democracy in which all 'political' participation would be constant and immediate.

Not surprisingly, the SAC issued strident criticisms of the social democratic unions, castigating them for their strategy of seeking day to day economic gains while leaving the question of the wholesale changing of society to political parties, and therefore to politicians. Their alternative was simultaneous economic reform and revolutionary change, to be brought about through the class struggle of the politically-driven economic tool, the revolutionary union.

## **Direct Action**

The tactics of revolutionary syndicalism, inspired by the spirit of revolution, were direct and engaging. Direct action had to be undertaken. Strikes, blockades, boycotts and sabotage had to be organised. A relentless struggle had to be waged against capitalism. The struggle started immediately.

By 1910, Swedish laws were proposed which promoted fixed term contract agreements. The LO had increasingly looked to fixed term agreements, during which any form of action was banned. The SAC bitterly opposed such agreements, arguing instead for standard wage rates with no strings attached. These would be forced on employers by collective action. As workers became more organised, the balance of power would shift towards them, and the demands of the union would be stepped up. Such tactics could keep the workers organisation on a militancy footing, and the revolutionary spirit could be prevented from being diluted through the process of class collaboration.

Since collective action was central to the SAC strategy, planning strikes became a major concern. In general, the approach was that each strike should be planned so it would not entail relief funds. If it was not concluded in a reasonable time, it should be called off and resumed at a later date. This would create constant instability within the workplace, putting management permanently on the defensive, while ensuring that large strike funds were not required. Indeed, the idea of money-raising was rejected. Solidarity was seen as the key to winning disputes, not the ability to finance strike activity.

Sabotage was also prominent among SAC tactics, although not explicitly. The foremost method was 'work-to-rule', which was referred to as obstruction. The SAC also developed a tactic unique to Swedish anarcho-syndicalism known as the register. This was used successfully to end competition between workers in the construction industry. Workers evaluated the price of work to be done based on a price list system set up collectively by themselves. They then used their collective strength to force the management to pay the wage rates established by the system. Workers went on to establish their own employment agencies, which management were forced to go to if they wanted to recruit workers. If they tried to find ways around this, they faced a boycott organised by the union.

Though SAC attempted to spread the register idea in other industries, it was only really successful within the construction industry. As a result, SAC construction workers were among the highest paid of all Swedish workers. Not surprisingly, the LO faced constant demands from its membership to adopt the idea of the register. Militant tactics, coupled with a growing disillusionment with parliamentary activity generally, led to steady growth in SAC membership. As it became more organised and stepped up its campaigns and activities, so the trend continued. By 1920, after just ten years, it had organised some 30,000 workers. It had become one tenth of the size of the social democratic union confederation, the LO.

Growth had stemmed from an initial concentration among stonemasons in the south-eastern district of Bohuslan (an area with strong young socialist presence). The concentration of members in one area and within one industry had allowed the SAC to move rapidly from being a mere propaganda organisation to a functioning union, allowing it to put its militant workplace tactics into practice. The ideas of SAC and news of its successes spread, leading to increased membership in other areas and industries, in particular, forest workers in the north and construction workers (mainly labourers) throughout the country. Other pockets of membership were established in metal industries, mining and farming. The vast majority of SAC's members were unskilled workers. Within its major areas of construction and forestry, work was often only temporary, and this ensured a large turnover of membership. By 1935, the SAC estimated that some 250,000 had at some time been members of the SAC. In a country of only a few million people, a large section of the population had clearly been attracted by the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

## **First World War and After**

In the period up to, during, and particularly immediately after the First World War, the SAC's relatively small size relative to the LO was more than made up for by its militancy. The LO was relatively powerless due to its willingness to negotiate with management. By 1920, approaching half of all Swedish strikes had been organised by the SAC, demonstrating its militancy and the power of its members.

Unlike anarcho-syndicalist movements in many other European countries, the SAC was able to withstand the shocks of the First World War and the Russian Revolution with remarkable ease. It was steadfast in its criticism of the French CGT's failure to oppose the First World War. Equally, it was quick to realise the Russian Revolution had failed, and argued that it was in fact a political coup by the Bolsheviks, who had gained political power without any corresponding economic revolution based on workers' control. The Bolsheviks' activities brought home the

reality of political centralism. The true meaning of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was quickly recognised, characterised by minority rule, repression, violence and lack of freedom.

In many other countries, waves of patriotism combined with brutal repression of all dissent to destroy organised opposition to capitalism. Sweden remained neutral in the war but elsewhere across Europe activists were called up, disappeared, silenced or otherwise unable to continue the struggle, while in 1917, the apparent success of Bolshevism was greeted as a success by many remnant and distant groups. However, the SAC retained strong levels of membership, and with it, tactical unity and an awareness that prevented it from being attracted towards the Bolshevik model.

## Questions of Tactics II

The SAC closely observed the failure of the Russian revolution (see Units 11–12), along with the experiences of socialist parties in Finland and Germany, who had also captured parliament but failed to introduce real economic change. Such events led the SAC to revise its ideas about revolutionary change.

The SAC’s total opposition to state socialism in all its forms was not in question. That a new society was required, which was to be decentralised and based on self-governing units was not in question either. However, the idea that the future society should be run by the unions was rejected, in favour of it being run by society as a whole. New SAC principles for the political-administrative and economic- industrial organisation of society were democratic and decentralised. Self-determination would be achieved by establishing communities that were federated both nationally and internationally to ensure necessary co-operation. Organisational links would operate both horizontally (geographically between areas) and vertically (economically through unions).

The SAC began to develop explicit theory, both regarding the transition of society and the shape and function of the future society. Past revolutions were studied in order to learn from them. The failure of the Russian revolution was attributed to the pre-occupation with overthrowing capitalism, with no clear vision of the new society that was to replace it. As a result, far greater emphasis must be placed on the constructive aspects of revolution. The idea of overthrowing the old society and then building up something new was a mistake. stroke of the revolutionary pen was not enough – the revolution itself must evolve as the result of an organic process from below. For the SAC, the key to successful revolution increasingly involved preparation.

Through social studies and practical experience, both at work and in local organisations, workers would achieve psychological transformation, and develop the sentiments of solidarity, sacrifice, personal dignity, individual responsibility, and self-reliance. The resultant new moral order would replace greed – the primary motivation of the capitalist order. As this new moral order was built, workers would increasingly understand both the essences of the bourgeois order and their capacity to replace it.

The building of this new moral order was an evolutionary process that could not be achieved suddenly, through violent insurrection. Instead, revolutionary change would come about gradually, through workers gaining ever-increasing power within the workplace. Eventually, the general strike would define the moment when workers completely take over production and distribution, thus eliminating all capitalist elements. The general strike had nothing to do with

spontaneity. It would only come about after careful planning and a long period of intense technical, psychological, intellectual and moral preparation.

The SAC commitment to what in effect was a gradual revolution occurred amidst a wider debate as to the nature of revolutionary syndicalism. Some syndicalists, for example, in Italy, argued for a break with anarchism, on the grounds that syndicalism represented a new movement in itself that was superior to that of anarchism. The general idea was that new morality based on solidarity would form the basis of a new legal framework that would bind society together and ensure the social character of individual behaviour. This was contested by anarchists, who argued that individuals' need for community was the motivating force which would eventually lead to a society governed by social mores, rather than collectively imposed authority.

The commitment to a planned and evolved revolution became dominant in the SAC. The 1922 SAC Congress approved an educational plan to prepare for the future society. Buoyed by its new theoretical clarity, the SAC launched *Arbetaren*, a new daily paper, in 1922, which was to continue as a daily until 1957. Frans Severin, its first editor, announced that while the SAC had no time for Bolshevism, revolutionary syndicalists had no time for anarchism either. The fact that this statement was still somewhat controversial within SAC can be gauged from the fact that he was quick to add he had the backing of the SAC Executive Council in making the statement.

## General Strike

The SAC position regarding the general strike also marked a defining break with the idea of spontaneity in revolution. Prior to industrialisation, anarchists had envisaged a spontaneous uprising that would overthrow feudalism. Industrialisation and trade unionism enabled anarchists to escape the simplistic notion of spontaneity and allowed anarchism to establish an organisational base within society. Through the union, the working class, inspired by anarchism, could wage war on capitalism to the point at which the social general strike could overthrow capitalism. However, the SAC, similar to many revolutionary syndicalist organisations after the turn of the century, envisaged organisational planning to the point where massed ranks organised in one large union, planned and announced a decisive general strike.

Both models proved too simplistic. Early revolutionary syndicalist ideas were no different to the Grand National Holiday (see Unit 2), where workers would simply stop work and thus bring capitalism to its knees. The assumption was that workers' economic power was such that the general strike would paralyse the economy so completely that capitalism would surrender without resorting to violence. Capitalism could therefore be overthrown peacefully. As development to this idea, the IWW (see Unit 8) began to argue that the revolutionary general strike would entail workers seizing production rather than walking out on strike, in effect, locking capitalism out.

Anarcho-syndicalists were later to take this concept further. They would come to recognise that the idea that capitalists and capitalism would allow revolutionary organisation to develop to the point where it will be able to call and plan a revolutionary strike was hopelessly utopian. In post-war anarcho-syndicalism, the general strike has become increasingly viewed as part of a wider social revolutionary situation. It is typically envisaged as happening after a series of labour strikes and growing social unrest, during which the state will use increasing repression to at-

tempt to control the situation. Over a critical period, the anarcho-syndicalist organisations play increasing organisational and co-ordination roles as the revolutionary situation develops.

## **1920s: Structures & LO**

Along with theoretical development, there was action. 1922 saw SAC embark on its most serious conflict, involving 10,000 forestry workers. The dispute lasted a year and ended in partial victory. By the summer of 1926, the SAC was able to organise a major strike in the mining industry, centred on the Steipa mine. It received popular support and led directly to the resignation of the social democratic government.

The SAC's handling of the strike was widely praised and made it a household name throughout Sweden. The growing strength of the SAC began to affect the LO. Up to 1922, the LO had rejected 6 separate proposals for joint action. However, the popular support the SAC was now commanding led many LO rank and file members to call for greater co-operation, and even amalgamation. The LO secretariat retained a view of the SAC as disloyal and factionalist, arguing that it could best serve workers' interests by disbanding and sending its members to the LO.

After bitter debate, the 1926 LO conference instructed its secretariat to negotiate on amalgamation with SAC. Still, the LO secretariat were slow to act on the instruction and no immediate approach was made. The next two years were to prove difficult as the effects of worldwide economic depression began to be felt. Employers went onto the offensive, with the inevitable harsh labour conflicts — one of the bitterest disputes involving SAC mineworkers striking in sympathy with LO. Many strikes happened and many were lost. As unemployment began to rise, SAC membership began to decline.

In 1928, a small radical minority decided to break away from the SAC and form a new organisation, the Syndikalistiska Arbetarefederationen (SAF, syndicalist workers federation). Criticism of the SAC became more wide-ranging, as the SAF criticised it for its growing bureaucracy and centralisation. They argued against paid officers, which they saw as leading to the growth of a latent bureaucratic leadership within the organisation. The SAF was deliberately structured to ensure decentralised yet simple decision-making, ensuring there was no need for a union bureaucracy. SAF dues were kept to a minimum to attract low paid workers. These criticisms of the SAC structures could have been levelled at most of the revolutionary unions throughout the world at the time. Only the more explicitly anarcho-syndicalist unions, such as the Spanish CNT and the FORA of Argentina (see Unit 9) argued that anarcho-syndicalist union should be decentralised and democratic thus operating as far as possible on the same principles as the future libertarian society. The SAF also pointed out the drift within SAC towards allowing fixed period contracts, and argued that to make agreement with capitalists approved exploitation and abandoned direct action.

The SAF struggled to survive, especially as the mass unemployment of the depression started to bite, resulting in falling membership across the union movement. Despite this, membership grew from only 1,000 in 1928 to 3,000 by the mid-1930s. The SAC did all it could to persuade the SAF to rejoin the SAC, issuing numerous invitations and maintaining links throughout the split. Eventually, in 1937 the SAF was to dissolve itself and re-enter the SAC. In 1928, with the SAC going through a difficult period, the LO leadership finally acted on its 1926 conference decision to enter into negotiations with the SAC on merger. A letter was sent advising the SAC to cease



its activities and amalgamate with the LO. The SAC responded by stating that amalgamation should produce an organisation independent of all political parties, with a programme to take over production, and with organisational structures similar to SAC. The LO rejected these ideas but declared their willingness to negotiate. In 1929, the negotiations took place and, after several months, an agreement was decided upon that split the SAC negotiation team. Three of the five delegates signed the agreement, leaving the other two bitterly opposed to it.

A heated debate waged within the SAC over the next few months. The LO's propaganda and the capitalist press generally argued for the agreement and tried to paint the two delegates who opposed it as isolated extremists. At the 1929 SAC conference, the vote result was a surprise to those who hoped that merger would bring an end to SAC militancy. 111 delegates voted against merger and not a single one voted in favour — there were 9 abstentions.

On reflection, it is not surprising that the membership should be so totally opposed to amalgamation. The LO had often broken SAC strikes, and members regularly criticised the LO's strategy as reformist treason. Even while negotiations were taking place, LO members had broken a blockade organised by striking SAC building workers at a large railway construction site. After the merger attempt, the LO launched a campaign of SAC strike-breaking in an attempt to undermine it. In contrast, the SAC had always argued for united action and workers' solidarity — no SAC members were ever reported to have crossed LO picket lines.

## **Conclusion**

The depression of the early 1930s caused major damage to the SAC. Nevertheless, it recovered slowly, so that by the late 1930s its membership had reached 30,000 again. However, from then on, there was growing pressure within the SAC from the apparent success of the LO's reformism. The LO had gained considerable prestige from its close relations with the social democratic government. Legislation on holidays, rights of association, negotiation and the nationwide introduction of state unemployment funds administered through the LO provided strong reasons for workers to take LO membership. As early as 1925, the SAC had accepted fixed-term contracts based on binding agreements. By 1929, it granted LSs (locals) the right to conclude binding agreements. By 1938, it accepted fixed term contracts in the face of suffering membership due to its opposition to them. By 1945, anarcho-syndicalism had been virtually wiped out worldwide, by a combination of fascism, communism and patriotic pro-capitalist propaganda. Yet still, the SAC survived and continued to operate with a membership worthy of its status as a functioning revolutionary union.

## **Key points**

- Anarcho-syndicalist ideas first developed in Sweden within the young Socialist League, the left wing of the Swedish Social Democratic Party.
- The aggressive tactics of Swedish capitalists and the moderate stance of the LO led to the formation of the SAC.

- The aims of the SAC were for the destroying of capitalism and the state through continuous class struggle and the social general strike to make way for a new and free society based on libertarian communism.
- After the First World War the SAC came under criticism for its growing bureaucracy and centralisation.
- The SAC increasingly drifted away from its commitment to anarchism, embracing a more gradual and planned road to revolution. It eventually came to accept fixed-term contracts and other concessions it had so bitterly criticised at its inception.

## Checklist

1. What were the main factors in the formation of the SAC?
2. What were 'fixed term contacts'?
3. What were the founding principles of the SAC?
4. In which industries did the SAC initially grow?
5. What was the 'Register' introduced by the SAC?
6. How did the SAC change in the 1920s?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the main factors in the formation of the SAC?*

The main factors were the deferential attitude of the LO to the state, its relationship with the Social Democratic Party and the aggressive attitude of the Swedish employers association.

### *2. What were 'fixed term contacts'?*

Fixed term contract were deals made between the employers and the unions which guaranteed that no industrial action would take place during the time of the agreement.

### *3. What were the founding principles of the SAC?*

The founding principles of the SAC were for a union founded on the basis of class struggle, with the aim of destroying capitalism and the state to make way for a new and free society. Syndicalism was seen the tool through which workers could organise to achieve economic liberation from capitalism. The social general strike was seen as the key to a revolution whose aim would be to establish a new society based on libertarian communism.

### *4. In which industries did the SAC initially grow?*

The vast majority of the SAC membership were unskilled workers. The initial basis of the SAC was concentrated among stonemasons in the south-east. Other areas of growth were among forest workers in the north and construction workers (mainly labourers) throughout the country. Other pockets of membership were established in metal industries, mining and farming.

### *5. What was the 'Register' introduced by the SAC?*

The register was a tactic unique to Swedish anarcho- syndicalism and was used successfully to end competition between workers in the construction industry. The workers evaluated the price

of work to be done based on their own price list system. They then used their collective strength to force the management to pay the wage rates established by the system. Workers went on to establish their own employment agencies, which management were forced to go to if they wanted to recruit workers. If they tried to find ways around this, they faced a boycott organised by the union. This idea was tried in other industries but was only really successful within construction.

*6. How did the SAC change in the 1920s?*

After the First World War the SAC was critical of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia and of attempts to set up socialist governments elsewhere. However it also distanced itself from anarcho-syndicalism. It became more bureaucratic and centralised and argued for a gradual and planned road to revolution. Later it drifted to reformism by accepting the idea of fixed term contracts.

## **Suggested discussion points**

- How big a factor was Sweden's neutrality in WW1 in the growth of the SAC?
- Is the SAC accepting fixed term contracts against basis anarcho-syndicalist principles?

## **Further Reading**

**Lennart K. Persson. Syndikalismen i Sverige (Syndicalism in Sweden) 1903–22. 1975. Federativs. -SE-** Historical account of events in Sweden, particularly centred on the development of SAC after 1910. Sympathetic to and centred around the SAC perspective.

Note 1: There are very few sources in English on this period in Swedish history, with any reasonable coverage of events in the development of the syndicalist labour movement. If you wish to gain further insight into the period, a direct approach may be easiest. The SAC is still active in Sweden – for their current address details contact SelfEd. Note 2: It is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 11: Russia I – 1850–1917

The momentous events in Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had a unique and profound effect on the development of anarcho-syndicalism.

Hence, both this and the following Unit are dedicated to Russia. Roughly speaking, this unit (Part 1) deals with events up to the 1917 revolution; Unit 12 (Part 11) with events following it.

Although undoubtedly there were thriving anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements in Russia, they remained small throughout the period. These are not the main focus for study here, instead, we will concentrate on the tactics and actions of the victorious; much of our attention is on the role of the Bolsheviks and in particular, Lenin. The events in Russia cast a long shadow, as we have seen in earlier Units, and they directly and massively affected anarcho-syndicalism world-wide.

In concentrating on Bolshevism, we shall expose the true nature of Marxist-Leninism, and demonstrate clearly how a genuine uprising of the people of Russia was transformed by the Bolsheviks into the authoritarian nightmare that became the Soviet Union.

### This Unit aims to

- Examine the economic and social conditions that gave rise to the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.
- Outline the events in Russia up to 1917.
- Discuss the positions of the various revolutionary groups within Russia.
- Illustrate the spread of anarcho-syndicalist ideas during the period.
- Analyse the development of Marxist-Leninism and the rise, and eventual triumph, of the Bolsheviks.

### Terms and abbreviations

**Narrodniks:** The revolutionary movement in Russia from around 1861.

**Russification:** The process of suppressing all ethnic and non- Russian national traditions and recognise the supremacy of Russian culture,

**The Pale (of Settlement):** The area of Jewish settlement in Russia Pogroms: The organised massacre of Jews.

**SR:** Social Revolutionaries. Peasant based revolutionary party; later to split into 'right' and 'left' factions.

**RSDW:** Rossijskaja Social-demokraticeskaja Rabocaja Partija, Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party. Marxist party formed in 1898 from the Emancipation of Labour Group.

**Bund:** The Jewish socialist group within the RSDW.

**Workers Cause:** The official representatives of the RSDW in exile.

**Bolsheviks:** ‘The Majority’. The name adopted by the followers of Lenin after gaining control of the central committee of the RSDW at the 1903 congress.

**Mensheviks:** ‘The Minority’. The name given to the opponents of Lenin in the RSDW.

**Khleb i Volia:** ‘Bread and Liberty’. A monthly anarchist journal, founded in 1903, and named after Kropotkin’s book. Later to become an anarchist group.

**Chernoe Znamia:** ‘The Black Banner’. Mainly Jewish anarcho- communist group formed during the 1905 revolution. It was based in the Pale and advocated a campaign of terrorism.

**Beznachalie:** ‘Without Authority’. Similar to Chernoe Znamia but based in St. Petersburg. Both groups contained a high proportion of students within their ranks.

**Maximalists:** Social Revolutionaries who argued against the idea of a two-stage revolution after 1905.

**Golos Trouda:** ‘The Voice of Labour’. Founded in 1917, the main organ of the anarcho-syndicalists.

## Introduction

The momentous events in Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century had a unique and profound effect on the development of anarcho- syndicalism. Both this and the following Unit are dedicated to Russia. Although undoubtedly there were thriving anarchist and anarcho- syndicalist movements in Russia, they remained small throughout this period. These are not the main focus for study here. Instead, we will concentrate on the tactics and actions of the Bolsheviks and in particular, Lenin. The events in Russia cast a long shadow, and it is essential that we all learn the lessons if we are to prevent the disastrous cul-de-sac that was Marxist-Leninism ever happening again.

Until the 1850s, Russia was economically backward relative to the western powers. Russian society was based on a caste system and most people in the rural population were owned as serfs by the landed gentry. The system was barbaric, old and inefficient. Economic decline took hold as the industrial revolution swept through the west, exposing the weaknesses of the autocratic Russian system. As is so often the case, it took a war to bring home the true nature of Russia’s decline. Russia military failure during the Crimean war shook the Russian elite, which thereafter began to look increasingly unsteady. After the disaster of Crimea, the main concern among Russia’s ruling class became industrialisation. If it was to compete with western powers it had to industrialise. Ironically, in attempting to industrialise Russia, the Tsar began the process that was to sweep away the feudal system his rule depended on.

The drive for industrialisation did initially meet with some success. Indeed, by the turn of the Century, Russia possessed some of the most modern and best-equipped factories in the world. But development was patchy – both industrially and geographically, concentrated in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Russian Poland and the Ukraine. Elsewhere, but for some oil production, economic and social conditions remained medieval and so, by 1917, Russia still lagged a long way behind Britain, Germany and the US. On the eve of the Russian revolution, 80% of the population still worked the land. Still, Russian underdevelopment was relative; its sheer size had made it a major power.

The 1861 Land Reform Act, which ‘freed’ the peasantry, became a source of bitter resentment. Under the agreement, the land was divided between the peasantry and the landed gentry. To

many this meant that their right to work the land had been taken away from them. Even those who were 'given' the land found themselves having to pay for the very soil they had worked for centuries. After 1861, things only got worse for the peasantry. Industrialisation was not fast enough to absorb the rising population, which resulted in a dramatic rise in the number of the rural poor.

Unlike in Britain, where industrialisation led to migration to the towns and a declining rural population, in Russia the rural population grew by 20% between 1900–1914. Ever-increasing numbers of peasants were dependent on the same amount of land. At the same time, the state deliberately squeezed domestic consumption by raising prices. This was to allow production to be exported for foreign currency, to finance the foreign loans used to pay for industrialisation. The peasantry bore the brunt of these cuts. The result was increasing peasant unrest that was to continue up until the 1917 revolution. This unrest spread to the growing urban working class, who retained strong links with the countryside, often working seasonally between the two.

In the 1870s, the first workers' organisations began to emerge. The most important of these were the strike committees, which began to form within the workplace and which became the main focus of strike action. Though illegal and much targeted by state forces, these committees were to play a major role in the course of Russian history.

## **Narrodniks, socialists & anarchists**

During the long period of unrest that followed 1861, a revolutionary tradition developed in Russia, based on the Narodniks. This became a catch-all name for a succession of revolutionary groups within Russia. At the heart of the Narodnik ethic was a belief that people had a yearning to be free and that this would enable them to overcome oppression and create a new world based on equality and freedom. Various Narodnik groups used a wide range of tactics aimed at bringing about a mass uprising. Some groups of intellectuals lived among the peasantry as a way of spreading revolutionary ideas, while others decided that assassinating the Russian elite might be a way to spark off spontaneous insurrection. As news of the full horrors of European industrialisation began to arrive in Russia, the Narodniks came to believe that Russia could bypass capitalism through a peasant uprising that would lead to the direct establishment of a democratic communist society.

The unrest and signs of upheaval were most noticeable in the periphery of the Russian Empire. Social disquiet was intensified by national and religious persecution. Non-Russians, included Finns, Estonians, Poles, Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, constituted a majority of the empire's population. A policy of Russification, to suppress non-Russian national traditions and recognise the supremacy of Russian culture, only served to aggravate the problem. No national or religious minority suffered more from this policy than the Jews. Around five million Jews resided in the Empire, mainly in the Pale of Settlement, which extended along the western borderlands from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, the anti-semites stepped up a gear. The government issued a series of decrees affecting every aspect of Jewish life. Jews were prohibited from settling in rural communities, even within the Pale. Movements from village to village were restricted and searches were introduced of Jews living outside of the Pale, which was reduced in size. Quotas were introduced to limit the number of Jewish students in secondary schools and

universities to 10% inside the Pale, 5% outside, except in St. Petersburg and Moscow where the figure was 3%.

It was in the borderlands of the west and the southwest, and mainly in the Jewish towns, that the Russian anarchist and other revolutionary movements were born. In these areas, economic distress had intensified after the famine of 1891 and the depression of 1899. In response, artisans, intellectuals and factory workers had been forming clandestine groups devoted mainly to self-education and radical propaganda. First here, and then throughout Russia, they became the nuclei around which the two major socialist parties, the Marxist Social Democrats, and the neo-populist Social Revolutionaries (SR) took shape.

An anarchist propaganda circle had been established in 1892 by Russian exiles in Geneva. This group, which called itself the Anarrkhicheskaia Biblioteka (Anarchist Library), attempted to smuggle translations of the works of anarchists such as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta into Russia. In 1903, the first anarchist group, the Bor'ba (Struggle), appeared in Russia at Bialoystok. At the same time anarchists in Geneva produced a monthly anarchist journal, *Khleb i Volia* (Bread and Liberty), which was obtained by the anarchists of Bialoystok. They immediately appealed for more. Russian translations of anarchist propaganda were sent, as well as a few copies of Yiddish periodicals published by Jewish anarchists from London's East End. Yet even then the anarchist groups remained small. This was partly because the Social Democrats and the Social Revolutionaries, in contrast to the socialist parties of Western Europe, were militant and had effective organisations of their own.

The Social Revolutionaries were rooted in the tradition of the Narodniks. Though influenced by Marxist thinking concerning the development of capitalism — they accepted that the next stage of Russian development would be capitalism and parliamentary democracy — they also argued that this would be quickly followed by a transition to communism. The SR theorised that, under the transition from feudalism to capitalism, the peasantry would take possession of the land from the landed gentry, prompting a further revolution, during which the workers would overthrow capitalism. As such, they saw a revolutionary role for the peasantry, in contrast with the widely-held view of most Marxists, who saw them as doomed by history.

The first Marxist organisation was the Emancipation of Labour Group formed in 1883. Its ideas had taken hold amongst a large section of the Russia intelligentsia, and even among the small capitalist class. Some of these saw Marxism as ideological reinforcement for their struggle against feudalism. Meanwhile, many in the liberal intelligentsia admired the Parliamentary system and were attracted to the 'scientific' approach of Marxism, including its prediction that the next stage of Russian development would be capitalist, bourgeois revolution based on the European parliamentary model.

The authorities also looked relatively kindly upon Marxism, seeing it as a better channel for revolutionary energy than the Narodnik groups, many of who had taken to assassination as a form of struggle. The state decided that some of the more moderate Marxist groups would be allowed to operate openly. This was notable in a country where the death sentence was rarely used, apart from against revolutionary groups.

The ideas of the Emancipation of Labour Group formed the basis of the Rossijskaja Social-demokraticeskaja Rabocaja Partija (RSDW, Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party). This was formed at a conference at Minsk in 1898 but the participants at the conference were quickly arrested and it soon ceased to exist as a functioning organisation. It was left to a group of exiles to re-launch the party, along with its newspaper 'The Spark', edited by Lenin. Though small, the RSDW

was soon riddled by internal division. Two warring factions quickly formed; the 'economists' and the 'politicians'. These divisions were to come to a head at the 1903 congress.

## **Beginnings of Marxist-Leninism**

The 'economists' basically kept faith with Marxist determinism. They argued that the capitalist bourgeois revolution would be spearheaded by the capitalist class, after which a mass-industrial proletariat would develop. Over a long period of experience with capitalism, this proletariat would then fulfil its historic mission to overthrow capitalism and begin the socialist transformation of society. The RSDW should therefore concentrate on the day-to-day economic struggle in order to begin building a mass party of the working class. This would then be ready to take its place in the new parliament after the capitalist revolution, where it would begin to fulfil its role as the political leadership of the working class.

The 'politicians', led by Lenin, bitterly opposed the economists' strategy. Lenin made furious attacks both in 'The Spark' and in a pamphlet written by him in 1902 entitled 'What is to be done'. During this polemic, Lenin was to lay the groundwork for what became known to the world as Marxist-Leninism.

Lenin concentrated most of his attack on the economists' idea of spontaneity. He ridiculed the idea that through their day-to-day struggle under capitalism, workers could automatically come to see the need to overthrow capitalism. Instead, he argued, the teaching of socialism had grown out of philosophical, historical and economic theories worked out by educated representatives of the possessing class. It was the intelligentsia, not the workers, who had developed revolutionary theory. Maintaining that "without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement", he stressed that the role of the intelligentsia was vital to the revolutionary cause. Without the leading role of the intelligentsia, he said, workers could engage only in economic struggle and (at best) they would develop "a trade union consciousness", and certainly not a revolutionary one.

The party would at first be made up of the intelligentsia, who would then recruit the more advanced workers and educate them in the ideas of revolutionary theory. Lenin continuously stressed the role of 'revolutionary consciousness' within the revolutionary movement and it was the intelligentsia that would implant this revolutionary consciousness into the working class. Through this process the party would be and remain an elite organisation of revolutionaries that would lead the working class. Lenin stressed that the party must lead the workers movement and not merge with it, the party must not be a mass organisation of the working class, but instead Lenin envisaged a small party made up of professional revolutionaries who were conspiratorial in nature. These would be the revolutionary core, a cadre, who were to keep a tight grip, leading the masses and preparing and executing a revolutionary master plan in which the masses would, unknowingly, play a part choreographed by the party elite.

Lenin dismissed the criticisms of the economists who pointed out that his plans would create an organisation that would, by its very nature, be undemocratic. Lenin argued that the main organisational principle for the movement, "must be strict secrecy, strict selection of members, and the training of professional revolutionaries". In other words, Lenin absorbed much of the specifically Russian tradition of secret revolutionary organisation and welded it to Marxism. Lenin demanded that members of the party must act as agents of the Central Committee within the



workplace — as if they were members of an army. They must follow the orders of the party unquestioningly. Moreover, he maintained that the basic economic interests of workers could only be achieved by a political revolution that would, “replace the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie with the dictatorship of the proletariat”.

For Lenin the principal role of the RSDW was to lead the workers in the overthrow of Tsarism, as a precondition for the establishment of socialism. In this not only did Lenin see a different role for the party than the economists, he disagreed with both them and classic Marxism. He argued that, due to the backward conditions in Russia, the capitalist class was too weak to overthrow feudalism and so it would be the workers, headed by the RSDW and supported by the capitalists, who would overthrow feudalism, leading to the establishment of parliamentary democracy.

Lenin did all he could to ensure the 1903 congress of the RSDW went his way. Out of the fifty-seven delegates only three or four were workers. Moreover the delegates had been elected in secret session ensuring minimal representation for Lenin’s opponents. In the event, the congress did not prove as much of a walk over as Lenin expected. Firstly the Bund, the Jewish socialists, had to be forced out, then so did the Workers’ Cause. In this, Julius Martov, leader of the economists, supported Lenin. It was the six votes of the Bund and Workers’ Cause that were the difference between the two factions of the RSDW and this was to prove crucial. For Martov, the congress was an occasion to express and formulate the party’s programme; for Lenin, it was the occasion to procure an oath of allegiance from the party’s leading members to the centre. Lenin and his supporters won, and the party split into two factions, the Bolsheviks, and the Mensheviks.

## **1905: Revolution**

For all their theorising, none of the various revolutionary parties managed to even predict the Russian revolution of 1905, let alone start it. As with later events in 1917, the 1905 revolution was a spontaneous event organised by the workers themselves. The event that sparked the unrest and led directly to revolutionary upheaval was a procession of workers carrying religious icons, headed by a priest, Father Gapon. The procession took place in St. Petersburg on January 9<sup>th</sup>, with the aim of presenting a petition drawn up by liberal intellectuals to the Tsar. In the event, troops opened fire on it, killing several people. The massacre was to become known as ‘Bloody Sunday’ and it caused a wave of unrest that swept the country and almost led to the overthrow of the Tsar.

The unrest was sparked and co-ordinated not by the political parties, but by works committees elected directly in the workplace. Strikes were called spontaneously often spreading beyond a single factory to become local or regional general strikes. As this level of action proved its worth, workers began to elect delegates on local factory committees to co-ordinate action within the locality. These committees became the embryo from which would grow the Councils of Workers’ Deputies, which were later to become known as the soviets.

One of the most important early examples of works committees was in Moscow. In May 1905, a strike broke out in the textile district, where working and living conditions were terrible. At first, the demands were purely economic, including a monthly minimum wage and the abolition of night shift-work. Soon, wider demands were raised, including the elimination of factory police, and the granting of rights of free assembly and free speech. On May 12<sup>th</sup>, a mass demonstration was organised, at which the decision was made to elect delegates from all the factories that were

on strike to form a workers' council to co-ordinate action across Moscow. Throughout the strike, the workers' council organised numerous meetings, during which the demands were extended widely to include those as diverse as the regulation of workers' pensions, and the establishment of a constitutional assembly based on universal suffrage. Though the strike ended in failure in July, the idea of a workers' council was soon spread to the capital, St. Petersburg.

In October 1905, a national strike by the newly organised All Russian Union of Railway Workers led to workers in St. Petersburg coming out in support. From here, the strike spread across Russia, until every major city and town in the country was involved, and a national general strike ensued. The strike had been highly political from the start, with the railway workers demanding a constitutional assembly. Once the majority of Russia's trains, trams, electricity, telephones and newspapers ground to a halt, the government conceded defeat and announced its intention to set up a constitutional assembly, the Duma.

During the strike, workers' committees were formed in workplaces across St. Petersburg. These began to form links with other workers initially in the same industry. Next came the idea of a city-wide council of workers based on the model that had been developed in Moscow. On October 13<sup>th</sup>, a committee was formed of 226 delegates from 96 factories. This became the St. Petersburg Soviet of Workers Deputies and it was to form the model for the soviet system that was later to spread across Russia. Rather than dissolve after the strike had ended in victory, it was decided that the soviet should continue to act as a centre for workers' struggle.

Over 50 soviets were established throughout Russia in 1905, based on the St. Petersburg model. Though there were local variations, many aspects were common, such as the rule that matters of importance were dealt with by a general assembly of all workers. Commissions were often established, to publish newspapers and other publications, collect and administer strike funds, or even to collect arms. Not surprisingly, the soviets and peasant organisations began to build up a nationwide network, at the centre of which was the St. Petersburg Soviet.

As confidence and numbers grew, the St. Petersburg Soviet began to usurp government functions. For instance, on October 19<sup>th</sup> it declared a new 'freedom of the press'. Its militia began to give orders to the local police. In the eyes of the head of secret police at the time, it was becoming a 'second government'. As time went on, it rapidly became clear that a major confrontation between the government and the emerging soviet system was inevitable.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> November, with the St. Petersburg Soviet preparing for confrontation with the Tsarist regime and sailors at the nearby city port of Kronstadt in open mutiny, the state moved to eliminate the growing threat. All the delegates to the St. Petersburg Soviet were arrested. Immediately, a new St. Petersburg Soviet was elected, and called for a national general strike. Unfortunately the resultant strike was fragmented and, by December 19<sup>th</sup>, the strike in St. Petersburg was called off as workers began to drift back to work.

In Moscow the situation was different, and the talk was of insurrection. The Moscow Soviet, which had called a general strike in support of the St. Petersburg Soviet, declared from the outset that the workers should aim to overthrow the Tsar. Unfortunately, they had counted on the state troops refusing to obey orders. The Tsar, fearing that the troops in Moscow may support the strikers, moved loyal troops in from St. Petersburg. With open fighting, and thousands involved, the state's tactics were to carve up the city and cut communication between various districts of the Soviet. With weakened co-ordination and separate battles taking place throughout the city, the army was able to crush the uprising district by district. After ten days of desperate street fighting, the insurrection was over. Now that the soviets in both Moscow and St. Petersburg

were destroyed, the Tsar unleashed a wave of oppression. The resultant sustained, widespread and bloody state campaign eventually led to the virtual eradication of the soviets.

## **Anarchist Organisations**

During the Revolution of 1905, according to a leading member of the Bor'ba in Bialystok, anarchists groups "sprang up like mushrooms after a rain." Many disaffected Social Revolutionaries or Social Democrats formed, or joined, small anarchist circles. These began in the western provinces, the south and in the shtetls (market towns) that dotted the Pale then spread throughout Russia. Although the common object of these new anarchist organisations was the total destruction of capitalism and the state, there was a profound disagreement on how this was to be achieved, centring on the place (or not) for terror in the revolution.

On the one side stood two similar groups, *Chernoie Znamia* (The Black Banner) and *Beznachalie* (Without Authority), which advocated a campaign of unmitigated terrorism against the world of the bourgeoisie. While the *Chernoie Znamia* operated mainly in the west and south the *Beznachalie* were centred in St. Petersburg. Both advocated "motiveless" terror as a means of stimulating the mass of the people for vengeance against the ruling class.

Secondly there were smaller groups such as *Khleb i Volia* that concentrated on distributing propaganda, scornfully dismissing the claim of the socialists that the 1905 upheaval was merely a democratic revolution. They attacked the Marxists and their ideas of a centralised party, arguing they were no more than present day Jacobins who aimed to use the workers to capture power for themselves. They were inspired and supported by Kropotkin, who was still living in the west. He argued against campaigns of terrorist violence waged by tightly-knit conspiratorial groups operating in isolation from the mass of the people. The *Chernoie Znamia* and the *Beznachalie* were, for all their admiration of Kropotkin's goals, were suspicious of his followers, who they saw as timid and compromising. But despite these doubts Kropotkin, and the *Khleb i Volia*, continued to sanction acts of violence that they saw as being impelled by outraged conscience or compassion for the oppressed. They approved of 'defensive terror' against police units or against the Black Hundreds, who launched frightful attacks against Jewish communities in 1905.

While both the 'propagandists' and the 'terrorists' identified themselves as anarchist-communist, the severest critics of terrorist tactics were the anarcho-syndicalists. They were mainly influenced by the ideas of the French syndicalists and originated in the *Khleb i Volia* group. According to one, Maria Korn, at the beginning of the Century there had been no Russian word for 'sabotage' and that a Russian who talked of a general strike would have seemed to be speaking "in some strange, incomprehensible language." But the strikes that had begun in 1903 and the general strike of October 1905 had radically altered the situation. The anarcho-syndicalists proposed the formation of workers' unions along the line of the *bourse du travail* leading to a general confederation of labour organisations along the lines of the (then) CGT.

The anarcho-syndicalists welcomed the formation of workers' councils and soviets during the 1905 revolution as an expression of the spontaneous generation of local cooperative institutions. They saw the soviets as versions of the *bourse du travail* but with revolutionary functions to suit the Russian conditions. Open to all leftist workers, regardless of political affiliation, the soviets were to act as non-partisan labour councils, controlled from below on the district and city levels,

with the task of bringing down the old regime. This syndicalist conception of the soviets was an anathema to the Marxists, who strove to exclude anarcho-syndicalists from the soviets, trade unions and workers' councils. In November 1905, after the general strike had begun to subside, the executive committee of the St. Petersburg voted to bar all anarchists from entering its organisation. This action increased the determination of the anarcho-syndicalists to build their own revolutionary unions.

Many anarchists continued to criticise the anarcho-syndicalists claiming that, "all reforms and partial improvements were a threat to the revolutionary spirit of the working masses." Although this difference continued to brew for more than a decade in the aftermath of the revolution it was clear that the heyday of terrorism had passed. There was a rapid shift from the romanticism of terrorist deeds to a pragmatic strategy of mass action and, as government reprisals against terrorism mounted, the need for organisation became painfully evident. Between 1905 and 1907 anarcho-syndicalists groups grew, mainly in the large cities of the Ukraine and the south. They forged links with groups in Moscow and elsewhere and set up an 'organisational commission' to coordinate activities.

## **Marxists & Soviets**

The various revolutionary parties viewed the spontaneous birth of the soviets from different perspectives. The Mensheviks wholeheartedly supported them and were partly instrumental in the setting up of the St. Petersburg Soviet. Indeed, they had some influence within it, and Trotsky, then a supporter of the Mensheviks, sat on the Executive. However, the soviets did not fundamentally change the Mensheviks' thinking. Although they accepted that the Russian proletariat would lead the fight for the constitutional assembly, they argued that the 1905 revolution was the first stage of a capitalist revolution that would result on in the establishment of a western style parliamentary democracy. They saw in the soviets revolutionary organs that would fade and hand over power to the constitutional government once it had been elected. They favoured the creation of the soviets, as organs through which they could build a mass party and from which they hoped a mass trade union movement would begin to emerge.

The Bolsheviks' reaction to the emergence of the soviets was confused. They fully supported the soviets in the early stages, when they were seen as merely committees that co-ordinated strike action. Later, as they began to take on political as well as economic functions and became revolutionary bodies in themselves, their attitude changed. From October onwards, the St. Petersburg Bolsheviks were hostile to the soviets. They passed a resolution demanding that the soviets must officially accept the Bolsheviks programme, since non-partisan organisations such as the soviets could not steer a specifically proletarian course and were therefore harmful. On October 27<sup>th</sup>, the Bolshevik Central Committee passed the same resolution, making it the official binding on all Bolshevik organisations.

On his arrival back in St. Petersburg, Lenin attempted to adopt the new revolutionary phenomenon of the soviets into his theory and tactics. He argued for participation in the soviets but that the unity and independence of the Bolshevik Party should never be jeopardised and that delegates should be under the strict control of the Central Committee. Generally, it was felt that paralleled existence of the soviet and the party was impossible in the long run. The majority of

Bolsheviks argued that the soviets should exist as a trade union organisation or they should not exist at all.

In 1907, Lenin attempted to define the soviets. He wrote a draft resolution to the party conference entitled 'On the Unaffiliated Workers' Organisations in Relation to the Anarcho-Syndicalist

Tendencies among the Working Class'. In it he restated the Bolsheviks' claim to be the only true leaders of the workers' movement. He stated that the participation of the Bolsheviks in all-party councils of workers is permissible on the condition that party interests are strictly preserved and that the party is strengthened and consolidated. He also argued that soviets could prove superfluous if the party comes to understand better how to organise the proletarian masses.

One of the more telling parts of Lenin's treatise on the soviets was contained within his references to anarcho-syndicalists. He delivered the stern warning that the soviets harboured anarcho-syndicalist tendencies, which should be fought at all costs. The threat they posed to the party's purity and dominance was seen as a grave one. At a conference in 1906, the anarchists argued that a revolution in Russia would bypass capitalist exploitation. The Russian peasantry and proletariat would come together to overthrow the Tsar and create a communist society based on independent communes federated nationally and, eventually, internationally. The anarchists argued that there was no need for state bureaucracy. Where possible, people should exercise direct control and, where necessary, delegates should be elected and subject to recall. Thus, the functions of the state would be replaced by democratic structures.

Workers' control and direct democracy, coupled to the ideas of economic equality and liberty, was clearly a basis on which the soviet system could operate free of the need for politicians and political parties. Anarchist ideas could be used to provide the existing soviets with their own economic and political philosophy. Lenin was quick to realise that the ideas of anarchism were capable of delivering the soviets an internal 'ideology'. This was at the root of his dire warnings against 'anarcho-syndicalist' tendencies of the soviet system. He realised that the potential existed for the soviets to gain their own political direction through the ideas of anarchism. This would undermine the need for the Bolsheviks, since the workers would be politicised and would be able to run their own society for themselves, with no need for leaders or parties.

The main method Lenin advocated to fight anarcho-syndicalism within the soviets was to subordinate the soviets to the party. This was a forerunner of the approach Lenin was to adopt in 1917, with the soviets being viewed as instruments by which the masses could be controlled by the party, rather than (as the anarcho-syndicalists saw them) as an embryonic form of a workers' direct democracy. Lenin's arguments concerning the soviets received little attention, and discussion about them within the Bolsheviks soon faded after 1905.

## **Marxist-Leninism after 1905**

One area where the events of 1905 did profoundly change Lenin's views was in his attitude towards the peasantry. In 1898, in a pamphlet entitled 'The Task of Russian Social Democrats', he had argued that workers would defeat feudalism with the aid of the capitalist class. After the events of 1905, in a pamphlet entitled 'The Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution', his view had changed. Now, he argued that, in overthrowing feudalism, the still small Russian proletariat would be aided by the peasantry rather than the bourgeoisie. Traditionally, Marxists held that the peasants were intrinsically reactionary and, as a class, they would

disappear with the defeat of feudalism. However, Lenin argued that, though they wanted to preserve private property, the Russian peasantry was also driven by the desire to take the land away from the feudal aristocracy. Therefore, they could be relied upon to rally to the industrial workers cause in their fight against Tsarism.

Once the Tsar was defeated, Lenin envisaged that the socialist parties would form a coalition to take up the struggle against capitalism. Within this coalition, Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks should take the leading role. Regarding the capitalist class, he argued that the defeat of the Tsar and feudalism would allow the workers' new enemy, capitalism, to become much stronger. This would, in turn, intensify the struggle by the proletariat for the transition to a socialist society, and so there would only be a very short period of capitalism in Russia. He went on to say that, due to the shortness of this period, the Russian proletariat would not have developed enough to fully carry out the transition to socialism. They would need help from the western proletariat to rally to the Russian workers' aid by overthrowing capitalism in their own country. In this way, Russia would be the spark that would trigger a world revolution.

It was during this time, in an article entitled 'The Relation of Social Democracy to the Peasant Movement'; Lenin developed further his idea of permanent revolution. He stated that, after the transition to capitalist democracy;

*"...we shall begin immediately and within the measure of our strength...to make the transition to socialist revolution. We stand for uninterrupted revolution. We shall not stop half way."*

Here Lenin gets close to the idea of a permanent revolution in which the party, at the forefront of the struggle, would lead workers in defeating the Tsar and then immediately attack and defeat capitalism. This was to be the position he would argue within the party in 1917, and which led to the Bolsheviks assuming the leading role within the Russian revolutionary movement. After 1905, Lenin did not refer to the idea of permanent revolution again. However, he had demonstrated that, in a time of upheaval, he was quite prepared to bend Marxist determinist thinking in order to ensure power for the Bolshevik party. Lenin's gift was not as a Marxist theoretician, but as a political strategist capable of reading the political situation and taking best advantage of it for the party.

## **The Social Revolutionaries**

The events of 1905 also provoked change within the SR. Indeed, the tension would later lead to two competing factions arising within it, a 'left' and 'right' wing. The first sign of this was the split from the SR of the 'Social Revolutionary Maximalists' in 1906. As the name implies, they argued against the idea of a two-stage revolution, and instead envisaged one series of events leading to "a republic of working people" based on universal economic equality. The Maximalist paper 'Kommuna' called for the forced expropriation of land, factories and workshops and their transformation to self- management by the workers. They argued that the "proclamation of a people's republic in Russia" would lead to a worldwide uprising of labour against capital. Though this split was small in 1906, the Maximalist position was to be taken up to an extent by the 'left' social revolutionaries during the events of 1917. The Maximalist position was a step closer to that of the anarchists but differed fundamentally from them in that the Maximalists still saw a role for the state.

## 1905–16

With the failure of the 1905 insurrection and the subsequent state oppression, the various revolutionary groups were forced underground. The modest economic gains evaporated, defensive strikes were crushed mercilessly, and the soviets and works committees collapsed as Tsarist repression took hold.

The anarchists were mercilessly targeted by the secret police. The more fortunate escaped to Western Europe and America but hundreds of others were executed after summary trials, imprisoned for long terms or exiled. In 1907 an Anarchist Red Cross was organised to aid their imprisoned comrades, with headquarters in London and New York. In 1911, there were signs of an anarchist revival in Moscow and this led to the formation of the Moscow Group Of Anarchist-Communists in 1913. They were pro-syndicalist and succeeded in gaining members in the factories of Tula and Briansk as well as having links with a new group based in the cotton mills of Ivanovo-Voznesensk, the Russian Manchester.

The Bolshevik party also collapsed under the reactionary conditions and, after 1905, was left with a tiny number of militants. These militants, hardened by sacrifice, welded together by conviction, and entirely free of moral obligations outside the party, were the embodiment of Lenin's concept of professional revolutionaries. Over the next few years, the Bolsheviks slowly re-grouped around a solid, ruthless and highly disciplined core. Unity became cemented to the point where members really could speak with one voice – the voice of the party. By the early 1914, with strike action reaching the levels of 1905, the Bolshevik party had been able to build a small but formidable organisation.

The outbreak of the First World War brought an end to the growing industrial unrest, as a wave of working class patriotism immediately followed the announcement of war. St. Petersburg, a German name, was renamed Petrograd. The Bolsheviks were virtually alone among the Russian revolutionary movement in calling for the "imperialist war to be turned into a civil war". Though unpopular at first, their total opposition to the war was to stand them in good stead as, soon enough, support for the war began to evaporate. The majority of the Moscow anarchists followed the example of Kropotkin and supported the allied cause against German militarism. The minority embraced anarcho-syndicalism and called for the transformation of the imperialist war into a social revolution. They established a presence within the large factories of the Zamoskvorechie district and within three Moscow trade unions, the printers, leather workers and railwaymen.

Russia's ramshackle war machine had suffered a series of disasters and the Russian soldiers were poorly supplied and cut off from allied support. The Russian economy was not developed enough to supply the army with modern weaponry and the morale of the army collapsed. Soldiers were sent to the front without guns; they literally had to wait to take firearms from the dead and wounded. Poorly armed and half-starved at the front, with acute economic deprivation at home, it is not surprising that the Russian workers quickly became disillusioned with the war. Workers' unrest again began to grow and, in 1916, the number of strikes began to rise dramatically. Invariably, these strikes were political in nature, with workers demanding an end to the war.

## 1917 Revolution: February

On February 18<sup>th</sup> 1917, a strike by workers at the Putilov Works in Petrograd quickly spread and, by February 22<sup>nd</sup>, the 22 factories were on strike. By February 25<sup>th</sup> the strike was widespread. On February 27<sup>th</sup> troops were ordered in to crush the now general strike, but they mutinied and joined the workers. Suddenly, the Russian revolution was underway.

Tsar Nicholas II was now isolated, with large sections of the elite favouring constitutional change. On March 2<sup>nd</sup> he abdicated in favour of his brother, who immediately renounced the throne, pending the election of a constitutional assembly. The Tsarist monarchy was overthrown and the first stage of the revolution had been won with scarcely a shot fired in anger. As in 1905, the events of February 1917 were spontaneous. They had no party involvement, but instead simply burst forth from the masses. Though later Soviet Union historians were to claim the Bolsheviks led the uprising, this is certainly and clearly not the case. Indeed Lenin stated his belief that the British and French had engineered the revolution.

The revolution quickly spread. In the provinces, the old Tsarist administration was swept away. From the provincial governor to the village policeman, huge numbers of the old regime were deposed or arrested within weeks. Despite pleas from the provisional government to wait for the constitutional assembly to bring about land reform, the peasantry across Russia immediately set about seizing the land from the autocracy. Rural land committees were established which were similar to the soviets, though they did not emerge as rapidly.

The February revolution was at first welcomed by many sections of Russian middle and upper class society. They set up a provisional government made up of constitutional party members, the liberal autocracy and disillusioned officials of the old Tsarist regimes. The Mensheviks were quick to respond, seeing the development of the provincial government as the first step in the capitalist revolution that would lead to a western style parliamentary democracy. They saw the soviets as the embryo workers' opposition, which they would lead in the future, and hastily got a large number of Mensheviks elected onto the Petrograd Soviet. They then used this influence to argue that it should support the provincial government as the first stage of the revolution. Duly, in late March, the Petrograd Soviet responded to numerous enquires from the provincial soviets as to what attitude should be taken to officials being dispatched from the provisional government to the regions by stating:

*“As long as the agreement between the Petrograd Soviet and the provisional government is not breached, the provisional government must be regarded as the sole legal government for all Russia.”*

To fit their determinist Marxist theories, the Mensheviks were willing to cede power to the provincial government. They maintained that the revolution was capitalist and must be followed by capitalist-based democracy. To them, the provisional government was the embryo of a future capitalist regime, which would bring about constitutional change. Under this, a new proletariat would emerge and mature, and be led by the Mensheviks. Unfortunately for the Mensheviks, the reality on the ground was very different. The provincial government actually had little real power. In many areas, the soviets were administering society and ignoring decrees put out by the provisional government. Even in the capital, the government could do little more than endorse decisions made by the Petrograd Soviet.



## Soviets and Factory Committees

The outbreak of the February revolution had at first caused deep divisions within the Bolsheviks. On February 26<sup>th</sup>, they had issued a manifesto which did not mention the soviets. Instead, it called for the establishment of a 'revolutionary provincial government', which would establish reforms, such as the eight-hour day, and lead to the creation of a 'constitutional assembly based on universal suffrage'. The Petrograd Bolsheviks, who argued that a radical challenge to the provisional government would be wrong and would lead to Bolshevik isolation, condemned even this modest proposal. Open warfare broke out between the Central Committee and the Petrograd Bolshevik committee, and the party was suddenly in danger of slipping into disarray.

Meanwhile, as the soviet system expanded to include soldiers drawn from the peasantry, the Petrograd Soviet renamed itself the 'Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies'. The SR, whose main support came from the peasantry, which made up the bulk of the new soldiers deputies, began thus to gain influence within the emerging soviet system. At the same time, further democratic structures were being developed in the form of the factory committees. Elected direct from the workplace, these were able to function largely free from the manoeuvrings of the political parties. At first, the factory committees concentrated on improving conditions within the factory. However, as Russian capitalists responded by locking out workers, the factory committees began to develop increasingly militant responses. They began to seize control of factories and bring them under direct control. The factory committees soon became the focal point for the movement for direct workers' control. A structure of factory committees quickly began to take shape, with organisations being based on locality, and each local electing delegates to regional councils. In areas where soviets had been assimilated by the political parties, such as Petrograd, where the Soviet was beginning to function as a local parliament, rather than a body of delegates carrying out the wishes of workers, the factory committees began to openly compete with the soviets.

By May, the Petrograd Council of Factory Committees passed a resolution calling for Russian industry to be brought under workers' control. The factory committees soon formed into a national organisation, which agreed at its national congress that;

*"the economic life of the country's agriculture, industry, commerce and transport must be subject to one unified plan constructed so as to satisfy the individual and social requirements of the wide mass of the people"*.

The factory committee movement soon drew up such a plan that could form the basis for the co-ordination and planning of the Russian economy under the direct control of the workers themselves. It was never to be implemented. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, the anarchists began to pick up support. For the first time, the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist papers such as *Golos Trouda* (The Voice of Labour), *Burevestnik* (The Stormy Petrel) and *Anarchiia* (Anarchy), based in Moscow and Petrograd, began to reach a mass readership. In contrast to 1905, when anarchism was strongest in the border regions, the movement was now centred in Petrograd and Moscow. Russian anarchist writers such as Bakunin and Kropotkin, now back in Russia, began to be read widely. In Petrograd and other large cities the anarchist groups attracted their membership from the working class and anarcho-syndicalist ideas quickly spread within the factory committee movement. Some anarcho-syndicalists argued that the factory committees, in conjunction with local peasants' committees, should provide the basic administration of the future society, as opposed to the soviets, which some anarchists recognised as flawed in that

they were increasingly coming under the control of political parties. In view of later events it is worth noting that one of the heaviest concentrations of anarchists was in the port and naval base of Kronstadt in the Gulf of Finland, where anarchist workers were joined by a considerable number of sailors of the Baltic Fleet.

The main organ of the anarcho-syndicalists was the *Golos truda*, which stated that its principal goal was a revolution, “anti-statist in its methods of struggle, syndicalist in its economic content, and federalist in its political tasks”. They sought the replacement of a centralised state with a free federation of peasant unions, industrial unions and factory committees. Although the anarcho-syndicalists endorsed the soviets as “the only possible form of non-party organisation of the ‘revolutionary democracy’,” they pinned their greatest hopes on the local factory committees, which they saw as the cells of the future socialist society.

The factory committees had arose spontaneously after the February revolution and spread from Petrograd into every industrial centre of Russia. From the beginning the factory committees did not limit their demands to higher wages and shorter hours they also demanded a role in the actual running of the factories. They sought, as in the Petrograd Radiotelegraph Factory, to “work out rules and norms for the internal life of the factory.” Overnight embryonic forms of workers control over production and distribution appeared in the larger enterprises. The slogan of ‘workers control’ caught on and spread from factory to factory. Soon, the more militant workers grew impatient with the moderate socialists who supported the Provisional Government and their continuation of the war and the capitalist system. Only the anarcho-syndicalists and the Bolsheviks were proclaiming what a growing number of workers wanted to hear. Lenin remarked that the Russian workers stood a thousand times more to the left of the Mensheviks and a hundred times more left than the Bolsheviks themselves. It was, in fact, the anarcho-syndicalists that came closest to the spirit of the Russian workers.

Both the anarcho-syndicalists and the Bolsheviks successfully resisted attempts by the Mensheviks to absorb the factory committees into the trade unions. Although the influence of the anarcho-syndicalists increased, and was disproportionate to their actual numbers, it was the Bolsheviks with their centralised organisation and leadership that gained the most ground. The anarcho-syndicalists consoled themselves with the view that at least it was “the Bolsheviks and not the Mensheviks are everywhere on the rise”, but the gains of Lenin’s party did provoke a feeling of unease within the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist ranks. They recognised that their movement needed a greater degree of organisation and a number of local and provincial conferences were hastily summoned.

Gains were made and anarcho-syndicalist influence continued to spread. They called for ‘total’ workers’ control embracing all plant operations and argued that, only then, could it serve as a transitional phase during which the workers would learn how to be their own bosses. At the All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees, which met in Petrograd on the eve of the Bolshevik insurrection, an anarcho-syndicalist from Odessa argued that the factory committees must be, “*the cells of the future, which even now are preparing for the transfer of production into the hands of the workers*”

## Lenin: April Thesis

With the proletariat beginning to take control of industry and the peasants taking possession of the large estates, Lenin returned to Russia in early April. On his return, he shocked the Bolshevik leadership by announcing that the party should immediately begin to organise around the slogans 'down with the war'; 'the land to the peasantry'; 'factory to the worker' and 'all power to the soviets'. The announcement was made as part of his April Thesis, which he first outlined to a small group of the Bolshevik leadership. Upon hearing his ideas, several immediately denounced him as 'inheriting the throne left vacant by Bakunin'.

This was hardly surprising, for on the face of it, arguing for 'all power to the soviets' meant arguing for what in effect was a decentralised system under which society was controlled directly by the workers. According to Marxist theory, this would only come about after a long transitional period under which the state would take control of society while the workers acquired the skills and political sophistication needed to administer a classless society based on self-management. Furthermore, like the Mensheviks and the 'right' SR, they argued that current events were in essence a capitalist revolution. They were still arguing for a provisional government made up of a coalition that would ensure the creation of a constitutional assembly. Many anarchists, although still suspicious of Lenin's pre-occupation with political power, found his call for Soviet power as a basis for cooperation. However, behind the populist slogans, what Lenin argued for in his April Thesis was worlds apart from the anarchism that he had bitterly opposed all his political life.

Lenin had decided that Russian capitalism was too weak to take control in Russia. Instead, the revolution was moving towards a soviet system, and it was only a question of time before it came into direct conflict with the provisional government and defeated it. In arguing for all power to come under soviet control, he had returned to an idea he had first outlined in the immediate aftermath of the 1905 revolution. Namely, the workers and peasants had successfully completed the first stage of the revolution and, given the weakness of the capitalists, the poor peasantry must immediately begin the fight for the socialist transition of Russia. He argued that the focal point of the struggle would be the workers' and peasants' soviets. The task of the party should be to take control of the soviets in order to lead the revolutionary masses. Lenin sought to bring the soviets under Bolshevik control and his use of the soviets was never a case of doctrine or principle, but one of expediency. They were the instruments through which the Bolsheviks could implant their programme on, and so control, the masses. As Trotsky, who was now close to Lenin's thinking, argued at the time:

*"..the soviets in themselves do not yet solve the problem...depending on program and leadership they serve various purposes...The program will be given to the soviets by the party."*

Nor was Lenin advocating that a communist society would be established in Russia. His April Thesis argued for a political revolution under the most advanced section of the workers, the Bolshevik Party, who would take control of the state, through which they would regulate the economy. Lenin may have proclaimed workers' control but, behind the populist slogans, he was arguing for something very different — limited state regulation of the economy. Only the land, Lenin argued, should be nationalised, and come under direct state control, with the creation of large-scale factory farms. In industry, Lenin argued for very limited state control. However, he tended to muddy the water somewhat for tactical reasons, by constantly calling for 'workers control'. He 'interpreted' this phrase to mean that workers should be given the power to regulate

capitalism. In general, from April onwards, the Bolsheviks used the slogan of ‘workers control’ without ever really defining it. Lenin himself stated, he sought;

*“..not the introduction of socialism...merely the control by the soviets...over the social production and distribution of products.”*

So, Lenin’s April Thesis was a rehash of ideas he first developed in the immediate aftermath of the 1905 insurrection; the revolutionary process should be permanent, under which the workers continue the struggle for the socialist society.

Lenin got his April Thesis adopted by the party, by appealing directly to the rank and file of the party over the head of the leadership. At the April conference, a motion supporting Lenin’s call for the soviets to assume power was duly passed, though it should be noted that the motion also included a call for the establishment of a constitutional assembly. This clause was partly to pacify the rest of the party leadership but was also supported by Lenin himself. For tactical reasons, he refused to rule out the idea of a constitutional assembly at this stage.

Lenin reaffirmed these views in September 1917 when he drafted his famous pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*. Once again he called for the proletariat and the poor peasants to “organise themselves freely into communes,” and, though he derided the anarchists for wanting to dissolve the state “overnight” he did stress the similarity between Marxism and anarchism in stating;

*“So long as there is a state there is no freedom; when there is freedom there will be no state.”*

## **1917 Revolution: October**

During the months after April it seemed that the anarchist and Bolshevik efforts were aiming for the same goal. Though a degree of wariness existed there did develop a kind of camaraderie engendered by their common purpose. The Bolshevik influence within the soviets began to grow rapidly. There was mounting discontent with the Provisional Government and the mood of the workers was growing more radical. Trotsky observed that the response of the masses to the anarchists and their slogans served the Bolsheviks as “a gauge of the steam pressure of the revolution.”

In April, an attempt was made by the provisional government to stamp its authority on the soviets. In May the Mensheviks, who still rigidly adhered to Marx’s historical framework, insisted that Russia was still in a ‘bourgeois-democratic’ period of development, announced that they would join the provisional government in an attempt to shore up its failing authority. Right wing members of the SR joined them, but this was a major tactical error. By joining the provincial government, Mensheviks and SR were seen to be joining the ranks of the bourgeoisie. This caused splits within the Mensheviks and further divided the SR. Most importantly of all, the Bolsheviks were the only party who were not compromised by participation in the feeble provisional bourgeois government. This was to be the start of their bid for power.

Then in June, the provisional government ordered a new campaign against Germany in a last-ditch effort to turn the tide of the war in Russia’s favour. Its failure shattered what was left of Russian morale and led to mass demonstrations and calls for the overthrow of the provisional government. Sailors and workers in the naval port of Kronstadt announced that they no longer recognised this government, and stated that “...the sole power in the City of Kronstadt is the Soviet.” They argued that a soviet system should be established throughout Russia, with Kronstadt leading the way. The ‘July Days’ surprised Lenin and the Bolsheviks. They did their best to prevent the demonstrations turning into an armed rising as they felt they still did not have sufficient

influence to seize power. Anarchists together with many rank-and-file Bolsheviks supported a rising but the Petrograd soviet refused to endorse the rebellion and the government was able to suppress it without too much difficulty.

In August, the workers and soldiers in Petrograd prevented an attempt at a counter-revolutionary coup by General Kornilov, tacitly aided by the leader of the provisional government. The 'Red Guard' took a leading role in the defeat of the coup. This was a militia set up by revolutionary workers, but which had been targeted by the Bolsheviks and had already come under their control. As a result, the Bolsheviks were rightly credited in playing a major role in putting down the attempted coup. This proved to be a telling boost to their standing. By September, they had mass support amongst some of the most vehement revolutionary elements within the Russian revolution. Crucially, they now controlled both the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets.

Although the anarcho-syndicalists had shared Lenin's determination to destroy the Provisional Government they remained wary of the Bolsheviks. Their suspicions of the Lenin's motives increased in September 1917 after the Bolsheviks won majorities in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets. They feared that the soviets were being reduced to vehicles of political power and argued strongly in favour of; "complete decentralisation and the very broadest self-direction of local organisations".

With revolution in the air, the Mensheviks and SR moved to the left. The 'left' faction of the SR succeeded in getting a motion passed which committed the SR to Lenin's call for the Soviets to take control. Lenin, again in exile, now called for decisive action. He argued in his letters that since the Bolsheviks controlled both metropolitan soviets, they must now seize power. His logic was that the party alone could now plan and lead an insurrection. He insisted that "...the insurrection must be treated like an art." His idea of taking power through the soviets had now been dropped. He first proposed an insurrection to begin in Moscow, then in Finland. However, the Bolshevik leadership did nothing.

With the Red Guard now in open revolt, Lenin grew increasingly alarmed that the chance to seize power would be missed. He got so incensed he threatened to resign from the central committee if his plans for insurrection were not instigated immediately. The rest of the central committee was appalled by his plans for insurrection, burning his letters for fear they would become public knowledge. Frustrated at being ignored, Lenin returned to Moscow in early October and again managed to convince the bulk of the party over the heads of the leadership. This time, it was to back his call for an uprising. The focal point now became Petrograd and the 2<sup>nd</sup> All Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets, which was due to take place on October 25<sup>th</sup>.

It was now generally accepted that the congress would vote to oust the provisional government, which, after the failed coup attempt, was totally discredited. Lenin continued to insist that the party should seize power. His logic was that the role of the party was to lead the workers and that it should place itself at the head of the soviets by taking power. He was countered by Trotsky, who accepted that this was the party's destiny, but argued (as Lenin had done earlier) that the bid for power could be 'camouflaged' by the soviets. Trotsky, now a convinced Bolshevik, was leader of the Petrograd Soviet. He was about to play a decisive role in the future of the Russian revolution.

On the eve of the Congress, he ordered the Petrograd garrison to occupy strategic positions throughout the city. The measure, he explained, was needed to defend the All Soviet Congress

from any attempt at a counter-revolutionary coup by forces loyal to the provisional government. He then ordered the Red Guards to arrest members of the provisional government itself. Kerensky, its head, feared for his life and fled the city. By the start of the first session of the Congress the following day, the capital was already under Bolshevik control. When the Congress demanded to know why the Bolsheviks had seized control instead of waiting for Congress itself to assume power, Trotsky argued that the party had acted in order to prevent counter-revolutionaries from taking power and was now handing power to the Congress. Neither the Mensheviks nor the 'right' SR were convinced by this explanation.

## **Bolsheviks' Triumph**

The Mensheviks and 'right' SR stormed out of the Congress of Soviets in protest at the Bolshevik insurrection. When the second session opened on the evening of October 26<sup>th</sup>, only the Bolsheviks and 'left' SR were in attendance. At this session, Lenin made his first triumphant appearance. Elections took place for a Central Executive. It was made up of 62 Bolsheviks, 29 'left' SR and 10 other socialists.

From this point, Lenin was portrayed as the saviour of the revolution. He and his party had saved the soviets from counter-revolutionaries. It was the party that had ensured soviet power. The prestige of Lenin's name had been firmly established. A Council of People's Commissars (CPC) was appointed, again headed by Lenin, to act as an executive body to carry out the decisions passed by the All Russian Congress. In the weeks and months to follow, the Bolsheviks were to use the CPC to ensure single party rule across Russia. In December 1917, at the All Russian Congress of Peasants, a speaker summed up the situation:

*"Comrade Lenin knows that if you disagree with him, he will scatter you with bayonets ...You speak of the power of the soviets and, in the meantime, the actions of the commissars undermine the power of the soviets. In place of soviet power, we have the power of Lenin, who is now in the place occupied by Tsar Nicholas."*

This was only the beginning, as we shall see in Unit 12, when we trace just how accurate these prophetic words turned out to be.

## **Key points**

- The drive for industrialisation to compete with the west.
- Three revolutionary traditions arose from the Narodniks. The Marxist represented by the RSDW, the Social Revolutionaries and the anarchists.
- Lenin envisaged a new form of Marxist party based on clandestine, professional revolutionaries.
- The 1905 revolution was a spontaneous uprising unforeseen by any revolutionary group.
- The idea of soviets grew out the revolution as a means of carrying through revolutionary change in society.
- Anarchist groups were divided over the issue of terrorism.

- The February revolution was born out of the frustrations of the Russians with the war.
- The various socialist parties were divided over their attitude to the creation of soviets and factory committees.
- Lenin's 'April Theses' signalled a change in Bolshevik policy to prepare for a seizure of power.

## Checklist

1. What were the main differences between Lenin and the 'economists' in the RSDW?
2. What were the main workers' organisations thrown up by the 1905 Revolution?
3. What effect did the 1905 Revolution have on the anarchist movement in Russia?
4. How did Lenin's ideas change after 1905?
5. What was the attitude of the various revolutionary groups to the soviets and factory committees after February 1917?
6. What were the main points of Lenin's 'April Thesis'?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the main differences between Lenin and the 'economists' in the RSDW?*

The economists adhered to basic Marxist determinism and so argued that a capitalist bourgeois revolution would be needed after which a mass-industrial proletariat would develop. The proletariat would then fulfil its historic mission to overthrow capitalism and begin the socialist transformation of society. The RSDW should therefore concentrate on the day-to-day economic struggle in order to begin building a mass party of the working class. This would then be ready to take its place in the new parliament after the capitalist revolution, where it would begin to fulfil its role as the political leadership of the working class. Lenin stressed that the intelligentsia was vital to the revolutionary cause and should take a leading role. Workers could only develop "a trade union consciousness", and not a revolutionary one so the party, made up of the intelligentsia, would implant a revolutionary consciousness into the working class remaining an elite organisation of revolutionaries that would lead the working class. The party would be made up of professional revolutionaries who were conspiratorial in nature. It would be the workers, headed by the RSDW and supported by the capitalists, who would overthrow feudalism, leading to the establishment of parliamentary democracy as a precondition for the establishment of socialism.

### *2. What were the main workers' organisations thrown up by the 1905 Revolution?*

Local committees were formed to coordinate strike action in St. Petersburg and Moscow at the beginning of the Revolution. These workers' or factory committees became the embryo from which would grow the Councils of Workers' Deputies, which were later to become known as the soviets.

### *3. What effect did the 1905 Revolution have on the anarchist movement in Russia?*

Before 1905 there had been little anarchist activity but in the wake of the revolution groups sprang up especially in the Jewish Pale. Many disaffected Social Revolutionaries and Social Democrats joined the anarchists. There were two kinds of groups; the terrorists and the propagandists. The propagandist wing included the anarcho- syndicalists.

*4. How did Lenin's ideas change after 1905?*

After the events of 1905 Lenin changed his attitude towards the peasantry. He now argued that, in overthrowing feudalism, the Russian proletariat would be aided by the peasantry rather than the bourgeoisie. He envisaged that, with the Tsar defeated, the socialist parties would form a coalition to take up the struggle against capitalism with the Bolsheviks taking the leading role. Due to the shortness of this period, the Russian proletariat would not have developed enough to fully carry out the transition to socialism. They would need help from the western proletariat to rally to the Russian workers' aid by overthrowing capitalism in their own country. In this way, Russia would be the spark that would trigger a world revolution.

*5. What was the attitude of the various revolutionary groups to the soviets and factory committees after February 1917?*

The Mensheviks, although taking part in the factory committees and soviets, still regarded them as secondary to the establishing of a Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks saw them as a way of seizing power and so supported them although they too argued for a Constituent Assembly. They used the slogan of workers' control without ever really defining what they meant by it. The anarcho- syndicalists were the main supporters of the factory committees and soviets and fought to keep them independent. They saw workers' control as vital to the success of the revolution.

*6. What were the main points of Lenin's 'April Thesis'?*

In his April Thesis Lenin declared that the party should immediately begin to organise around the slogans 'down with the war'; 'the land to the peasantry'; 'factory to the worker' and 'all power to the soviets'. He argued for 'all power to the soviets' because he had decided that Russian capitalism was too weak to take control in Russia and the revolution was moving towards a soviet system, so it was only a question of time before it came into direct conflict with the provisional government and defeated it. He argued that the focal point of the struggle would be the workers' and peasants' soviets and the task of the party should be to take control of the soviets through which the Bolsheviks could exercise control. Lenin may have proclaimed workers' control but he was arguing for something very different – limited state regulation of the economy.

## **Discussion points**

- How do modern Marxist-Leninist parties compare to the Bolsheviks of 1917?
- How can anarcho-syndicalists prevent a seizure of power by a party in a revolutionary situation if it developed today?

## **Further Reading**

**H. Carr. The Bolshevik Revolution E. MacMillan. 1950. -LI-** A multi-volume epic, dealing with Russia from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century up until 1928. This heavyweight and meticulously detailed



academic text is what many other historians use as their main reference point. Verging on the 'apologetic for the Bolsheviks', and underestimates the movement for workers' control.

**A. Berkman. The Russian Tragedy. ISBN 0948984007. Phoenix Press. £4.50 -AK- -LI-** Berkman is a good writer, although this particular work is a bit scrappy in parts. Nevertheless a useful, affordable and contemporary anarchist viewpoint, and a damning indictment of the Bolsheviks.

**O. Anweiler. The Russian Peasants' and Workers' Soviets. 1929. Pantheon Press. -LI-** Now sadly hard to find outside good university libraries, Oscar Anweiler's book remains the most detailed and best academic text on the soviets up to and during the Russian revolution. Worth the search.

**G. Maximoff. The Guillotine at Work. 1979. Cuinfuegos Press. ISBN 0904564223. -LI-SE-** Gregory Maximoff was an anarchist condemned to death by the Bolsheviks. This is an angry but highly cogent and detailed attack on Lenin and scientific Marxism generally, leaving you in no doubt about the Bolsheviks' motives.

**D. Guerin. No Gods No Masters: Book One. AK Press. ISBN 1873176643. £11.95. -AK-BS-** This reader contains various bits and pieces of relevance to the Russian revolution, including 'Kropotkin in the Russian Revolution'.

Note 1: For more further reading on the Russian revolution, see Unit 12. Note 2: The further reading outlined is not an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is always worth consulting local libraries for general history texts, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 12: Russia II – 1917–1930

Unit 11 traced the development of the soviet system and in particular the role of Lenin and the Bolsheviks in this process. This unit continues with the story in Russia, concentrating particularly on the establishment of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin in the years following the 1917 events (see Unit 11).

The soviet system prior to 1917 was based on workers' democracy. However, Lenin transformed this beyond recognition, into a mechanism he could use to exercise centralised control and brutal single party dictatorship over working people across the Soviet Union.

Through sharp critique of the events in 1917 and after, this unit aims to uncover the twisted logic and suspect motives of the Bolsheviks. Their subsequent 70-year reign of oppression over the Russian workers remains a permanent warning to working class people and revolutionary movements everywhere. Hopefully, knowledge of Bolshevik tactics, as outlined here, will help prevent such opportunist state capitalists from destroying genuine attempts to build direct democracy in the future.

### This Unit aims to

- Outline the Russian Revolution (see also Unit 11) and subsequent events.
- Examine the establishment of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin in the years following 1917.
- Illustrate the twisted logic and suspect motives of the Bolsheviks during the period.
- Consider briefly the anarcho-syndicalists in Russia at the time.
- Trace the steps in the establishment of the Bolshevik dictatorship.

### Terms and abbreviations

**Left SR:** Left wing of the Social Revolutionary Party who supported the Bolsheviks.

**Right SR:** Right wing of the Social Revolutionary Party, opposed to the Bolsheviks.

**CPC:** The Council of People's Commissars

**CheKa:** All-Russian Extraordinary Committee, the Bolshevik secret police, later to become the KGB.

**VSNKh:** Supreme Council of National Economy.

**NEP:** New Economic Policy introduced in 1922 heralding a return to small-scale capitalism.

## Introduction

The events leading up to 1917 in Russia are discussed in Unit 11. This Unit follows on, by considering the developments of 1917 and after.

The February Revolution had brought about the formation of soviets and factory committees that were based on workers' democracy. Lenin and the Bolsheviks worked ceaselessly to secure a majority in the factory committees and soviets by using the slogan of workers' control. Once they seized power they transformed the soviets beyond recognition; into a mechanism they could use to exercise centralised control and single party dictatorship.

## After October

Before the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in October 1917, Lenin had relentlessly attacked the provisional government for its failure to arrange elections for a Constituent Assembly. At the same time, since Lenin's 'April Thesis', the Bolsheviks had promoted the soviet system over the Constituent Assembly option. In effect, Lenin was arguing through the summer of 1917 that the two systems could run along side each other, arguing;

*"...only strong and triumphant soviets would guarantee the convocation of the national assembly." He called this tactic "revolutionary realism" and, as Trotsky later noted, "...outside the soviet dictatorship and until its arrival, the Constituent Assembly had to appear as the highest achievement of the revolution."*

Although the Bolsheviks had, due to the perceived popular support, found it prudent to pay lip service to the idea of the Constituent Assembly, the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists had, of course, always opposed it. Before October they had poured scorn on the idea of parliamentary democracy stating that preparations for the Constituent Assembly were a waste of precious energy and instead preparations should be made for the workers to take over the factories and the peasants the land. As one anarcho-syndicalist argued:

*"We must create economic organisations. We must be prepared, so that on the day after the revolution we can set industry in motion and operate it."*

After October, things had changed dramatically for the Bolsheviks and one of their first changes in tactics was to switch from being staunch advocates of the idea of an elected Constituent Assembly, to complete rejection of it. Firstly, the soviet system had now been established, and secondly, the Bolsheviks had gained a leading position within it. Both Lenin and Trotsky now argued that the establishment of a Constituent Assembly was a backward step, representing an obsolete remnant of the 'bourgeois' revolution. The soviets were portrayed as a new stage of the revolution, which would eventually lead to the establishment of socialism.

Managing the Bolshevik about-turn in policy was not easy, since they had campaigned so hard prior to October for a Constituent Assembly. At first, Lenin argued that the party should simply reject the policy as now out of date, but the majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee, who argued that such a measure immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power would prove unpopular, opposed him. Eventually, Lenin was forced to accept this, and the election for the Constituent Assembly was duly set for November 25<sup>th</sup> 1917.

## The Constituent Assembly

The election result clearly demonstrated the weakness of the non-socialist parties in Russia. Altogether, they mustered only a fifth of the vote. For all Lenin's talk of counter-revolution, this demonstrates how sweeping the Russian revolution had been and how total the victory was. The Social Revolutionaries (SR), were the largest party. They had stood as a single party but entered the Assembly as two groups. The Right SR had 380 while the Left had 39 seats. The Bolsheviks formed the second largest party, with 168 seats. The biggest losers in the elections were the Mensheviks, who only got 18 seats, reflecting the folly of their earlier decision to support the now defunct 'bourgeois' provisional government.

The election result posed another problem for the Bolsheviks – they had hoped for far greater gains. Now, they were faced with at least some power being shifted from the soviets, which they effectively controlled, to the new Constituent Assembly, which they did not. In response, Lenin again showed all his determination and tactical brilliance. Within days of the result of the election being announced, he unleashed a ferocious attack on the Constituent Assembly, arguing that its very existence alongside the soviet system was inconsistent. It represented bourgeois capitalism, while the soviets reflected a real workers' revolution. He challenged the Russian workers to decide which of the two they wanted.

Lenin had rightly calculated that, though workers may support the Constituent Assembly, this support would evaporate if it meant abandoning or severely weakening the soviet system. There were two planks to Lenin's strategy. Firstly, the soviets had previously functioned democratically (it was only in recent months that this had begun to be undermined by the Bolsheviks) and still enjoyed broad worker support on the basis of this former mode of operation. Secondly, by arguing that those who favoured the Constituent Assembly were automatically undermining the soviets, he rallied the broad support for the soviets and used it to oppose the assembly.

Immediately, those who supported the establishment of the Constituent Assembly were put on the defensive. The Right SR argued that the apparent conflict between the soviets and the Constituent Assembly had been artificially created by Lenin. Instead, they maintained, both could co-exist, and both had a role. The soviets united the working class and safeguarded revolutionary gains, while the Constituent Assembly was to legislate and define society.

However, they fatally played into Lenin's hands by arguing that, if it came to choice of 'assembly versus soviet', then the assembly was preferable. The main reason for this was the role and interests of the wealthier peasantry within the Right SR. They opposed the idea of land nationalisation promoted by the rural soviets. Indeed, it was this issue that lay at the heart of the split within the SR. While the Left favoured common ownership and direct democracy, the Right basically favoured a capitalist-based economy based on a parliamentary democracy.

Within the Mensheviks opinions differed, a minority, with their mechanistic scientific Marxism, favoured the Assembly for theoretical reasons. They advocated a tightly knit popular front of all non-Bolshevik forces in support of the Constituent Assembly. The majority argued for a coalition extending from the Bolsheviks to the Right SR and although still maintaining, "All power of the state belongs to the Constituent Assembly" they, in effect, assumed a neutral position between the Bolsheviks and their opponents.

On January 18<sup>th</sup> the first, and last, session of the assembly took place. After a long debate, a Bolshevik motion calling for the assembly to accept the programme laid down by the soviets was defeated by a coalition of the Right SR, Mensheviks, non-aligned capitalists and regional

nationalists. The Bolsheviks and the Left SR walked out. At about the same time the Central Executive of the All Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets issued a decree, written by Lenin, calling for the dissolution of the assembly. A detachment of the Red Guard was sent to disperse the Assembly, symbolically led by an anarchist, a Kronstadt sailor called Zhelezniakov, which it did without much fuss. On January 23<sup>rd</sup>, the All Russian Congress of Soldiers' and Workers' Soviets (henceforth 'Congress of Soviets') met and voted to dissolve the assembly. The Third Peasant Congress ratified it two days later. On January 28<sup>th</sup>, a statement issued by the Congress of Soviets declared the formation of the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic.

Lenin had read the situation correctly. Though the Russian working class may have supported the general idea of the assembly, it remained an abstract concept. The reality of the soviets was stronger than this. Its previous actions and effectiveness was proven — the new assembly was not. Furthermore, the old provincial government had tried to stop peasants seizing the land by saying they should wait for the establishment of the assembly to bring about land reform. However, Lenin had already mocked this notion, pointing out that a parliamentary democracy would never introduce real land redistribution. Hence, he cast the assembly as an opponent of land reform, and the soviets as being the true source of workers' power.

Lenin's tactic worked. The shutting down of the assembly by the Congress of Soviets met with general indifference. The army stayed in the barracks and the workers stayed off the streets. Thus, the Russian parliament passed into history with scarcely a murmur of protest.

## The Soviet System

The months that followed the failed assembly saw significant strengthening of the soviet system, particularly in rural areas, where their development lagged behind the cities. Regional land committees were established as a rural form of soviet, and the soviets and land committees began to administer society. This involved co-ordinating the local economy, and forming militias under democratic control and so a democratised system based on equal but independent soviets began to emerge.

The soviet principle was also applied to the army and navy — though this was due more to recognition of the hatred of the officers by the soldiers and sailors than a conscious application of soviet principles — and power was passed to soldiers' committees, with officers now being elected. In factories, day-to-day control passed to councils of workers elected directly from the workplace. These councils quickly set about organising into a national federation that, in conjunction with the soviets, would be able to co-ordinate the Russian economy both nationally and locally.

With the soviets now the sole sources of state power, the Left SR put forward proposals for a new soviet constitution. This included; *"...that the soviets should carry full state power; they have the right to decide all questions, except those voluntarily delegated to the exclusive authority of the central power". They also stressed; "our federation is not an alliance of territorial governments or states but a federation of social economic organisations."*

In other words, individual soviets were to be autonomous in voting procedures and general internal organisation. However, territorial federalism was opposed, in view of the danger of the emergence of regional and ethnic divisions. Thus, the Left SR saw the future soviet system as an organic structure under which the state and politicians would soon disappear, leaving a society run on co-operation and self-government.

The Bolsheviks directly opposed the Left SR proposals, delayed the formation of a constitution, and quickly set about securing power. The Council of People's Commissars (CPC), dominated by the Bolsheviks and led by Lenin, was the main instrument through which they began to gather power. The CPC almost immediately began to make decisions and issue decrees independently of the Congress of Soviets Executive. The Left SR protested immediately about the undemocratic nature of these actions. The Bolsheviks informed them that:

*"The Soviet Parliament (meaning the Congress of Soviets) cannot abrogate the right of the Council of People's Commissars to issue decrees of extreme urgency without previously submitting its proposals to the central executive committee."*

The CPC was supposed to be merely an executive organ, responsible for carrying out decisions of the Congress of Soviets Executive. However, under Bolshevik control since January 1918, it had been transformed into a permanent institution, with its own committees and rules of procedure. Now, it was actively establishing committees and departments designed to bring the soviet system under central control. In undertaking this, the managers and high-ranking civil servants from the old Tsarist regime began to be utilised by the Bolsheviks as "experts". From there, the People's Commissar rapidly began to function as an independent power centre gradually superseding the Congress of Soviets that only met infrequently.

Through the CPC, the Bolsheviks began immediately to use the power of the state to undermine opposition. As early as November 21<sup>st</sup> 1917, Lenin declared:

*"...the State is an institution built up for the sake of exercising violence. Previously, this violence was exercised by a handful of money bags over entire people, now we want to transform the state into an institution of violence which is to do the will of the people...We need firm government, violence and compulsion, but it shall only be directed against a handful of capitalists."*

## **Bolshevik Repression**

The first to feel the Bolshevik state violence were the Kadet Party, whose members began to be arrested in November 1917, as a prelude to their organisation being suppressed. However, the Red Guards, under Bolshevik control, increasingly began to arrest and search citizens and politicians alike. Widespread and increasing protest resulted, to which Trotsky responded by stating:

*"You protest at this mild terror...you should know later the terror will assume very violent forms after the example of the French Revolution. The guillotine will be ready for our enemies and not merely jail"*

Within weeks of Trotsky's speech, the CPC established the "All-Russian Extraordinary Committee", which quickly became known as the CheKa, and one of the most feared organisations in Russia. The CheKa was set up supposedly to prevent counter-revolutionary groups operating. At this time, the Russian revolution was so successful that no such organisations existed, but the CheKa soon found a role for itself. On January 8<sup>th</sup>, it was announced that Labour Battalions were to be formed, made up of "...men and women of the bourgeois class..." stating that "...those who resist are to be shot." Lenin now advocated "...shooting on the spot one out of every ten found guilty of idling." A few weeks later he said;

*"...until we apply terror -shooting on the spot — to speculators, takers of bribes and swindlers, we shall achieve nothing."*

By February, the CheKa was well established nationally, acting independently, with no constitutional checks on its activities. It announced that all counter-revolutionaries would be shot, including "...those who pass out or stick up anti-government leaflets". The term 'counter-revolutionary' was already beginning to be applied to anyone suspected of being opposed to the increasingly brutal Bolshevik rule. The phrase 'swindlers and idlers' was increasingly applied to the peasantry, and began even to be applied to any workers who dared to protest against Bolshevik economic policies. Prior to 1918, Russia had been a country in which the use of capital punishment was extremely rare. Now, the Bolsheviks were all-powerful and their use of summary execution became an everyday occurrence.

## Capitalist Coexistence

A cornerstone of the Russian revolution had been an end to the war – but not at any price. The rallying cry of the Russian masses had been peace without "annexation". In December, Trotsky, now in charge of foreign affairs, refused to sign a peace agreement put forward by Germany, arguing; "...we wage no war, we sign no peace.." and that there would be "...no compromise with German imperialism." The decision met with widespread approval throughout Russia. Later the same month, he stated that;

*"...the workers and peasants, inspired and armed by the revolution, could by guerrilla warfare overcome any invasion".*

Three months later, in March 1918, Trotsky signed the Brest- Litovsk Treaty, handing Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, White Russia and Bessarabia over to Germany. Understandably, this provoked widespread opposition, even within the Bolshevik party. Lenin's April Thesis had been entirely dependent upon the notion that a Marxist revolution was imminent in the west, after which the proletariat would come to Russia's aid. Since, he had argued, the Russian proletariat and economy was too underdeveloped to make a full transition to state control, the success of the revolution depended on revolutions in the west. Thus, a major plank of Bolshevik strategy was to aid and encourage an international revolutionary movement. Brest-Litovsk was the first step towards co-existence with the capitalist world. Bukharin, a rising star within the Bolsheviks, was particularly bitterly opposed to this development, stating;

*"...we said and we say that in the end everything depends on whether the international revolution conquers or not. In the end, the international revolution-and that alone- is our salvation."*

He went on to argue that the primary role of the soviets was to wage 'revolutionary war' against capitalism. Accepting the treaty meant undermining the central part of soviet policy, the promotion and encouragement of world revolution, which was the only salvation for underdeveloped Russia. Disagreement was such, that an opposition faction (the so-called "left" communists) was formed immediately after a majority accepted the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.

Outside the narrow confines of the Marxist theoretical debate within the Bolsheviks, there was widespread opposition to the Brest- Litovsk Treaty. Virtually everyone, including every other political party, was incensed by it.

The opposition to the agreement was on two levels. Firstly, it meant handing over a large section of the Russian working class. Secondly, it would spell economic ruin, since most Russian industry would be handed over to Germany, including the Ukraine grain belt and the Don coalfields. The Left SR and anarchists argued that a guerrilla army should be formed in order to

defeat the threat of German invasion. Workers and peasants immediately responded by forming military detachments to go to White Russia and the Ukraine, the current centre of the fighting with the Germans.

## Red Terror

The Bolsheviks responded to the call for a revolutionary war by announcing that Russia was now under an obligation to honour the agreement signed with Germany. Trotsky dispatched troops to pursue and suppress the partisan units. Dzerzhinsky, head of the CheKa, demanded "...that all such terrorists be handed over." With some of the anarchists and the Left SR now calling for the overthrow of the Bolsheviks, preparations were made to unleash a campaign of "Red Terror" aimed at ridding Russia of all opposition to Bolshevik totalitarian rule. This was to be the first of many such bloody episodes in the ensuing decades.

To prepare for the way for single party rule, the Bolsheviks set about reorganising the army to bring it under Bolshevik control. Shortly after the Brest-Litovsk agreement was signed in early March, Lenin and Trotsky met with the two former high-ranking Tsarist officers Altwater and Behrens, to discuss the reorganising of the army. It was quickly decided that much of the structure of the army under Tsarist Russia should now be reintroduced, including bringing back the old officer corps. This was many months before the beginning of the civil war.

In April 1918, Trotsky announced the introduction of conscription for the Labour Battalions. In May, the army obtained a general staff and commander in chief, Kamenev, a former Tsarist staff colonel. Trotsky announced that the army needed the specialised skills of a former Tsarist officer. Another crucial cornerstone of the revolution – a democratically-run army, made up of and run by workers, was thus forgotten. Both the Marxists (including Lenin) and the anarchists had always argued that the only guarantee that the army would not be used against the revolution was to ensure it was controlled by and an integral part of the working class. However, after Brest-Litovsk, the Bolsheviks quickly realised that they would need an army under state rather than workers control if they were to succeed in their historical mission to lead the masses. The army would be central to crushing all opposition to their rule.

The first to feel the wrath of the Bolsheviks were the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists. Their calls for free soviets under direct workers control had begun to gather considerable support, especially in the major towns and cities. Lenin acknowledged this growing influence and resolved to use both rhetoric and force against them. In late March, he announced:

*"The nearer we come to the full military suppression of the bourgeoisie, the more dangerous becomes to us the high flood of petty-bourgeois anarchism...(and this must be met with)...force and compulsion."*

On April 12<sup>th</sup>, troops under the command of the CheKa were deployed against the anarchist movement. Their centres were closed, activists shot and imprisoned, and the anarchist press was banned. Soon after, came the turn of the Mensheviks and Right SR, who were increasingly harassed by the CheKa. In June, they were banned from standing for elections to the soviets and their organisations were thereafter suppressed.

Only the Left SR remained. On March 19<sup>th</sup> they had resigned in protest from the CPC, after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, though they remained on the Congress of Soviets' Executive. Through propaganda in the army and the peasantry, they sought to obstruct the treaty,



leading to growing tension between them and the Bolsheviks. Matters came to a head during the 5<sup>th</sup> Congress of Soviets in July. While the Congress was in progress, the Left SR assassinated the German Ambassador. This was followed by the Left SR attempting to organise a number of uprisings, aimed at overthrowing the Bolsheviks, in the hope that this would end the Brest-Litovsk Treaty.

This was the ideal excuse for the Bolsheviks to unleash the CheKa on the Left SR. All their delegates to the Congress of Soviets were arrested, and raids and mass-arrests were simultaneously made across Russia. The SR papers were closed, leaving only the Bolshevik press operating. On July 15<sup>th</sup> the Congress of Soviets, now made up only of Bolsheviks, passed a resolution outlawing the SR. The Bolsheviks were now the only legal party in Russia and the only group allowed to publish papers and other propaganda.

At the same time as the political opposition was attacked and demolished, any opposition to Bolshevik one party rule within the wider working class was also dealt with. Lenin, who only a year earlier had made 'workers' control' a central tenet of Bolshevik propaganda, was now forthright in just what he really meant by the phrase. His description was in terms of the power of workers to regulate the economy. By 'workers' control', he meant not the workers' control of industry, but workers' control over industry.

## Land Deals

Lenin's apparent early support for what workers and the revolutionary movement saw as workers' control was purely tactical. For similar reasons, the Bolsheviks also originally embraced the idea of direct control of the land by the peasantry, with land distribution being decided by the soviets and land committees. Indeed, buying and selling of land was banned, as was the hiring of labour, but these measures were basically the programme of agrarian reform developed by the SR and passed by the All Peasants' Congress in August 1917 (known as resolution 242). The Bolshevik support for the principle of 'land to the peasants' was purely tactical too.

In October 1917, Bolshevik support amongst the peasantry was virtually non-existent. Hence, they needed to keep the support of the Left SR, and so accepted their agrarian programme, even though they did not, as it turned out, have any intention of carrying it out. As Lenin himself stated later, circumstances forced the Bolsheviks "to swallow whole" the SR programme. Lenin had earlier argued for the nationalisation of the land under state control, and had been scathing about the SR agrarian programme, calling it "...hopeless, unwittingly naive wishful thinking of down-trodden, petty proprietors." As part of his April Thesis, he had argued for the land to be nationalised and brought under state control in large-scale state-run farms. What the Bolsheviks wanted in November, was land nationalisation in accordance with the April Thesis, but they could not yet achieve this without fierce opposition from the peasantry and they did not yet feel ready to face such a prospect.

Although, in 1905, Lenin had argued that the proletariat would make the revolution with the help of the peasantry, once in power, his basic Marxist mistrust of the peasantry as a reactionary and backward class came to the fore. Underlying the Bolshevik plans for nationalisation and the adoption of large-scale state-run farms was not the concern of economic efficiency, but the belief that the peasantry were not to be trusted, and were incapable of self- management.

## Workers' Control Crushed

From November 1917, the Bolsheviks were in a strong position in the cities, enjoying both popularity and the forces of the state. They immediately began to introduce their industrial programme. In December 1917, the Supreme Council of National Economy was set up known as the VSNKh. This was attached to the CPC and was in effect run by a Bolshevik committee, with powers to issue orders on economic affairs. By January 1918, it was taking on the managers of capitalist firms as advisers. By May, it had formed a massive bureaucracy of industrial control, both on regional and national levels.

On January 19<sup>th</sup>, the VSNKh issued a decree which made a law that no further expropriation of industry could take place without its specific authority. This was the first attempt, after the Congress, by the Bolsheviks to take control of the movement of workers' councils. However, they were still in no position to enforce such a law and the decree was virtually ignored. By March, however, with the Bolsheviks in sole control of the CPC following the Left SR resignation over Brest-Litovsk, another attack was launched. By now, the CheKa was also fully functional. On March 3<sup>rd</sup> the VSNKh announced a decree to bring industry under the control of the state. In each industry, a central administrative council composed of workers, employers and technical personnel was to be established, which would have sole power within industry and be answerable to the CPC. The decree accepted that capitalism would continue in Russia, and limited the powers of the workers to the role of regulating capitalism. The Bolshevik Milyutin introduced the decree by declaring;

*"...the dictatorship of the proletariat had made inevitable a change of our whole economic policy from the bottom to the top."*

He went on to criticise the possibility of having both workers' control and state control. Just days later, the VSNKh announced it had entered into negotiations with a leading Russian rail magnet Meshchersky, under which a new national rail company would be established. Half the shares would be owned by the state and the other half by Meshchersky. At the time, the railways were being operated directly by the rail workers themselves through their union, and had been doing so successfully for several months. Next, the VSNKh announced that negotiations were taking place with Stakheev, a Russian steel magnate. Steel production was to be taken over under one of three options; a joint company financed by the state; Stakheev and an unnamed American capitalist, or a company financed by the state but managed by Stakheev's company in a return for a percentage of the profits.

Both announcements met with widespread hostility, including from within the ranks of the Bolsheviks. The Left communists immediately denounced the proposals, and matters quickly came to a head at a party meeting on April 4<sup>th</sup>. Here, Lenin outlined his industrial strategy in a paper later to be produced as a pamphlet entitled 'The Immediate Task Facing the Soviet Government'. For the first time, Lenin clearly outlined the basic form the new soviet society was to take. The Bolshevik aim of single party rule is clearly stated:

*"The people's political leaders, i.e. the members of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)...which today is the governing party in Russia, must set about organising society...(later)...we have won Russia from the rich for the poor... We must now administer Russia."*

Russia was no longer governed by a soviet system, but by one party rule administered through the soviets. In this new soviet system, Lenin argues, the expropriation of capital must come to an end, to be replaced by the;

*“...strictest and country-wide accounting and control of production (meaning workers) not being lazy, not stealing and working hard (above all, they have to) observe the strictest labour discipline.”*

He also clarifies what he means when he says ‘workers must take control over industry’. He means legislation must be introduced to regulate capitalism and give the workers some say in the running of the workplace. In effect, he means a mixed economy — even control by the state is now no longer advocated, never mind direct control by workers themselves. His justification is basically that the workers are not capable of running capitalism, so industry requires the expertise of the capitalist, in the form of “...co-operation of bourgeois specialists, technicians and administrators.” In recruiting these specialised staff, Lenin claims it is necessary to “...pay a very high price for their services...” entailing “...different levels of incomes for different skills.” Another basic principle of the revolution, equality of earnings, is thus lost, laying the basis for economic inequality, which can only lead to the creation and maintenance of a class-based system.

## **Totalitarianism**

In his “On the Nature of the Russian Workers”, Lenin boldly states that “...the Russian is a bad worker when compared with his western counterpart.” This was his justification for the introduction of piecework. The Taylor system, aimed at increasing efficiency of labour and once described by Lenin as “...the enslavement of man to machine...”, was now advocated as the best means of doing away with “...superfluous and awkward motions...” in the production process. He argues for the reintroduction of one-man management and furthermore that, “...obedience, and unquestioned obedience at that, during work to one-man decisions,” must be observed; that managers should be “...granted dictatorial powers (or unlimited powers)...”, and that compulsory labour should be introduced.

Lenin also unequivocally proclaims himself a keen advocate of state coercion;

*“...we are not anarchists, we must admit that the state, that is coercion, is necessary...(this requires)...dictatorship...Dictatorship is iron rule by coercion.”*

He goes on to advocate “...the shooting of thieves on the spot...”, the “...shooting of hooligans...” and the shooting of “counter- revolutionaries”, which he describes variously as anarchists, Mensheviks, Right SR, and even the Left SR. The Bolshevik Central Committee adopted this unashamedly totalitarian document. A few days later, Lenin delivered another paper, again later released as a pamphlet, entitled ‘On Left Infantilism and Petty-Bourgeois Spirit’. In this, he argues for the introduction of state capitalism based on the model adopted by Germany throughout the First World War, i.e. a highly concentrated and monopolistic economy operated by capitalism, but under strict state supervision. He also states that since revolutions have not yet occurred in the west as predicted, backward Russia must make progress through its own devices and modernise by its own exertions. The tool he advocates is state capitalism, as a stepping-stone to socialism. He argues that Russia;

*“...must learn from the Germans...Germany now represents the last word in contemporary large capital technique and planned organisation...(The task of the Russian revolution is to)...study state capitalism of Germany...to adopt it with all possible strength, not to spare dictatorial methods in order to hasten its adoption.”*

To carry out the programme, Lenin calls for some sectors of industry, such as railways and agriculture, to be nationalised and taken under state control. In other sectors “agreements with

the captains of industry” must lead to the formation of trust directed by them and embracing basic industries, which from the outside may have the appearance of state undertaking. Bukharin and the Left communists described Lenin’s ideas not as a step forward to socialism but a step backward to capitalism. But Lenin’s stranglehold on the party was now complete, and moves against the workers’ councils began, firstly through use of the trade unions to undermine them.

Prior to October 1917, the trade unions were dominated by the Mensheviks and were seen as moderate bodies in line with Menshevik doctrine. After this, the Bolsheviks had begun to take them over and, by December, they were already being transformed into organs of state control. Before the regulation of the economy could be transferred to Bolsheviks they had to curb the freedom of the industrial workers as represented by the factory committees. They called for “iron discipline” in the factories and the mines. The trade unions, which until then had had taken a secondary role, were to be used to “devour” the factory committees and convert workers’ control to state control.

This began at the First All-Russian Congress of Trade Unions, which met in Petrograd from 7 to 14 January 1918, immediately after the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly. The Bolsheviks commanded a large majority of the 416 voting delegates while the anarcho-syndicalists, who had generally shunned the unions in favour of the factory committees, had only six. The Bolsheviks were joined by the Mensheviks in attacking the anarcho-syndicalists who argued for industrial federalism and the autonomy of the factory committees. Bill Shatov, an active anarcho-syndicalist and member of the Central Council of Petrograd Factory Committees, characterised the trade unions as “living corpses” and argued that the workers needed to;

*“...organise in the localities and create a new Russia, without a God, without a Tsar and without a boss in the trade unions.”*

When the well-known Marxist scholar, and newly converted Bolshevik, protested against this attack on the unions Grigorii Maximoff, another leading anarcho-syndicalist, dismissed his objections as those of a “white-handed intellectual who had never worked, never sweated, never felt life.” Another anarcho-syndicalist delegate reminded the Congress that the revolution had been made “not by the intellectuals but by the masses”; that they need to “listen to the voice of the working masses, the voice from below..”

The Bolsheviks, having now seized power, had no intention of listening to the voices from below. Before October, when they sought to overthrow the Provisional Government, they had joined the anarcho-syndicalists in support of the factory committees and workers’ control. Now they sought centralisation and sided with the trade unions that sought state control. The Bolsheviks did part company with those trade unionists who demanded that the unions stay neutral, that is exist independently of the government, labelling this a “bourgeois” idea and an anomaly in a workers’ state. The Congress promptly agreed that the unions;

*“...should be transformed into organs of the state, the participation in which for all persons employed...will be part of their duty to the state.”*

By March 1918, the trade unions had been fused with the People’s Commissariat of Labour and its regional and local variants (the so-called Labour Commissars), primarily made up of trade union officials. The function of the unions thus became to discipline labour and to raise productivity. The workers’ councils were absorbed into the unions by degree and were slowly transformed into organs of state control made up of party members who policed the workforce.

## Land Grabs

The ending of peasant control of the land was far more direct and far more brutal than the Bolshevik take-over of industry. In January 1918, with food shortages already growing, Lenin had called for mass searches of storehouses and the shooting of all speculators. By May, with food supplies a serious problem, much of it caused by the loss of the Ukraine, Lenin moved the blame from swindlers in the city to rich peasants hoarding food in the countryside.

In May 1918, the Peoples' Commissariat of Supply was given powers to organise armed detachments to confiscate grain from the peasantry. In June, the Bolsheviks created 'Committees of Village Poverty', which replaced the existing soviets. Together, these two organs of Bolshevik power brutally confiscated grain from rich and poor alike, often burning down the villages of those who resisted. As starvation turned into famine in the countryside, so democratic control and self-management of agriculture also ended at the hands of the Bolsheviks.

## Revolt and Civil War

The elimination of all political opposition and the destruction of the structures of workers' control and self-management were resisted across Russia, leading to numerous uprisings. This included a failed insurrection in Moscow, and culminated in an attempt to assassinate Lenin by the SR member Dora Kaplan. In response, Lenin unleashed a new intensity of "Red Terror". An orgy of mass-murder ensued, during which the state and party organs seemed to compete over who could make the most brutal call for more mass-murder of 'counter-revolutionary' forces. This was real 'scientific socialist' Bolshevism. How many were murdered will never be known, but one of the prominent CheKa members at the time calculated that some 245 uprisings were put down during this period. This was probably exaggerated, as the CheKa sought to demonstrate its unswerving loyalty to the Bolshevik cause. Nevertheless, opposition was clearly sustained and desperate, and was crushed without mercy.

However, Bolshevik rule was soon to be threatened by an outside enemy. In August, French, US, Japanese and British troops invaded. In southern Russia, "white" forces under the leadership of Denikin formed a "volunteer army", encouraged, trained and supplied by the allies. As it began its northward advance, more forces under Wrangel joined it. The Russian Civil War had started, and before it ended, millions of people were to die, either in the fighting or through disease and malnutrition.

In response to the invasion, Bolsheviks partially lifted their ban on opposition groups and the press. The softening led many to believe the revolution was still worth fighting for, and there was a general rallying to its defence. At the same time, so-called 'War Communism' was introduced, which led to the whole economy being brought under direct state control, the introduction of rationing. Later, the workforce was militarised under a system of compulsory labour.

War Communism also allowed the CheKa to extend its influence further, to cover all aspects of civil life. During the civil war, the number of executions it carried out soared, some estimates putting the total at 150,000. As Lenin later boldly stated; "...anybody who placed their own interest above the common interest was shot."

It was during the civil war that the anarchists played one of their most prominent roles in the revolution. After the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, a guerrilla army had been organised by the anarchist

Makhno in the Ukraine known as the Makhnovstschina. First, it fought the Germans after the Ukraine was ceded to them, then it turned on the “whites” during the civil war. The rallying cries were ‘free soviets without a ruling power’ and ‘against the subservient and partisan Bolshevik soviets’. Within the area protected by Makhnovstschina, delegates to the soviets were elected directly from the village and workplace, and no-one was allowed to stand on a political party ticket. This ensured that soviet delegates put forward the views of the people who delegated them, not the views of political parties. There was also freedom of the press, even though war conditions prevailed.

At first, the Bolsheviks attempted to suppress the Makhno army, but were soon forced to recognise how effective this highly mobile, democratically controlled force of thousands was. After the civil war broke out, Makhno visited Lenin to offer an alliance against the whites. In doing so, he illustrated the ineffectiveness of the Red Army armed trains, which had only managed to liberate an area 30 metres each side of the track.

By late 1919, the whites were retreating and the Makhnovstschina had played a major role in their defeat. Immediately, the Bolsheviks moved against them. Red Army units were transferred to the Ukraine in large numbers, under the guise of a joint operation. As the two armies joined forces, the Makhno units found themselves surrounded and were defeated. Though the partisan movement took up a campaign against the Bolsheviks, they were never to recover and were eventually totally suppressed.

The brutal and cynical crushing of the Makhnovist movement marked a change of strategy for the Bolsheviks. In 1920, with the civil war coming to an end, there was widespread hope that after all the sacrifices and brutality, War Communism would come to an end and a truly democratic soviet system could be established. Such hopes were cruelly dispelled as the Bolsheviks quickly moved to assert their dominance. They stated that War Communism was not related to the war. Bukharin, now a staunch Lenin supporter, wrote;

*“...the Bolsheviks had conceived war communism as not related to the war ...Proletarian compulsion in all its form, from executions to compulsory labour, constitutes, as paradoxical as this may sound, a method of formation of a new communist humanity.”*

With the war threat receding, the Bolsheviks actually increased state repression. As Trotsky wrote in 1920;

*“..militarisation of labour...represents the inevitable method of organisation and discipline...during the transition to socialism...(and)...the road to socialism lies through a period of highest possible intensification of the principles of the state...which embraces the life of the citizen in every direction.”*

This caused opposition within the party, in the form of the ‘Workers’ Opposition Call for Greater Democracy’. In opposing this group, Trotsky argued that the historic birthright of the party allowed “...it to maintain its dictatorship regardless of the temporary wavering of the masses.” Lenin dismissed the opposition as “...anarcho- syndicalist deviations.” The workers’ opposition within the party was quickly defeated and silenced. However, it was not so easy to defeat the Russian people at large. With the Whites defeated, the people once again rose up against the Bolshevik dictatorship. There were some 118 peasant revolts in February 1921 alone. Even the Bolshevik sympathiser Lewis Siegelbaum was forced to concede that, in early 1921;

*“...the workers’ hostility towards the Bolsheviks authority was as intense as it had been four years earlier towards the Tsarist regime.”*

The Bolsheviks attempted to contain the protest through the introduction of martial law. However, even with the full weight of this dictatorial tool, the country slipped further towards the verge of a fresh revolution. Shortly, matters came to a head in Petrograd.

## **Kronstadt Massacre**

The strike started over further cuts in food rations and more factory closures. Petrograd workers were in uncompromising mood, and, with martial law imposed and strikes banned, the movement soon became political. The main thrust of the demands were free elections to the soviets. This was recognised as the first step to replacing the Bolshevik dictatorship with direct democracy. As the strikes spread, the Bolsheviks rushed in troops from other regions, fearing the city garrison could not be trusted. As soon as they arrived, they were ordered in to the city, led by the “Kursants”, the young communists of the Bolshevik military training school.

The strike soon spread to the Port of Kronstadt, which had long been a centre of revolutionary activity. A mass meeting of some 16,000 workers and sailors was held and demanded free elections of all soviets to be held after a period of free agitation. This period would allow freedom of speech and press for workers, peasants, anarchists and left-socialist parties, freedom of assembly, release of all political prisoners and abolition of all political units in the army. Also, it would allow the equalisation of earnings and the peasants’ right to control their soil as long as they do not employ people. The meeting also decided to arrest the Bolshevik naval commander Kuzman.

On March 4<sup>th</sup> 1921 Trotsky, in his role as commissar of war, condemned the Kronstadt sailors and demanded their unconditional surrender. Despite a massive propaganda campaign against the Kronstadt uprising, the first attempt to storm the port failed. The troops brought in from other areas refused to fight. On March 18<sup>th</sup> elite troops arrived as wide-scale military tribunals were set up to attempt to enforce state discipline. On March 17<sup>th</sup> the port was taken after the Kronstadt sailors decided not to take offensive action. On entering the port, the Bolshevik troops shot hundreds of unarmed sailors on the spot in cold blood. Many more were imprisoned, and others managed to escape to Finland.

## **After Kronstadt**

After the Kronstadt revolt, the Bolshevik Government arrested thousands of social revolutionaries, anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and Mensheviks. Some 3,000 workers were sentenced to forced labour for breaches of labour discipline in 1921. Lenin argued that the death sentence should be extended to all forms of activity by Mensheviks, social revolutionaries, anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists. This was followed by a formal ban on all political groups and parties later that year. This was later extended to a ban on factional organisation within the Bolshevik party itself.

Although some peaceful anarchist activity was tolerated until 1929 the most militant anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists were tracked down by the CheKa and brought before Revolutionary Tribunals. Those who were not executed were jailed or sent to concentration camps. Those sent to the converted monasteries on the Solovestkii Islands staged demonstrations and hunger strikes to protest at their confinement until they were eventually dispersed among the CheKa prisons or banished to the penal colonies of Siberia. Those anarcho-syndicalists who escaped Russia,

including Maximoff, were convinced that their movement had failed because of a lack of effective organisation. The main centre for exiles was Berlin and, in 1922, many were to play important roles in the establishing of the anarcho-syndicalist international, the IWA.

Next, the Bolsheviks tried to use the famine (which raged throughout 1921 and claimed up to 3 million lives) to reintroduce capitalism. In late 1921, it announced the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP), under which nationalisation of all small industry was revoked. Every citizen was authorised to "...undertake small scale industrial enterprise not extending beyond the hiring of twenty workers." Leasing of factories in the possession of the VSNKh was introduced, and some 6,000 private firms were immediately leased out. The NEP introduced a form of mixed economy with an overwhelmingly private agriculture and small-scale private manufacturing.

In 1922, with the economy still in a desperate state, profit making was introduced as the sole operating criteria. Lenin advocated allowing large sectors of the Russian economy to be run by foreign capitalists, saying: "We chased out our own capitalists, now we must call in foreign capitalists." Within the state, management was made up of party secretaries, managers and trade union officials. Workers were selected to sit on 'production councils', a primitive form of works councils, which had no real power and little input into decision-making. The workers on these councils were trained to give them "...various administrative, technical and economic skills." They were intended to be the new managers of the future soviet economy.

Though it was never really successful, the NEP continued up until 1929 and at least there was no recurrence of the mass starvation that had occurred in 1921. The NEP was finally scrapped after a bitter internal feud left Stalin in control of the Bolshevik party. In 1929, Stalin immediately set about introducing "...the revolution from above..." aimed at full nationalisation of the economy, including the introduction of large state-run farms. The next few years saw new depths of misery, as 6 million peasants starved due to a famine brought about directly by the collapse of agriculture due to this disastrous policy. In industry, Stalin's first 5-Year Plan was introduced, involving forced industrialisation, the aim of which was to catch up and overtake western capitalism. Brutal methods were employed, with capital punishments for minor 'offences' such as absenteeism, in an attempt to make the plan work. At the same time, punishments such as death by shooting were reintroduced for petty theft and other minor crimes.

The command economy that Stalin introduced survived until the collapse of the soviet system in the late 1980s — a testament to the brutal repression and careful planning of the Bolshevik elite. Despite this, the dream first articulated by Lenin of overtaking western capitalism was never achieved. Indeed, the state-run system fell increasingly behind, unable to deliver the technological innovation needed for the electronic revolution that now powers western capitalism.

As in the 1850s, it was war that highlighted just how far Russia had fallen behind. The 1967 Middle Eastern War saw the American-supplied weaponry of the Israeli forces annihilate the Russian-supplied Arab counterparts, sending shock waves through the Russian elite. The resultant forced change of policy led to the Soviet Union increasingly embracing free market capitalism. Over thirty years later, this path has led it into the current misery now being endured by the Russian people.



## Conclusion

Looking at the failures of Marxist-Leninism, it is often argued by some of the more libertarian Marxists, that Leninism was a distortion of true Marxism. Certainly, as the Mensheviks argued, Marx foresaw revolution occurring after a long period of capitalist relations. However, this does not exonerate Marxism from its involvement with Leninism. A major factor in the Russian revolution was the basic distrust of the peasantry, a distrust derived from Marxist theory – which condemned the peasantry as a “reactionary” force. Furthermore, this distrust reflects a wider distrust of the working class, inherent in Marxist theory.

Though it recognises that the state, by its very nature, is repressive, Marxism argues that, during a ‘transitory period’, revolutionary society must be run by the state. In other words, until the workers have reached social, economic and political maturity, an all-powerful state must act on their behalf. This is a fatal flaw; the state cannot act on the workers’ behalf, it is diametrically opposed to their interests. Marxism then goes on to reason that, when the point is reached that the workers are able to take control of their own lives, the state will somehow wither away. This is a second fatal flaw; the state will never wither away of its own accord, since this could not possibly be in its interest.

The single major failing of the Russian revolution was the basic Marxist mistrust of the people. The Bolsheviks deeply distrusted the peasantry, in a country where 80% of the population were peasants. As Marxists, they felt that, because Russia was backward, a socialist revolution was impossible without the aid of the western advanced proletariat. When this failed to materialise, they fell back on forced industrialisation based on state coercion.

The Russian revolution was made by the Russian masses, including the peasantry. The Bolshevik contribution was negligible since, at the time of the revolution, they were temporarily paralysed, because their Marxist theory did not match reality. However, with the expert tacticians Lenin and Trotsky, they were able to place themselves at the head of the revolution, by jettisoning much of their theory in order to win mass support.

Once in power, their Marxist distrust came to the fore and they once again attempted to bend reality to meet theory. Instead of encouraging the masses’ enthusiasm for change, they did the opposite and actively stifled it. Using intense and brutal measures, the Bolsheviks eventually crippled the massive movement for workers’ control and self-management, at which point the revolution was lost. Far from playing a positive part in the Russian revolution, it was the Marxists, and particularly the Bolsheviks, which directly caused it to fail.

The next major revolutionary episode in Europe was to occur in Spain in the 1930’s. This was a very different story, and one that will be examined in Units 15–18. Meanwhile, the last words on Russia are left to two people who were there at the time. The first is from an anarchist, summing up the Bolsheviks’ attitude to the workers, and the second is from a Bolshevik in 1921, summing up the essence of the tragedy that was the Russian revolution.

*“According to the Bolsheviks, the masses are ‘dark’, mentally crippled by ages of slavery. They are multi-coloured; besides the revolutionary advance guard they comprise great numbers of the indifferent and many self-seekers. The masses, according to the old maxim of Rousseau, must be freed by force. To educate them to liberty one must not hesitate to use compulsion and violence.”*

*“We are afraid to let the masses do things themselves. We are afraid of allowing their creativity. We no longer trust the masses. Therein lies the origin of our bureaucracy. Initiative wanes, the desire to act dies out...Here is the root of all evil.”*

## Key points

- After October 1917 the Bolsheviks, under instructions from Lenin, switched from being advocates of a Constituent Assembly to being staunch opponents of it.
- Having gained control of the soviets they now extended them to all areas, including the army and navy, to cement their control of the Russian state.
- Workers' control was suppressed and the factory committees were subsumed in the trade unions, which in turn, were taken under state control.
- Managers were re-introduced into industry and officers re-introduced into the army and navy.
- Repression of all opposition began with the formation of the secret police organisation, the CheKa. All opponents of the Bolsheviks were soon to be deemed counter-revolutionary.
- Any opposition such as Kronstadt revolt and the Makhnochina in the Ukraine were brutally suppressed.

## Checklist

1. How did Lenin and the Bolsheviks justify their switch from support of the Constituent Assembly to their total opposition to it?
2. How were the soviets and factory committees brought under the central control of the Bolsheviks?
3. What was the role of the CheKa?
4. What were the features of 'war communism'?
5. How did the Bolsheviks attitude to the peasantry change?
6. Why did the Bolsheviks introduce the 'New Economic Policy' in 1922?

## Answer suggestions

*1. How did Lenin and the Bolsheviks justify their switch from support of the Constituent Assembly to their total opposition to it?*

Before October 1917 the Bolsheviks had supported the idea of a Constituent Assembly but this was merely a tactic to use against the Provisional Government. After October, with the Bolsheviks effectively in control of the soviets, they argued against it now maintaining that the establishment of a Constituent Assembly was a backward step. After its election Lenin attacked the Constituent Assembly, arguing that its very existence alongside the soviet system was inconsistent. It represented bourgeois capitalism, while the soviets reflected a real workers' revolution. He challenged the Russian workers to decide which of the two they wanted. He rightly calculated that, though workers may support the Constituent Assembly, this support would evaporate if it

meant abandoning or severely weakening the soviet system. The two planks to Lenin's strategy were, firstly, the soviets had previously functioned democratically enjoyed broad worker support on the basis of this former mode of operation. Secondly, he rallied the broad support for the soviets by arguing that those who favoured the Constituent Assembly were automatically undermining the soviets.

*2. How were the soviets and factory committees brought under the central control of the Bolsheviks?*

They began by using the Council of People's Commissars, which was supposed to be an executive organ responsible for carrying out decisions of the Congress of Soviets Executive to undermine opposition within the soviets. The CPC began to make decisions and issue decrees independently and the Bolsheviks justified this by arguing that it was necessary due to the extreme urgency of the situation. The CPC rapidly began to function as an independent power centre gradually superseding the Congress of Soviets that only met infrequently. The factory committees were then brought under the control of the trade unions, which, in turn, were brought under state control. All economic policy was centralised under the Supreme Council of National Economy known as the VSNKh. This was attached to the CPC and was in effect run by a Bolshevik committee made up of fifteen members.

*3. What was the role of the CheKa?*

The CheKa was the All-Russian Extraordinary Committee and was set up at the end of 1917 to prevent counter-revolutionary groups operating. At the time there was little or no such groups and so the CheKa soon established a role in the crushing of any opposition to the Bolsheviks including anarchists and the Left SR. By February 1918 the CheKa was well established nationally, acting independently, with no constitutional checks on its activities.

*4. What were the features of 'war communism'?*

War communism meant that the whole economy was brought under direct, centralised, state control. Rationing was introduced and, later, the workforce was militarised under a system of compulsory labour. It was in fact the system that Stalin later re-introduced in 1929 and was the foundation of the later Soviet economy.

*5. How did the Bolsheviks attitude to the peasantry change?*

When the Bolsheviks seized power they had little support amongst the peasantry. They adopted the programme of the Left SR wholesale to attract support. This again was a purely tactical move and when they felt strong enough they ended peasant control of the land was far more direct and far more brutal than the Bolshevik take-over of industry. In May 1918, the Peoples' Commissariat of Supply was given powers to organise armed detachments to confiscate grain from the peasantry. In June, the Bolsheviks created 'Committees of Village Poverty', which replaced the existing soviets. Democratic control and self-management of agriculture was ended by these two organs of Bolshevik power that brutally confiscated grain often burning down the villages of those who resisted. As a result starvation turned into famine in the countryside.

*6. Why did the Bolsheviks introduce the 'New Economic Policy' in 1922?*

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced in late 1921. The Bolsheviks used the famine as an excuse to reintroduce capitalism. It announced that the nationalisation of all small industry was revoked. Citizens were authorised to undertake small scale industrial enterprise that employed less than twenty workers. Leasing of factories in the possession of the VSNKh was introduced, and some 6,000 private firms were immediately established. The NEP introduced a form of mixed economy with an overwhelmingly private agriculture and small-scale private manufac-

turing. Profit making was introduced as the sole operating criteria. Lenin advocated allowing large sectors of the Russian economy to be run by foreign capitalists and, within the state, management was made up of party secretaries, managers and trade union officials. Workers were selected to sit on 'production councils', a primitive form of works councils, which had no real power and little input into decision-making. The workers on these councils were intended to be the new managers and so trained to give them administrative, technical and economic skills. The NEP continued up until 1929 when it was finally scrapped after a bitter internal feud and left Stalin in control to re-introduce his version of war communism under the guise of the five-year plans.

## Discussion points

- What is the basis for co-operation between anarcho-syndicalists, anarchists and Marxist-Leninists?
- How much of the failure of the anarcho-syndicalists in Russia be attributed to a lack of a coherent organisational basis?

## Further Reading

**A. Berkman. The Bolshevik Myth. ISBN 1853050326. Pluto. £3.95. -AK-** Based on Berkman's diaries, roughly covering the period 1919–21, an excellent account of a tragic period for Berkman and all other anarchists in Russia.

**M. Brinton. The Bolsheviks & Workers Control. Black & Red, £4.95. -AK-** Historical view from a libertarian Marxist perspective, sympathetic to the anarchists. Detailed, especially on the period 1917–21, littered with quotes and critique of Lenin.

**Voline. The Unknown Revolution. Black Rose. ISBN 0919618251. £12.99. -AK-** Many view this as the best text on the Russian revolution. Chunky, detailed, combination of eye-witness account, history and analysis, from an anarchist participant in the period 1917–21. One for your birthday list.

**A. Nove. An Economic History of the USSR. 1969. Pelican. -LI-** Focuses on social and economic, rather than political aspects. Hardly mentions any alternative to the Bolsheviks. The author was a leading light in developing 'market socialism' theory in 1950's USSR.

**N. Makhno. The Struggle Against the State & Other Essays. AK Press, ISBN 1873176783. £7.95. -AK- -BS-** Makhno wrote most of this while in Paris in the 1920s, while battling with the bottle and looking back on the betrayals of the Bolsheviks. nevertheless, an important account from the most prominent anarchist involved in the Russian struggle.

**E. Yartchuck. Kronstadt in the Russian Revolution. KSL pamphlet. £3.00. -AK-** Excellent eye-witness account of this crucial event. Yartchuck was an elected member of the Kronstadt Soviet, a veteran of both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, and was subsequently imprisoned by the Bolsheviks.

**I. Mett. The Kronstadt Commune. Solidarity pamphlet. £1. -AK-** First published in 1938, Mett provides us with a telling chronology of Kronstadt from an anarchist perspective. Cheap and essential guide to a critical event.

**I. de Llorens. The CNT in the Russian Revolution. KSL pamphlet. £1.00. -AK-** Concentrates on the visits to Russia of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT from Spain, and the negotiations over setting up of the anarcho-syndicalist international (see also Unit 14).

**T. Brown. Lenin & Workers Control. Monty Miller Press pamphlet. £1.50. -AK-** Tom Brown's short polemic on just how cruelly Lenin sold out the Russian workers. 1940s British perspective, cheap and essential.

**O. Ruhle. The Struggle Against Fascism Begins With The Struggle Against Bolshevism. ISBN 1870133544. Bratach Dubh pamphlet. £1.50. -AK-** Vicious attack on Lenin, especially his 'left wing Communism', from a classic Marxist (council communist) viewpoint.

**D. Guerin. No Gods No Masters: Book Two. AK Press. ISBN 1873176694. £11.95. -AK-** Part II of this reader contains over 100 pages on the Russian revolution from various contemporary writers and activists, including Voline, Makhno, the Kronstadt Sailors, and Emma Goldman.

Note 1: For more further reading on the Russian revolution, see Unit 11. Note 2: Lenin's own works are also well worth a visit – he never hid his real intentions, and his contemporary writings of the time are especially eye-opening, e.g. 'The Immediate Tasks Facing the Soviet Government' and 'Left-wing Communism – an Infantile Disorder' (both 1918). Get cheap, discarded 'Collective Works of Lenin' in s/h book shops. Note 3: The further reading outlined is not an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is always worth consulting local libraries for general history texts, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), – BS- try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## **Block 3**

# Unit 13: Going Global – International Organisation, 1872–1922

This Unit is about the attempts to organise a revolutionary international in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. From the fall of the First International in the early 1870s (see Unit 3), the desire for a truly revolutionary international organisation gathered strength. Even at this early stage, labour activists were aware that capitalism was an international system that could not be fought within national boundaries alone. As revolutionary syndicalism exploded onto the international labour scene from the early 1900's onwards, the desire increasingly became an imperative. Only an international organisation could organise effective global solidarity, co-ordinate the offensive against capitalism, and develop the tactics of anarcho-syndicalism by sharing experiences between local organisations. The need for such a body became increasingly urgent as reformist international organisations began to emerge, which the syndicalists perceived as diverting workers from the real struggle against capitalism.

## This Unit aims to

- Review the attempts to organise a revolutionary international in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries
- Briefly examine the reformist internationals
- Examine the reasons behind the rejection by anarcho-syndicalists of the Bolsheviks 'Red International'
- Look at the founding of the IWA

## Terms and abbreviations

**SPD:** Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands. German Social Democratic Party

**ISNTUC:** International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres, the reformist trade union international

**NAS:** Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat, Dutch syndicalist organisation

**ISEL:** Industrial Syndicalist Education League

**IWW:** Industrial Workers of the World

**CGT:** Confederation Generale du Travail, French anarcho-syndicalist union federation.

**ISNTUC:** International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres, the reformist union international prior to 1914.

**CI:** The Third International or Comintern

**SAC:** Sverige Arbtares Centralorganisation, Swedish revolutionary syndicalist union federation.

**FAUD:** Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands, German anarcho- syndicalist union federation.

**RILU:** Red International of Labour Unions

**USI:** Unione Sindicale Italiana, Italian anarcho-syndicalist union federation.

## **Introduction**

Some of the basic tenets of anarcho-syndicalism were developed within the First International, and it was here that the struggle for an anarcho-syndicalist international began (see Unit 3). After the anarchists were expelled through Marx's manoeuvrings at the 1872 Hague Conference, they moved quickly to organise a new conference. This duly took place in Switzerland and, although boycotted by Marx's supporters, the majority of sections affiliated to the First International supported the conference. Among these were the Spanish, Italian, French, Belgian, Dutch, English and part of the Swiss group.

The Swiss Conference unanimously overturned the Hague Conference decision to expel the anarchists, and rejected the moves made there to make the First International an organisation whose primary aim was the capture of political power. A resolution was passed stating that the aim of the International was not the seizure of political power, but to promote the overthrow of capitalism by workers, organised at the point of production, taking direct control of industry. This marked a return to the slogan of the First International – that the workers' emancipation is the task of the workers themselves. The centralisation that the Marxists had attempted to introduce was also overturned, and replaced with a decentralised structure under which each section could act autonomously within each country, as long as it complied with the basic aims and principles of the International.

The weakness of the Marxist faction within the International at the time is indicated by their attempts to organise an international conference the following year (1873) in Germany. This was a complete failure due to lack of support. Thereafter, the Marxists' attempt to create an international faded, as it became little more than an office in New York staffed by Marxist supporters. It was finally formally dissolved in 1876.

## **Anarchist International**

The anarchist wing of the First International continued to function after 1872, building on its achievements prior to the split. With a paid up membership of 150,000 activists, it had influence that went beyond its numbers. The Russian anarchist Kropotkin, active in the International at the time, argued that its main achievement after the split was the resistance it organised to the reaction that swept through Europe after the crushing of the Paris Commune in 1871. Taking the initiative, the capitalists attempted to crush the workers' movement, and in Kropotkin's words, the International "saved Europe from a very dark period of reaction."

The Anarchist International was also at the forefront in organising uprisings in both Spain and Italy. This assisted in the creation of an enduring anarchist tradition within these countries, which in turn, was to lead to the emergence of mass anarcho- syndicalist movements there in the early 1900s.



Meanwhile, throughout the 1870s, the International continued to assist in the development of the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, based on practical experience. To combat the increasing global centralisation of monopoly capitalism (the term globalisation has been around for a while), the International began to argue for the creation of industrial organisations at national and international level within individual sectors of the economy.

The idea was to build a strong, co-ordinated, organised International in two dimensions. Horizontally, there were the locals, or general workers' organisations, which were organised on the basis of locality. Then, vertically organised industrial organisations were envisaged, which would provide regional, national and global solidarity within industries faced with the same problems of organised international capital. This two-way structure was the forerunner of the basic structure that was to be adopted by the emerging anarcho-syndicalist unions some 25 years later.

The International also targeted the state, as the instrument of power over working people. It even mapped out an alternative vision for organisation of society, based on direct democratic control. Kropotkin outlined how the International envisaged a future communist society functioning:

*"... a new form of society is germinating, and must take the place of the old one: a society of equals, who will not be compelled to sell their hands and brains to those who choose to employ them in a haphazard way, but who will be able to apply their knowledge and capacities to production, in an organism so constructed as to combine all the efforts for procuring the greatest sum possible of well-being for all, while full free scope will be left for every individual initiative. This society will be composed of a multitude of associations, federated for all purposes which require federation; trade federations for production of all sorts, — agricultural, industrial, intellectual, artistic; communes for consumption, making provision for dwellings, gas works, supplies of food, sanitary arrangements etc.; federations of communes among themselves, and federations of communes with trade organisations, and wider groups covering the country or several countries... All will combine by means of free agreement between them...there will be full freedom for the development of new forms of production, invention and organisation; individual initiative will be encouraged, and the tendency towards uniformity and centralisation will be discouraged. Moreover, this society will continually modify its aspects, because it will be a living evolving organism; no need for government will be felt, because free agreement and federation takes its place in all those functions which government considers its own at the present time... conflicts which may still arise can be submitted to arbitration."*

In 1877, the Congress of the International passed a motion warning that unions aimed solely at improving workers conditions "will never lead to the emancipation of the working class; their ultimate goal must be to expropriate the possessing classes, thereby suppressing wage slavery and delivering the means of production into the hands of the workers. It also endorsed the general strike, seeing it as "the means of paralysing capitalist society during the final revolutionary encounter with capitalism". Thus, the International provided a link between the idea developed within Chartism of the "grand national holiday" (see Unit 2), and the idea of the social general strike as a major revolutionary weapon, developed by later anarcho-syndicalists.

Sadly, the 1877 Congress was to be the last meeting of the Anarchist International. Soon after, state repression and an economic downturn forced the workers onto the defensive. With workers increasingly occupied with defending gains on a local or national scale, the international movement went into deep decline, and lurched towards collapse.

In 1881, an attempt to breathe new life into the international movement was made with the re-launch of an International Association of Working People. Dominated by anarchists, it quickly

became known as the “Black International”. However, with the workers’ movement on the defensive in Europe, it only really made its mark in North America, where it contributed to the growth of anarchism in the bitter struggle for the 8-hour day, which included the Haymarket Tragedy, and thus left its mark on generations of US activists (see Unit 8).

## Second International

The next real move towards developing an international organisation was made in 1889, with the launch of the Second International. This time, the impetus came not from trade union organisations but political parties. Chief among these was the German Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), which, strongly influenced by Marx, was a proponent of the idea of the “conquest of power within existing states”. In line with Marxist theory, they argued for the creation of the “popular state”, under which the state would take control of industry and manage it on the workers’ behalf, as the first stage in the transition to socialism.

The SPD had concentrated increasingly on the peaceful transition to socialism, arguing that the workers only needed to vote to power a socialist party, which would then take control of the state and begin the seamless transition to socialism. As a contemporary described at the time, the SPD developed so that “gradually, the life of the German Social Democratic Party was subordinate to electoral considerations. Trade unions were treated with contempt and strikes were met with disapproval, because both diverted the attention of workers from electoral struggle. Every popular outbreak, every revolutionary agitation in any country in Europe, was received by social democratic leaders with even more animosity than by the capitalist press”. With this platform, the SPD built up a popular following in Germany and was successful in getting a number of deputies elected to the German Reichstag. This aroused great hopes amongst socialists that, by the turn of the century, the social democrats would form a majority within the German parliament. Socialist parties across Europe copied popular ‘Erfurt programme’ of the SPD. As Lenin later wrote, it became “the model of socialist organisation for the whole world for 50 years or more”.

The German SPD had been instrumental in launching the Second International and was to remain the dominant force within it, first through the predominance of Engels and, after his death, the Marxist theorist Klaus Kautsky. Kautsky had produced the Erfurt programme and, under him, any idea of the violent overthrow of capitalism was expunged from the Second International, while great emphasis was placed on his writings, stressing the peaceful transition to socialism through the electoral process.

Despite the domination by political parties, the anarchists attempted to influence the proceedings. At the founding conference, they tabled a motion calling for the general strike to be adopted as the main weapon of workers’ struggle. After a long and bitter debate, the motion was overwhelmingly rejected. Instead, the conference endorsed political action aimed at securing state power. Securing a parliamentary majority was to be the main focus of the Second International.

The limited anarchist presence within the Second International came to an abrupt end at the 1896 Congress in London, when they were banned. A motion was passed stating that membership of the International would now only be allowed to groups that recognised “the participation in legislative and parliamentary activity as a necessary means” in the realisation of socialism. The resolution went on to declare, “that therefore anarchists are consequently excluded.”

Anarchism was on the wane in the closing decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, coinciding with the growth in the tactic of “propaganda by deed”, which alienated many sections of the working class. In such conditions, reformism began to make steady progress across Europe. The political parties gained partial electoral success, and increasingly viewed strike action and revolutionary agitation as a diversion. Increasingly, extension of the vote became not a means to move forwards, but the number one priority, and the best way to secure better conditions for the working class.

By the turn of the century, Rosa Luxemburg and other activists on the left within the International were fighting a rearguard action against reformism, while the Bolsheviks were now present as an obscure minor party from Russia. State ownership of industry was a distant prospect, while the fight for parliamentary seats became paramount. When electoral success did come, for example in France and Germany, the resultant socialist MPs typically succumbed to the trappings of office and furnished their egos and personal ambitions. The French socialist Millerand accepted a post in the capitalist government (see Unit 4). Despite storms of protest from the left, the International duly passed a resolution allowing socialists to take cabinet positions within capitalist governments.

In 1903, Bernstein put forward a resolution stating, “that the final aim of socialism meant nothing, the day to day movement everything...(and)...capitalism only needed to be developed” rather than overthrown. The motion was only defeated after bitter argument. In the build-up to the war, electoral politics so dominated the parties of the Second International that success was measured only in the number of votes gained.

The growing reformism of the socialist parties in the Second International assisted the growth of syndicalism in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Workers who had helped trusted socialist representatives win elections at both local and national level saw them time and again get sucked into the trappings of office, and they felt increasingly betrayed. In office, these socialists argued for the toning down of their party’s demands so as not to alienate voters/ capitalists, and meanwhile, those expecting the promised improvements to working and living conditions always seemed to be told to wait for just a little longer.

## **Syndicalists regroup**

Originating in France (see Unit 4), by 1906, revolutionary syndicalism had exploded onto the scene, driven by growing working class discontent. Often, these new workers’ organisations faced bitter opposition from political parties and reformist unions backed by the Second International, and the reformist trade union international, the International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres (ISNTUC). Soon, the revolutionary syndicalists began to raise the possibility of organising a new revolutionary international to end their organisational isolation.

At the 1907 International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam, delegates from revolutionary syndicalist organisations in 8 countries held concurrent sessions to discuss the establishment of closer international links. The outcome was the Bulletin International du Mouvement Sydicaliste, financed by syndicalist organisations from the Netherlands, Germany, Bohemia, Sweden and France.

Over the next few years, revolutionary syndicalism made rapid headway throughout the world. Ever-greater links were established between the various syndicalist groups, both formal and informal, and the calls for the establishment of an international revolutionary syndicalist move-

ment became more numerous. Simultaneous calls were sent out from the Manchester Conference of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League ISEL and the Dutch, Nationaal Arbeids- Secretariaat (NAS) in February 1912. Both lamented the lack of a syndicalist International and condemned the existing international organisations.

One invitation declared that, as workers;

*“We cannot be rendered impotent by having our international relations conducted through a body that exacts pledges of parliamentarianism and is composed of glib-tongued politicians who promise to do things for us, but do nothing. We must meet as Syndicalists and Direct Actionists to prepare our movement for economic emancipation free from the tutelage of all politicians”.*

Syndicalist unions in Germany, Austria, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Spain and the USA endorsed the calls but they were not welcomed by the CGT in France (see Unit 4). The CGT opposed the setting up of a revolutionary International for reasons peculiar to the way in which the syndicalist movement had developed in France. Being the first union organisation there, the CGT was attempting to organise all workers, including those who supported reformism.

Some of the French anarcho-syndicalists had responded to this by advocating the idea of a ‘conscious’ group of revolutionaries organising within CGT, to convince workers of the need for revolutionary change, and thus protect the organisation from becoming reformist. Importantly, they did not envisage a revolutionary ‘leadership’, separate from the mass organisation. Rather, the revolutionary workers would convince workers by the strength of their argument, conducted through the democratic life of the union.

The CGT revolutionaries then extended their ideas to the reformist International, the ISNTUC (International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres). As a revolutionary organisation, the CGT would work within the reformist International to convince it of the need for revolution. Pointing out that most trade unions were affiliated to the ISNTUC, it called on syndicalist organisations to agitate for revolutionary politics within ISNTUC, rather than establish a separate organisation. In this call, the CGT was alone. Most revolutionary syndicalists were overtly hostile to the ISNTUC. Their experience was typically one of long-term struggle within their countries’ respective reformist unions — many had been separated or expelled from them.

## 1913 Conference

With only the CGT in opposition, a conference to set up a new revolutionary international duly took place in London in September 1913. In attendance were delegates from Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Poland, Spain, Cuba, Brazil and Argentina, representing a combined union membership of some 300,000 workers. Also present were observers from a number of IWW affiliates as well as delegates from propaganda organisations such as the ISEL and various anarchist organisations.

Though chaotic at times, the conference discussed a wide range of topics, from anarchist morality to organising international solidarity. It also attempted to codify the basic principles of revolutionary syndicalism. Nowhere was this clearer than on the issue of political neutrality. While in the 1906 Charter of Amiens (often considered the founding document of revolutionary syndicalism — see Unit 4) the CGT had not explicitly stated its opposition to political parties, only the need for independence from them, the 1913 conference was vehemently opposed to party politics.

Many delegates were explicit about their opposition to the state and parliamentary democracy. Duly, the conference adopted a statement that voiced total opposition to the state, capitalism and political parties of all forms — whose very existence is geared to capturing state power. However, the 1913 conference did not create a new international revolutionary syndicalist organisation. The French CGT was held in great esteem, and others were reluctant to set up a new organisation without them. There was also a degree of cynicism and ‘wait and see’ among many delegates, who felt that the CGT would inevitably split into reformists and revolutionaries, from which the latter would form a specific revolutionary syndicalist organisation and join a newly formed revolutionary International at a later date.

So, instead of forming an International Secretariat to co-ordinate a new International, the Conference established the Syndicalist Information Bureau in Amsterdam, to co-ordinate solidarity, exchange information, and organise a further international conference the following year. The Bureau was seen as a temporary measure — the idea of setting up an International was to be carried over to the next conference.

Though virtually ignored by historians of both left and right, the 1913 conference represents the birth of anarcho-syndicalism as an international movement. It also represents the first attempt to bring the various strands of anarcho-syndicalist thinking into one overarching set of basic principles. Also, given the reformist nature of the Marxist-dominated Second International, the conference marks a major step in the development of the revolutionary international labour movement. While the conference drew fierce criticism from both the capitalist press and the reformist organisations, delegates left it charged up by its success and looking forward to the establishment of an international organisation as the first stage in the world-wide overthrow of capitalism.

Little did they realise that within a year, workers would be slaughtering each other in the carnage of the First World War. The extent to which the socialist parties of the Second International had dropped even the semblance of revolutionary pretensions can be gauged by the stampede to support the First World War. To their credit, the small Bolshevik group was almost alone in the Second International in opposing it. In August 1914, the SPD parliamentary group of 110 MPs announced their unanimous support in favour of war credits. The day before, 14 of the 110 had voted against this, but the dissenting voices agreed to the announcement of a unanimous decision in order to ensure party unity.

## **The First World War**

In contrast to the Marxists of the Second International, revolutionary syndicalism survived the outbreak of war with its revolutionary credentials intact — the CGT was alone in declaring its support for war. However, the war itself shattered attempts to build an International, and the individual syndicalist organisations were left to organise opposition to the war within their own countries. This was dangerous work, and both in America and Europe, numerous syndicalists were imprisoned and many murdered by the state, due to their opposition to the war.

Throughout the war, the Syndicalist Bureau in Holland did its best to function. In 1915, it attempted to organise a further international conference to combat “nationalism, militarism, capitalism and imperialism”, recognising that the task of opposing the war “fell to the syndicalists”.

However, the call was not circulated widely due to the war conditions, and reached no further than the German and Scandinavian radical press.

It was not until 1918, and the end of the war, that an international syndicalist meeting could be convened. Held in Holland, delegates attended it from Norway, Sweden and Denmark, but the German delegation was refused entry into the country. The meeting decided to organise a new international conference, for which invitations to all revolutionary syndicalist organisations would be made. However, attempts to organise this new conference were frustrated when the Dutch government banned it. Attempts to reorganise it in Denmark, and then Sweden, were similarly opposed by the respective governments.

By this time, events in Russia were beginning to cast a long shadow over international syndicalism. The Bolshevik revolution caused major splits within the ranks of the syndicalists in many countries (see Units 11 and 12). It also disrupted the moves towards setting up a revolutionary syndicalist International.

## Rise of Bolshevism

It is hard to overemphasise the contempt that revolutionary syndicalists had for reformism. By 1918, they had experienced years of harsh repression for standing up for their beliefs, while the socialist parties had rushed to embrace and organise the national chauvinism that accompanied the war. In the labour movement, many reformist unions had used the war to eradicate the growing 'threat' of syndicalist unions, by signing no-strike agreements in return for being granted sole negotiation rights.

Then came the Russian revolution. Apart from the obvious attraction, and lack of knowledge about the real nature of the Bolshevik party, even those anarcho-syndicalists who harboured misgivings saw in the Bolsheviks an organisation that had constantly opposed the war and called for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. So, when Lenin's Bolsheviks called for an international conference in 1918, many anarcho-syndicalists welcomed it on the grounds that it was seeking to form a revolutionary International. With both workers unrest and syndicalist organisations growing at a phenomenal rate, many syndicalists reasoned that a world revolution could take place shortly, and that a united revolutionary organisation was of urgent necessity to co-ordinate action. One syndicalist summoned up the mood in 1918:

*"We knew no fear in those days. Hope overpowered everything".*

For his part Lenin, shattered by the news that the SPD supported the war, had long argued and campaigned for the setting up of a new International. Lenin and the Bolsheviks, like the syndicalists, calculated that world revolution was imminent. In 1918, with the international communist movement still weak, Lenin needed the support of the syndicalist organisations (ironically, while many syndicalist groups initially supported the Russian revolution, many Marxist Parties at first did not recognise it as a communist revolution, on the grounds that Marxist theory said this could not take place in backward Russia). The only syndicalist organisation not to receive an invitation was the Russian syndicalists, whose attempt to organise the third All Russian Conference of Anarcho-syndicalists was prevented from going ahead by the Bolshevik party only months before the 1919 conference.

## Third International

The international conference duly took place in March 1919 in Moscow. It was badly attended, mainly due to the problems of travelling to the still-isolated Russia. Few delegates arrived from outside the soviet borders, and the meeting did little more than announce the founding of the Third International or Comintern (CI), and call for the immediate seizure of power by the proletariat under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Nothing was said about the Bolsheviks' belief in the need for political centralism under their control. Lenin calculated (not unwisely) that this would lead to the syndicalists withdrawing their support for the new International.

After the conference, the attitudes of the syndicalists towards the communists began to change. With the civil war coming to an end, many anarcho-syndicalists in Russia, who had refused to speak out against the Bolsheviks while the revolution was under threat from the civil war, now began to do so. Information as to the true nature of the Bolsheviks began to circulate. This led to growing doubts about entering an International with the Bolsheviks. Most notably, the Swedish revolutionary union (SAC) and the German Freie Arbeiter- Union Deutschlands (FAUD) both opposed the CI and called for a syndicalist International. Hence, the second meeting of the CI in the summer of 1920 took place in very changed circumstances. Several attempts at revolution in central Europe had now tried and failed and the Bolsheviks saw their hopes of imminent world revolution fading. Realising a long-term struggle would be needed, the Bolsheviks changed tactics. Now, just as they had directed the revolution in Russia, they believed that through the CI, they would assume the political leadership of the international revolution.

The various syndicalist delegations setting out for the conference were blissfully unaware of the Bolsheviks' tactical about- turn. The measure of the esteem in which the Russian revolution was still held can be gauged from the elation felt by those few who managed to get through to Russia (the majority were either turned back or arrested on the way). Many later recalled the sense of euphoria of stepping onto Russian soil; this was soon to abruptly evaporate.

Before the CI conference opened, the newly arrived syndicalist delegates were invited to attend a CI Executive Committee. Here, the Bolsheviks announced they were to launch a new international trade union organisation, the Red International of Labour Unions, ostensibly to counter the reformist International Federation of Trade

Unions, recently launched in Amsterdam. The syndicalists were handed a document entitled "To Syndicalists of all Nations". This was presented as a *fait accompli* manifesto. It had been written by Lozovsky, proposed leader of the new trade union International, who was aided by the British syndicalist Murphy, in consultation with Lenin. It contained a clear message; the world syndicalist movement was to become subordinate to the communist political leadership in Moscow. It argued for a "close indestructible alliance between the communist party and the trade unions" and claimed that the aim of the new International should be to set up "communist cells" within reformist unions in order to capture the leadership. The syndicalists rejected the document out of hand.

The CI conference itself provided further controversy. The syndicalists hope for a loose alliance of co-existing groups of disparate ideology, united mainly by their revolutionary commitment, was not to be. On the opening day, the Bolsheviks presented a document stating that the proletariat cannot accomplish its revolution without a political party leading it. They argued that the aim of the revolution was the capture of state power under the leadership of the communist

party. Thus, the Bolshevik proposals explicitly repudiated the basic principles of revolutionary syndicalism. They claimed that the syndicalists' rejection of political parties;

*"helps only to support the bourgeoisie and counter revolutionaries...They fail to grasp that, without an independent political party, the working class is a body without a head (and, in comparison to revolutionary Marxism)...syndicalism and industrialism are a step backward"*.

The syndicalist delegates listened in stunned silence before rising spontaneously, one after another, to present their passionate and powerful defences of syndicalism. It is interesting to note the differences in emphasis of these speeches, which reflect the differences within their own countries. Jack Tanner was from the Shop Stewards' Movement in Britain, which placed great emphasis on the importance of factory committees (see Unit 14). While he agreed with the idea of a conscious revolutionary minority he pointed out that, if this formed into a party, it would become detached from the workers' struggle, and a slave to its own power interests.

Another syndicalist, Souchy, stressed an idea dating back to the First International, that revolutions can only be made by the workers themselves. Rather than starting with preconceived notions; "revolutionary theory should derive from the conscious development of the tendencies and means embedded in the workers' actual struggle with the bourgeoisie". To be successful, an International must encompass "the living spirit of working class movement...found not in the heads of theoreticians but in the heart of workers". Replying to the Bolshevik view that workers could not organise the economy, Souchy asked;

*"Who is to organise the economy? Some bourgeois elements which we organise into parties, who are not in touch with...economic life, or rather those...near the source of production and consumption?"*

Perhaps the most telling speech was from Pestana, from the Spanish CNT (see Units 15–18). Ironically, he was constrained by the mandate he had brought with him from the CNT to support the setting up of the CI. The greatest vision he brought to his speech was about the way revolutions happen. He ridiculed the idea that political parties organise revolutions, and argued convincingly that they blossom out of complex evolutionary processes. For Pestana, the revolution would emerge when there was "a spiritual condition favourable to change in the norms that govern the life of the people". This would be brought about when there was a critical difference between "the people and their aspirations and the organisations that govern them". He openly mocked the idea that the Bolsheviks had made and organised the Russian Revolution, calling their seizure of power a "coup d'état" (which it clearly was – see Units 11 and 12). As he put it, the Russian revolution was one thing and the Bolshevik seizure of power quite another.

## **Rise of anarcho-syndicalism**

The showdown between the developing ideas of anarcho-syndicalism and the Bolshevik version of Marxism was bound to happen. The fact that it took until 1920 for the differences to turn into open opposition on the international scene is due to a combination of poor communication, misplaced trust in the Bolsheviks, and Lenin's careful attempts to 'manage' international syndicalism. Some of the ideas of anarchism lying at the root of the split with Marxism are outlined in Unit 3, but they are worth airing again here in the international context.

Anarchists have a specific view of human history, and of its role in how we organise and interact. In this view, humans emerged from a pre-historic past dominated by individual struggle,



and developed co-operation in order to ensure their group survival. Thus, they were able to maintain themselves against the physical superiority of other species. As a result, the central tenet of humanity emerges, rooted in social solidarity and mutual aid. In the modern world, humans continue to inherit, from their ancestors, the social instinct necessary to maintain a society based on co-operation. Despite capitalism, co-operation over the basics of life is still the norm. We still live largely by a set of social laws, based on common morality, which is itself based on common humanity.

Fundamental to the anarchist view of humanity is the notion of freedom. Without freedom, co-operation becomes coercion. Humans can be forced into 'co-operating' but, at some point, the fundamental desire to act freely will ensure human rebellion. Since co-operation is the essence of human development and progress, the greater the freedom, the greater the growth in human development. Closely linked to freedom, is the concept of equality. If a minority or majority receives more power or material wealth than the remainder of society, then some form of coercion must have arisen in order to maintain inequality. To stay rich, you have to find a way of keeping everyone else poor.

Historically, the main tool of coercion to preserve inequality is the state. This is not directly part of society, but above it, so as to exercise control over it. The state has to get stronger, as more power/ wealth inequality is sought. In other words, more inequality needs more coercion, which reduces co-operation and therefore stifles human development. History is full of examples where inequality and coercion have undermined basic humanity. To cite just one, a commentator in France noted that, due to industrialisation, a large part of the French rural population "stood almost on the level of beast, having lost every trace of humanity as a result of horrible poverty". The individualist within us still exists, and reappears when we are backed into a deep corner. However, even in such dire circumstances, the desire to co-operate persists and will soon re-emerge. Humans seek each other out to ensure basic survival. Once they do this, a common morality will automatically emerge to underpin social relations.

And so the huddled masses, driven off the land and forced to work as slaves in the emerging French capitalist factory system, soon came together to fight their economic destitution. The act of co-operating inevitably brought them into conflict with capitalism. The result was two opposing forces in society; those who sought to maintain power in a society based on coercion and inequality, and those who sought a society based on co-operation, freedom and equality. For the anarchist, the latter is the necessary pre-requisite to the evolution of further human social development, and a new humanity.

The struggle against capitalism is only part of the long struggle for a new and better, more co-operative humanity. Human progress is the result of free co-operation and equality and therefore, it can only occur when inequality and coercion are overcome. In essence, the anarchist view of human history is one of struggle for freedom and an end to the dominance of one human being over another. Revolutions have a distinct (but not exclusive) role in this struggle for freedom. To quote an anarchist far more articulate than the writer, revolutions are;

*"only a special phase of the evolutionary process, which appears when social aspirations are so restricted in their natural development by authority, that they have to shatter the old shell by violence before they can function as new factors in human life".*

Revolutions are spontaneous. They represent that point in history when the desire for change can no longer be constrained by coercion. Crucially, they are made by masses of people acting together socially in solidarity, co-operation, and free expression. It was on this basis that Pestana

attacked the Bolshevik concept of revolution, which Lenin said, “could be planned down to the last detail” by a small political elite. History demonstrates that revolutions are not planned, but erupt when rulers can no longer contain the desire for freedom and equality. As Pestana argued;

*“revolution is the manifestation, more or less violent, of a condition of the spirit favourable to change in the norms governing the life of a people, which by constant labour of several generations...emerges from the shadows at a given moment and destroys without pity all obstacles standing in the way of its goal”.*

The crucial point Pestana makes here is that, though revolutions are spontaneous, they do not suddenly appear, but are the end result of a long period of struggle, during which opposition to the rulers and their oppression evolves. This clearly throws out the Marxist argument that revolutions come about as a result of some inevitable law of history, where some indifferent process makes workers automatically into revolutionaries. Revolutions are not automatic. They are not caused by abstract economic laws, but by the subjective desire for freedom.

Anarcho-syndicalism has taken this anarchist view of history and gave it organisational form. It made anarchist ideas a potential reality, by producing a basic structure within which people could co-operate and organise for revolution. While anarchism had identified the basis of humanity and struggle through human history, anarcho-syndicalism took anarchist principles and used them to shape a basic form of organisation that was not only a vision of a new, free society, but would also help create the embryo of such a society, within the shell of the old. Anarcho-syndicalism thus made a hitherto well founded, but disjointed, struggle for a greater humanity and gave it coherence, direction and continuity. In making its starting point the common struggle against capitalism, anarcho-syndicalism sought to encourage a new culture of resistance within the working class — a culture based on solidarity, freedom and equality.

Anarcho-syndicalism also started to develop a sophisticated dynamic — a view of how culture, struggle, revolution, and the new society would develop together. Basically, as people began consciously co-operating in the struggle for equality, the new culture of resistance would develop. As working people gained experience in running their own struggle, they would develop their understanding and ability to run their own workplaces, communities and society. As they realised the benefits of greater co-operation and its deep link with equality of wealth and power, the new culture would evolve further and mature, until the point when capitalism and its coercive arm the state could no longer contain it. The result would be revolution, centred on the social general strike, that would sweep away the old world based on capitalist oppression and herald the new world based on co-operative organisation and equality.

The anarcho-syndicalists were far from being unsophisticated and disorganised, as both the state and the Marxists would have us believe (as does anyone who wants to be leaders of others). In fact, they were more sophisticated than the Marxists, since they accommodated subjective relations into their model of revolution, and they certainly believed in the primacy of organisation. The local anarcho-syndicalist organisations were both economic and social, centred on day-to-day life both in the community and workplace. They were the basic core of the new society, and they ensured that working people could direct their own struggle both before, during and, if a coup was prevented, after the revolution. Resistance would be organised until the point was reached at which it could no longer be contained. Then, the conscious masses themselves would make the revolution. It would be spontaneous, but planned for. After it, the local organisations would be the starting point from which new democratic structures would emerge to form the basis of a new society.

## Demise of the CI

For their part, the Bolsheviks had not broken free from Marxist determinism, as the anarcho-syndicalists attending the CI Conference in 1920 had apparently hoped. They still maintained that all inequality was rooted in economic inequality, and that society was little more than a social superstructure built on the edifice of economic production. All that was needed was to change the nature of production via state control and the very nature of society would automatically change with it.

The only difference between the Bolsheviks and the Marxists of the Second International was that they rejected the idea that state control could be ultimately achieved through the ballot box. Instead, they favoured seizing state power through an insurrection planned, organised and controlled by a small political elite in the form of the communist party.

Once the syndicalists realised the Bolsheviks' strategy of controlling the CI through a rigged voting system, they took very little part in the proceedings of the 1920 CI Conference. It ended with the passing of 21 conditions that must be met before being accepted into the Comintern, aimed at ensuring that only communist parties could join. Furthermore, these "would be purified, highly centralised, disciplined, resolute and wholly reliable organs of the international staff of the proletarian revolution." Only those unions who supported the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' through the conquest of political power made admittance to the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU).

It was to take a further meeting of the RILU before the syndicalists finally abandoned the idea of uniting the world's revolutionary unions. In late December 1920, a syndicalist conference was held in order to formulate an approach to the next RILU conference. The Berlin syndicalists adopted 7 points that would have to be accepted by the RILU so that syndicalists could join. The most important were that the RILU must be completely independent of political parties and that the socialist reorganisation of society could only be carried out by the economic organisations of the working class. The Bolshevik-controlled RILU meeting duly rejected all 7 points, and the RILU was made completely subordinate to the Comintern.

The final breach between revolutionary syndicalism and Bolshevism had occurred. At the 1921 FAUD Congress in October, syndicalist delegates from Germany, Sweden, Holland, Czechoslovakia and the US section of the IWW met and decided to hold a new international congress in Berlin in 1922, with the aim of forming a new International of revolutionary syndicalists.

## Founding of the IWA

In December 1922, the International Congress of Syndicalists met in Berlin, with delegates from the Federación Obrera Regional Argentina (FORA), the Chilean IWW, the Danish Union for Syndicalist Propaganda, the German FAUD, the Dutch NAS, the Italian Unione Sindicale Italiana (USI), the Mexican Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), the Norwegian Norsk Syndikalistisk Federation (NSF), the Portuguese Confederaçao General do Trabalho (CGT), and the Swedish Sverige Arbtarens Centralorganisation (SAC).

The Spanish CNT, engaged in a bitter struggle with the Spanish state, sent messages of support to the Congress after their delegation was arrested on the way to the conference. Though many

of the organisations represented had already endured bitter state repression, they still totalled several millions of workers.

The Congress adopted the name of the First International, the International Working Men's Association, which was later changed to the International Workers' Association (IWA). It also adopted a programme, which for the first time, codified anarcho-syndicalism into a number of basic principles. In general, this was based on ideas from the 1913 conference but it also took into account the lessons learned from the Russian revolution. For instance, earlier advocates of the general strike had argued that workers' economic power was such that a largely peaceful orderly transfer of power could take place. The Russian revolution had dispelled any such notions.

The conference still recognised the social general strike as the highest expression of direct action, but they now saw it as merely the prelude to social revolution, which would probably have to be defended by violent means. While recognising that violence may be necessary, they stipulated that defence of the revolution should be completely in the hands of the workers themselves, organised in workers' militias, accountable and controlled by the wider workers' movement.

Centralism, political parties, parliamentarianism and the state, including the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, were all emphatically rejected. The Congress also rejected the Marxist concept that liberation would, as one delegate put it, come about;

*“by virtue of some inevitable fatalism of rigid natural laws which admit no deviation; its realisation will depend above all upon the conscious will and the force of revolutionary action of the workers and will be determined by them”.*

The programme also made clear that syndicalism opposed, not only economic inequality, but also all forms of inequality and dominance. It also stated its total opposition to war and militarism. In terms of post-capitalist organisation, the programme envisages a system of economic communes and administrative organs, based within a system of free councils federated locally, regionally and up to the global level. These would form the basis of a self-managed society, in which workers in every branch of industry and at every level would regulate the production and distribution process according to the needs and interests of the community, by mutual agreement, according to a pre-determined plan. The revolutionary aim was stipulated as seeking to replace the government of people by the management of things.

The 1922 IWA founding conference marked a watershed in the development of anarcho-syndicalism. Ideas and tactics developed through practical direct action and self-organisation across the world were brought together and distilled into a clear set of aims of principles. What is more, workers from different parts of the world, facing widely varying problems and conditions, agreed upon these aims and principles. They described the fundamental core of anarcho-syndicalism, and they remain fundamentally in place and just as relevant today (even if the syntax and grammar seems a little dated!) In 1922, for the first time, anarcho-syndicalism was defined as an international movement.

## Postscript

In the years following the founding Congress, unions and propaganda groups from France, Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Switzerland, Bulgaria, Poland and Rumania affiliated to the new anarcho-syndicalist International. Later, the Asociación Continental Americana de los Trabajadores (ACAT – American Continental Association of Workers) affiliated en bloc, including

unions and propaganda groups from Chile, Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Guatemala, Cuba, Costa Rica and El Salvador. At one time or another in the period 1923–39, the IWA had affiliates in 15 countries in Europe, 14 in Latin America and one in Japan, while maintaining sympathetic contact with labour organisations in India.

However, despite the size and early growth of the IWA, it had formed against a background of mounting repression. Even at the 1922 founding Congress, the delegates from USI warned of the rising danger of fascism and reported that already, a number of USI members had been murdered by marauding groups of fascists. In the 1920s, the USI was an astoundingly large organisation of some 600,000 members but, within a few years of Mussolini coming to power, the fascists had annihilated it. This was soon followed by the merciless destruction of the German FAUD by the Nazis. The CNT in Spain, which became the biggest affiliate to IWA in the 1930s, was executed out of existence by the Franco regime during and following the tragedy of the 1936–9 Spanish revolution (Units 15–18). By the end of the Second World War, repression had wiped out much of the pre-war anarcho-syndicalist movement, leaving only a handful of much smaller organisations struggling to keep the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism alive.

In Britain, it was not repression that undermined anarcho-syndicalism, but the attraction of communism. However, not before the syndicalist movement left its mark on the British labour movement. In Unit 14, we will focus on the British syndicalist movement, before going on to study the Spanish CNT and the Spanish Revolution and Civil War, which provides an able demonstration of how a society run on the principles of anarcho-syndicalism worked in practice.

## Key points

- The anarchist wing of the First International continued to function in the 1870s. It developed within it the basic principles of anarcho-syndicalism.
- The anarchists attempted to exert some influence on the Second International but were unable to steer it from its reformist pro-parliamentary path and were soon excluded.
- As syndicalist organisations developed across the world prior to WW1, links were established but no international set up due to reluctance of the French CGT to take part at that time.
- After the Russian Revolution the Bolsheviks established the Third International (Comintern) and attempted to recruit the existing syndicalist unions. These overtures were rejected as the Bolshevik tactics became clear.
- The anarcho-syndicalist international was finally established in December 1922 in Berlin.

## Checklist

1. In what way did the anarchist wing of First International seek to organise after the split of 1872?
2. On what basis was the Second International established?

3. What were the main reasons for the opposition of the French CGT to the forming of an anarcho-syndicalist international in 1913?
4. Why did the syndicalist unions reject Bolshevik attempts to enlist them in the Comintern?
5. What were the main points of the programme adopted by anarcho-syndicalists at the founding of the IWA in 1922?

## Answer suggestions

*1. In what way did the anarchist wing of First International seek to organise after the split of 1872?*

The International was to be organised in two dimensions. Horizontally, there were to be the general workers' organisations, which were organised on the basis of locality. Then, vertically organised industrial organisations were envisaged, which would provide regional, national and global solidarity within industries faced with the same problems of organised international capital. This two-way structure was the forerunner of the basic structure that was to be adopted by the emerging anarcho-syndicalist unions some 25 years later.

*2. On what basis was the Second International established?*

The impetus for the Second International came not from political parties, chiefly the German Marxist SPD, which was an advocate of the idea of the "conquest of power within existing states". The Second International concentrated on the peaceful transition to socialism through the creation of the "popular state", created by the voting into power of socialist parties. The state would take control of industry and manage it on the workers' behalf, as the first stage in a seamless transition to socialism.

*3. What were the main reasons for the opposition of the French CGT to the forming of an anarcho-syndicalist international in 1913?*

It was due to the way in which the syndicalist movement had developed in France the CGT opposed the setting up of a revolutionary International. Being the first union organisation in France, the CGT was attempting to organise all workers, including those who supported reformism. The CGT wanted to work within the ISNTUC, the reformist International, to convince it of the need for revolution. It argued that as most trade unions were affiliated to the ISNTUC other syndicalist organisations should also agitate for revolutionary politics within ISNTUC, rather than establish a separate organisation.

*4. Why did the syndicalist unions reject Bolshevik attempts to enlist them in the Comintern?*

With the establishing of the Comintern it was proposed that syndicalist unions were to become subordinate to Bolshevik political leadership. The aim of the International was to capture the leadership of the reformist unions by setting up communist cells within them. The syndicalists had hoped for a loose alliance of co-existing groups of disparate ideology, united mainly by their revolutionary commitment. The Bolsheviks stated that the proletariat cannot accomplish its revolution without a political party leading it and that the aim of the revolution was the capture of state power under the leadership of the communist party.

*5. What were the main points of the programme adopted by anarcho-syndicalists at the founding of the IWA in 1922?*

It adopted a programme codifying anarcho-syndicalism into a number of basic principles. These were based on ideas from the 1913 conference but it also took into account the lessons

learned from the Russian revolution. The conference recognised the social general strike as the highest expression of direct action seeing it as the prelude to social revolution. They stipulated that defence of the revolution should be completely in the hands of the workers themselves, organised in workers' militias, accountable and controlled by the wider workers' movement. Centralism, political parties, parliamentarianism and the state, including the idea of the dictatorship of the proletariat, were all categorically rejected. The programme also made clear that syndicalism opposed, not only economic, but all forms of inequality and dominance. It also stated its total opposition to war and militarism. In terms of post-capitalist organisation, the programme envisages a system of economic communes and administrative organs, based within a system of free councils federated locally, regionally and globally. These would form the basis of a self-managed society, in which workers in every branch of industry and at every level would regulate the production and distribution process according to the needs and interests of the community, by mutual agreement, according to a pre-determined plan. The revolutionary aim was stipulated as seeking to replace the government of people by the management of things.

## Suggested discussion points

- Should the establishment of the IWA be seen only as a direct response to the Bolshevik-dominated Third International?
- Prior to 1914 the French CGT argued that anarcho-syndicalists should attempt to work within reformist union internationals. How relevant is this argument today?

## Appendix

Principles of Revolutionary Syndicalism International Convention of the International (IWA) in Berlin, 1922. as adopted by the First Workers' Association (IWA) in Berlin, 1922.

1. Revolutionary Syndicalism, basing itself on the class war, aims at the union of all manual and intellectual workers in economic fighting organisations struggling for their emancipation from the yoke of wage-slavery and the oppression of the State. Its goal is the re-organisation of social life on the basis of Free Communism, by means of the revolutionary action of the working class itself. It considers that the economic organisations of the of the proletariat are alone capable of realising this aim, and in consequence, its appeal is addressed to workers in their capacity as producers and creators of social riches, in opposition to the modern political labour parties which can never be considered at all from the point of view of economic re-organisation.

2. Revolutionary Syndicalism is the confirmed enemy of every form of economic and social monopoly, and aims at their abolition by means of economic communes and administrative organs of factory and field workers on the basis of a free system of councils entirely liberated from subordination to any Government or political party. Against the politics of the State and of parties it erects the economic organisation of labour; against the Government of people, it sets up the management of things. Consequently, it has not for its object the conquest of political power, but the abolition of every State function in social life. It considers that, along with the monopoly of property, should disappear also the monopoly of domination, and that any form the dicta-

torship of the proletariat will always be the creator of new monopolies and new privileges. It could never be an instrument of liberation.

3. The double task of Revolutionary Syndicalism is as follows: on the one hand it pursues the daily revolutionary struggle for the economic, social and intellectual improvement of the working class within the framework of existing society; on the other hand its ultimate goal is to raise the masses to the independent management of production and distribution, as well as to transfer into their own hands all of the ramifications of social life. It is convinced that the organisation of an economic system, resting on the producer and built up from below upwards, can never be regulated by Governmental decrees, but only by the common action of all manual and intellectual workers in every branch of industry, by the conduct of factories by the producers themselves in such a way that each group, workshop or branch of industry is an autonomous section of the general economic organisation, systematically developing production and distribution in the interests of the entire community in accordance with a well-determined plan and on the basis of mutual agreements.

4. Revolutionary Syndicalism is opposed to every centralist tendency and organisation, which is but borrowed from the State and the Church, and which stifles methodically every spirit of initiative and every independent thought. Centralism is an artificial organisation from top to bottom, which hands over en bloc to a handful of people, the regulation of the affairs of a whole community. The individual becomes, therefore, nothing but an automaton directed and moved from above. The interests of the community yield place to the privileges of a few; personal responsibility by a soul-less discipline; real education by a veneer. It is for this reason that Revolutionary Syndicalism advocates federalist organisation; that is to say, an organisation, from below upwards, of a free union of all forces on the basis of common ideas and interests.

5. Revolutionary Syndicalism rejects all parliamentary activity and all co-operation with legislative bodies. Universal Suffrage, on however wide a basis, cannot bring about the disappearance of the flagrant contradictions existing in the very bosom of modern society; the parliamentary system has but one object, viz., to lend the appearance of of legal right to the reign of lies and social injustice, to persuade slaves to fix the seal of the law onto their own enslavement.

6. Revolutionary Syndicalism rejects all arbitrarily fixed political and national frontiers, and it sees in nationalism nothing else but the religion of the modern State, behind which are concealed the material interests of the possessing classes. It recognises only regional differences, and demands for every group the right of self-determination in harmonious solidarity with all other associations of an economic, territorial or national order.

7. It is for these same reasons that Revolutionary Syndicalism opposes militarism in all its forms, and considers anti- militarist propaganda one of its most important tasks in the struggle against the present system. In the first instance, it urges individual refusal of military service, and especially, organised boycotting of the manufacture of war materials.

8. Revolutionary Syndicalism stands on the platform of direct action, and supports all struggles which are not in contradiction with its aims, viz., the abolition of economic monopoly and of the domination of the State. The methods of struggle are the strike, the boycott, sabotage etc. Direct action finds its most pronounced expression in the general strike which, at the same time, from the point of view of Revolutionary Syndicalism, ought to be the prelude to the social revolution.

9. Although enemies of all forms of organised violence in the hands of any Government, the Syndicalists do not forget that the decisive struggle between the Capitalism of today and the Free Communism of tomorrow will not take place without serious collisions. They recognise violence



therefore, as a means of defence 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 land. Just as this expropriation cannot be commenced and carried to a successful issue except by the revolutionary economic organisations of the workers, so also the defence of the revolution should be in the hands of these economic organisations, and not in those of any military or other organisations operating outside the economic organs.

10. It is only in the revolutionary economic organisations of the working class that is to be found the power apt to carry out its emancipation, as well as the creative energy necessary for the re-organisation of society on the basis of Free Communism.

## Further Reading

**Anarcho-syndicalism. Rudolph Rocker. Phoenix Press. ISBN 0948 984058. £4.50. — AK- -BS — -LI-** Covers the period of the creation of the IWA by someone who was directly involved. A widely acclaimed classic.

**Memoirs of a Revolutionist. Peter Kropotkin. Black Rose Books. ISBN 0921 689187. £11.99. — AK- -BS — -LI-** Another first-hand contemporary account of the setting up of the IWA, this time in Kropotkin's remarkable autobiography. Invaluable.

**The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour. Wayne Thorpe. Kluwer Academic Publ. -LI-** Academic perspective, but nevertheless an extremely good chronology of the events leading up to the creation of the IWA and the Bolshevik International. One of the best specific texts on the period.

**The CNT in the Russian Revolution. Ignacio DeLlorens. KSL Pamphlets. £1. -AK-** Cheap and cheerful pamphlet specifically on the Bolshevik's moves to woo the CNT into the Red International and the CNT finding out what they were really about.

**The Revolutionary Left in Spain 1914–1923. Gerald H Meaker. Stanford University Press, 1974. ISBN 0-8047-0845-2 -LI-** In-depth academic historian account of the early years of the CNT in Spain, including their decision to join the IWA.

**History of the Three Internationals. William Z Foster. International Publishers Co., 1955. -LI-** Dry but revealing account of the revolutionary internationals.

Notes: The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is always worth consulting your local library. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK — available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), — BS — try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 14: Anarcho-syndicalism in Britain, 1914–30

In this Unit, we return to Britain, picking up the development of syndicalism from where we left off in Unit 6 – the First World War. The outbreak of war had a profound effect on the revolutionary syndicalist movement, and on the workers' movement in Britain as a whole. By 1914, the huge membership of militant, active workers' organisations had become a major threat to the privileges of the ruling class.

Rather than attempt to document the entire movement, in this unit we attempt to provide an in-depth case study mainly of one industrial sector – that of engineering. This sector is chosen because, after an initial decline, syndicalism re-emerged within engineering in the form of the Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement. In this Unit, we trace the rise of this movement and the part syndicalism played within it.

### This Unit aims to

- Study the development of anarcho-syndicalism during and after the First World War.
- Provide an in-depth case study of one industrial sector – that of engineering.
- Trace the rise of the Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement and the part anarcho-syndicalism played within it.
- Look at the reasons behind the decline of anarcho-syndicalist influence in the British labour movement.

### Terms and abbreviations

**Guild Socialism:** A form of socialism developed in Britain that advocated a system of industrial self-government through national worker-controlled guilds. Aspects of Marxism and syndicalism were adopted and Guild socialists held that workers should work for control of industry rather than for political reform. The function of the state in a guild-organized society was to be that of an administrative unit and owner of the means of production; to it the guilds would pay rent, while remaining independent.

**ASE:** Amalgamated Society of Engineers

**CLWC:** Central Labour Withholding Committees, an unofficial organisation of shop stewards in the Glasgow engineering industry.

**CWC:** Clyde Workers' Committee, a permanent committee to resist the Munitions Act based in Glasgow.

**SLP:** Socialist Labour Party, 'dual unionists' who were strong in Glasgow.

**SWC:** Sheffield Works Committee, a syndicalist influenced organisation set up in 1916.

**SSWCM:** Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement, changed its name to the

**NWCM:** National Workers' Committee Movement in 1921.

**CP:** Communist Party.

## **Introduction**

In the Britain of 1914, the huge membership of militant, active workers' organisations had become a major threat to the privileges of the ruling class. There can be little doubt that the outbreak of the First World War proved a massive blow to the development of syndicalism. In the first few months of wartime, the syndicalist movement became rapidly isolated, as it adamantly clung to its anti-militarist principles, while patriotic fever gripped the nation. Syndicalist newspapers collapsed, membership dwindled, and many employers took advantage of the situation to rid themselves of isolated troublesome militants. Many active syndicalists were left with little choice other than to emigrate or face unemployment. However, unlike mining, the railways and the building industry (the centres of pre-war syndicalist activity), the engineering sector experienced major rapid change due to the war. It was this that led to growing unrest within the industry as the war progressed. From the outset, workers within engineering turned to syndicalist ideas and methods to help them in facing up to the management demands.

The engineering industry was crucial to the British government. It was the key source of weaponry in what was the world's first industrialised war. Development, reorganisation, and automation of the production system were brought about at accelerated pace by massive state-driven expansion and investment in the industry. The result was a revolution in economic relations, and major changes in the structure of the industry and the role of the workers within it.

Prior to the war, British engineering had been relatively outdated and generally unspecialised, with production often scattered amongst numerous small-scale workshops. The craft unions were able to impose restrictive working practices and maintain their status against the threat of advancing technology. However, their influence was waning and, as early as 1898, the employers had organised a national lockout, imposing a settlement on the workers, which both exposed and undermined the divisive craft unionist system. Under the influence of syndicalism, many militants then accepted the demise of the craft unions and began organising within the amalgamation movement for a single industrial union. By 1914, the most powerful engineering union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), was forced to accept some semi-skilled workers as amalgamation took hold.

## **The war economy**

As the war began, the craft unions still represented a formidable force, despite a number of defeats at the hands of the employers' federation. Now, British capitalists and the government had the problem of how to break the power of craft unionism, while still retaining the loyalty of craft workers. These craft (skilled) workers were critical to the rapid expansion of output. Even though unskilled workers could operate new machinery, the craft workers were needed to set

them up and to supervise the quality of the work. The divide between unskilled and craft workers was to dominate industrial relations throughout the war.

Before looking at the struggle within engineering, it is worth pausing to place the industry in the wider “war economy”. Within months of the war starting, it was clear that the free market was unable to meet the demands of the war machine and that state intervention would be necessary to sustain production. Massive state control of the industry was immediately implemented and, within four years, the government controlled 90% of total imports, and the domestic production of food, coal, most other raw materials, shipping and railways. Food distribution was controlled through rationing and raw materials through allocation. Rents, wages and capital markets were also government-controlled. Engineering was at the centre of this state intervention and, by 1918, 3.5 million munitions workers in the industry were under state control.

For the Marxists, this exercise proved that the state could assume full control of the economy, and it assisted those who argued for nationalisation of industry. Even some syndicalists who, before the war, had argued for direct workers’ control, now supported state control of industry prior to it being run by workers through a system of local committees (an idea influenced by guild socialism). However, since the First International, the anarchists had held that the state, by its very nature, was oppressive and that an all-powerful state could prove more oppressive than capitalism. This belief was soon proved right, as the state used its power to crush workers’ unrest, especially among engineering workers. It was this reality that was to assist in the development of anarcho-syndicalism across British engineering.

The arms industry was not brought under direct state control, rather, it came under overall state direction with individual companies operating within it. While allowing private firms to operate, the government also drafted 90 directors from British companies into the Ministry of Munitions, to ensure that capitalist expertise was used on the state’s behalf.

These directors were clear about what this new partnership meant; the government would control the workforce, allowing the companies to reap massive profits from the unlimited demand for arms. William Weir, a leading Glasgow munitions employer who later became Director of Munitions for Scotland, called for engineering workers to be conscripted in the same way as soldiers, with a wage freeze and the ending of all trade union restrictive practices and bargaining rights. As he put it;

*“the existing skilled men, organised as trade unionists, are uncontrollable by employers, and the state should therefore take on the employers’ disciplinary functions itself.”*

For its part, the government was wary of what became a national campaign by the employers’ federation, backed by the press, for engineering workers to be subject to virtual military dictatorship. It was in a weak position; by 1915, the shortage of shells at the front was desperate. Confrontation with workers would at the very least result in yet further shortages in the short term. Also, the expanding arms industry was already resulting in labour shortages, as an internal government memo stated early in 1915;

*“workmen of any pretensions to skill at the engineering and ship building industry have little difficulty finding work ...the result is that to a very considerable extent men are out of control of both their employers and their own leaders”.*

## The Munitions Act

Rather than opting for coercion, the government decided to enlist the help of the reformist trade unions. Within weeks of the outbreak of the war, the Labour Party and trade union leaders, who had up to recently strenuously opposed all capitalist wars, were falling over themselves to demonstrate their patriotism. The government's plan was now to introduce masses of unskilled engineering workers to overcome the labour shortage (a process which became known as dilution), and Lloyd George wasted no time in inviting trade union and Labour Party leaders to the Treasury to enlist their support for a proposed Munitions Act. The Act would make strikes in war-related industries illegal and introduce compulsory arbitration in all disputes. It would also allow any workplace to be designated a "controlled" establishment, in which all restrictive practices were illegal and wages and workshop discipline were under direct control of the Ministry. Joint employer/union tribunals could impose fines on such "controlled" workers who were deemed to have broken workshop rules or encouraged others "to restrict the rate of production." Workers in munitions would also need a "leaving certificate" to leave employment, which noted the reason for leaving, while workers without leaving certificates could not be taken on until a six week period of unemployment had passed. This draconian law would totally change power relations within the workplace. Employers could introduce measures to raise production while cutting wages and conditions. Any worker who resisted would face fines and the threat of being sacked, with the reason for dismissal placed on a leaving certificate, ensuring they would never work again.

At the meeting, the labour leaders accepted the proposals in what became known as the "Treasury Agreement". The Munitions Bill was duly rushed through Parliament with little opposition. A Labour Party Conference report at the time stated;

*"while the unions by the Munitions Act have relinquished for the time being many of the liberties and rights that have taken a generation to build up, on the other hand they have come forward and occupied a place in the affairs of the country which will do much to consolidate and strengthen them in the future".*

The "affairs of the country" refers to the National Labour Advisory Committee, which was established under the Act, and through which representatives of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the Labour Party leadership were consulted widely. Joint union/management production committees were established, and unions became part of the local Munitions Tribunals set up to administer the Act. Attempts to absorb and co-opt the Labour and union movement had started before the war (see Unit 6), but this move enabled the average trade union official to mingle with polite society like never before. Union officialism was now fast becoming a profession and its members a social caste, growing curiously apart from the general interest of the rank and file and shop floor workers. It was this growing division between union leaders and the rank and file which was to put at risk the government's strategy – they had bought the leadership, but the workers were soon to embark on mass strike action aimed at ending the war.

After holding out for a few minor concessions, the ASE signed up to the Treasury Agreement, on the understanding that they would agree to dilution taking place in the short term, but their skilled status would be returned immediately to craft unions once the war had ended. They even brought an agreement with the National Federation of Women Workers, that those women recruited to engineering would hand back their jobs to skilled workers once the war was over.

## The seeds of revolt

Of all the major industries, engineering had the most potential for a revolt by rank and file workers against the union leadership. Because of the decentralised nature of the industry, the engineering unions had little workplace organisation, instead, they had a local branch system. The union organisation itself was therefore divorced from the workplace. To maintain contact with workplaces, a shop stewards system unique to engineering had evolved. The shop stewards collected dues, checked union cards and reported grievances to the branch or district committee.

As the unions were increasingly co-opted by the state, divisions had begun to occur and, as early as the turn of the century, shop stewards were going beyond their basic administrative duties and organising unofficially within the workplace to force concessions directly from management. This brought them into direct conflict with full-time branch officials. Management therefore increasingly looked to the latter to discipline unruly shop stewards.

Even before the war, shop steward activity had led directly to disputes, most notably in the North East, where “vigilance committees” made up of shop stewards, had attempted to force the local employers federation to agree to district-wide wage-rates. The ASE stepped in to denounce the strike action and full-time branch officials joined forces with management against the shop stewards and rank and file workers.

In Glasgow, in December 1914, local engineering workers demanded a two-penny an hour rise. The ASE was horrified, and the employers’ federation dismissed the claim out of hand. However, the Glasgow district Associated Engineering Union reacted by calling for an overtime ban, which quickly spread throughout Glasgow. The shop stewards then called successfully for more decisive action and, by February 1915, 10,000 engineers were on all-out strike from 26 factories across Clydeside.

The local district committee of the ASE supported moves by the ASE leadership to cut off strike pay in order to force the strikers back to work. An unofficial organisation, the Central Labour Withholding Committees (CLWC) was then established, made up of shop stewards from the various striking factories. This bore a remarkable resemblance to the early soviet system (see Unit 11). A delegate to the CLWC described how it worked:

*“Every morning, mass meetings were held in all areas, and discussion and decisions of the previous day’s committee meeting were reported and discussed. Every afternoon, the committee was in session, taking reports from the areas and considering ways and means of ending the strike. The organisation and contacts between the factories and the areas, and between the areas and the centre, were almost perfect”.*

Though the strike ended in defeat, the CLWC provided a model through which the shop stewards’ movement in engineering developed. With the Munitions Act in full force, employers were quick to use their new powers, and the implications of the Act began to dawn on the workers. On 26<sup>th</sup> August, at a factory in Glasgow, a dispute arose over a decision to sack two workers for “slacking”, the reason being marked on their leaving certificate. The resultant strike led to 17 shop stewards being fined under the conditions of the Act. Failure to pay the fine resulted in imprisonment and this led to widespread protest, with demands to scrap the “slave act”. Former members of the CLWC organised a meeting of rank and file engineers, which threatened to organise strike action, and the prisoners were promptly released. With this victory, it was decided to form a permanent committee to resist the Munitions Act. The Clyde Workers’ Committee (CWC) was to be run on the same democratic basis as the CLWC, with 250–300 delegates elected directly from

the workplace meeting every week. It survived until April 1916 when the government smashed it.

## **The Syndicalist Influence**

The Socialist Labour Party (SLP), which supported the dual unionist approach (see Unit 5), only numbered a few hundred nationally, but was well organised on Clydeside. Many members were also delegates of the CWC, and were able to convince workers that the government would never keep its promise to bring back the status of craft workers after the war. They argued that, in the long term, de-skilling was inevitable due to technological change, and the Munitions Act was an attack on collective workers' organisation in engineering. The logic was therefore that workers should unite regardless of skill or sex into the CLC, as the first stage in creating a new industrial union. Rather than opposing dilution, they should be ensuring that unskilled labourers were paid the same rates as the skilled workers they replaced.

The CWC was not an SLP "front"; its sheer size was too great. However, the limit to syndicalist influence was demonstrated by the policy it adopted on dilution, which was that the munitions industry be nationalised, with local control being passed to works committees. Rather than wait for the election of a Labour government, the CWC proposed refusing to allow dilution to take place until their demand for nationalisation was met. Though state control was strongly opposed by the syndicalists, there was more agreement on the eventual goal. The CWC made it clear that nationalisation was a temporary measure, prior to the building of industrial unions. As CWC member James Gallacher wrote in 1916;

*"the ultimate aim of the Clyde Workers' Committee is to weld these unions into one powerful organisation that will place the workers in complete control of industry".*

The CWC needed to influence both unskilled and skilled (craft) workers in engineering in the short term, and the wider workers' movement in the long term. This was a tall order, firstly, because unskilled workers in Scotland were largely unorganised. To help overcome this, the CWC approached women workers, many of whom had been politicised through the suffragette movement. The most successful outcome of this was the 100% union membership of women workers at the massive Parkhead munitions factory in Glasgow.

The second problem, that of extending the works committee movement beyond the engineering industry was made more difficult by the fact that the war (and dilution, the Munitions Act, etc.) had not affected other industries in the same way. However, there was some early success, when a massive rent strike broke out across Glasgow against government proposals to raise rents. The strike was primarily organised by women's committees in the community, who co-ordinated various direct actions, including occupations and pickets. Engineering workers soon joined in, and eventually the government was forced to give in. The links remained after the strike, and the CWC was subsequently involved in a number of community actions.

## **Turning up the heat**

After the CWC had successfully opposed several attempts at dilution by employers, the latter, fearful that strike action might disrupt the massive profits being reaped from the war, called on the government to intervene directly. Seeing that the ASE had no control here, the government

approached the CWC directly. Lloyd George, who had sworn never to meet with the CWC, duly arrived in Glasgow, where he was publicly humiliated by the CWC delegation, adamant that they would not allow dilution until nationalisation of munitions had been agreed. Lloyd George conceded that nationalisation would be a possibility at a future date, but such a course was not open due to the conditions caused by the war.

With negotiation getting nowhere, the government turned to the usual final recourse of the state — brute force. In March 1916, large parts of Glasgow were declared under Martial Law. Meetings were banned, CWC members harassed, arrested, and refused bail, and the government smashed the BSL print press and suppressed the CWC paper “The Worker”. Widespread strike action spread immediately in response, during which no reporting of the dispute was allowed in the press, and a number of CWC delegates were arrested and sentenced to internal deportation. The strike was eventually smashed and two editors of “The Worker” were sentenced to a year’s imprisonment. Thereafter, dilution was forced onto the munitions industry at bayonet-point. Though the CWC was completely destroyed, it was to re-emerge within 18 months.

Before, the CWC had a chance to resurrect itself, unrest broke out in England. This dated back to the attempt to revive the syndicalist movement by Tom Mann and a number of pre-war syndicalists, through the launching of “The Trade Unionist”, a syndicalist paper, in early 1915. The syndicalist amalgamation movement was then re-launched as unrest in engineering grew, and the pressure was on to form a single industrial union of the working class (see Unit 6).

Delegates from 70 newly formed amalgamation committees met and decided to launch a national amalgamation organisation for the engineering industry. A conference in Leeds in November 1915, adopted a set of principles which argued for the setting up of an industrial union for all engineering workers, “regardless of craft grade or sex”. They also stressed the need for the new structures to be based on workplace organisation, with all union policies being determined in mass meetings held in the workplace. Regarding long-term goals, they stated that;

*“the definite object of the union shall be to secure the complete control of industry and the abolition of the wage system”.*

This was a significant step in the development of British syndicalism. While anarcho-syndicalists in other countries had already recognised the need for decisions to be made by mass assemblies as a basic tenant of anarcho-syndicalist democracy, pre-war British syndicalism had often considered the union branch, rather than the workplace, as the basic building block of workplace organisation. The move to workplace based democracy brought British syndicalism in line with the international movement.

Closely associated with the Amalgamation movement was an emerging Shop Stewards and Works Committee movement, the impetus for which came from events in Clydeside. Across England, Works Committees were set up, mostly modelled on the CWC. Some tentative attempts were made to network these into a national Works Committee organisation in August 1916, by deported members of the CWC. However, it was not until the biggest wartime strikes broke out in May 1917, that a national organisation became a reality.

The strike was centred on the issue of dilution. Engineering plants not directly involved in munitions, so exempt from the Munitions Act, were attempting to deskill too. Also, conscription of skilled engineers became possible (it had hitherto been a reserved occupation). The strike started in Manchester, the centre of non-munitions engineering industry, based mainly on textile production. The Manchester Works Committee organised a walkout, which quickly spread to the munitions industry. Almost overnight, 100,000 skilled engineering workers were on strike.



On May 9<sup>th</sup>, the government threatened strike organisers with life imprisonment. Police were drafted into the affected areas and a virtual state of martial law was declared. The government blatantly used the national press, and daily reports branded engineers as cowards who refused to fight. War veterans were also put into action in demonstrations against the striking workers. Despite this the strike stayed solid and there were signs that it would spread to Scotland. A national committee of delegates from the various Works Committees was set up, and demanded direct negotiations, rather than through the ASE leaders. However, the brutal action of the state was once again brought to bear, and the strike was eventually mercilessly crushed.

Despite this sad end, the action was significant in a number of ways. Firstly Lloyd George had recently (December 1916) formed a new coalition government in which Labour Party and union leaders were given government posts, including in the all-powerful War Cabinet. The brutal government action in crushing the strike exposed Labour Party and union leaders playing a prominent role, and this turned many workers against the Labour Party, while greatly boosting the support for the Works Committees and syndicalism. The strike also highlighted the dangers of organising only skilled workers, which left unskilled and semi-skilled workers alienated. The reformist unions, who had built up strong membership among these workers, not only refused to join the strike but, partially influenced by the press, they were openly hostile.

## Syndicalism in Sheffield

The hostility was particularly felt by the Sheffield Works Committee (SWC), one of the best organised. It was strongly influenced by syndicalism being set up by syndicalists who had been involved in the pre-war amalgamation movement. From the outset, the SWC attempted to extend beyond the narrow craft (skilled) base and had started to break down the barriers between the workers, to become a broad based workers organisation. However, the May strike re-opened the divisions. To counter the problem, the SWC launched a pamphlet written by the syndicalist engineer JT Murphy, which laid out the basic principles of the emerging Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement (SSWCM). In it, he attacked the narrow 'craftist' views that divided workers, as well as the sexist attitudes of the ASE and many skilled workers. He argued that attitudes to women who were doing jobs previously undertaken by men were due to bigotry and male dominance, "which have existed for centuries". Further, he pointed out that women workers within engineering were being treated "with amassed contempt as passengers of war". He completely rejected the idea that women could or should be expected to leave their jobs after the war so men could take them back. Instead of divisions based on "craft, trade and sex prejudice", Murphy called for unity in one Great Industrial Union, which would "invigorate the labour movement with the real democratic spirit". In this, he argued against leadership, official or otherwise, which results in others "doing the thinking for us", leading to passive acceptance and people being treated as "pliable goods, to be moulded and formed according to the desires and judgement" of others.

Real democracy, in Murphy's eyes, would encourage participation;

*"the more responsibility rests upon every member... the greater the tendency for thought ... (and)... thought is revolutionary, it breaks down barriers, transforms institutions, and leads onwards to a larger life. To be afraid of thought is to be afraid of life, and to become an instrument of darkness and oppression".*

Therefore, the key to democracy is participation. This ensures individual development, which, in turn, ensures wider human development. This emphasis on individual development and democratic structures clearly fits closely with some of the basic anarchist principles established in the First International (making it doubly sad that Murphy was to later become one of the founders of the Communist Party). Elsewhere in the pamphlet, branch organisation outside the workplace was rejected. In the place of branches, workplace organisations were needed, where people “working together every day become familiar with each other and easily associate with each other”, working in the same workplace they have common grievances, “making for common expression”. Beyond the department or workplace, Murphy envisaged elections of delegates onto committees to co-ordinate activity in the immediate locality, regionally and nationally, for both specific industries and all industries.

Murphy’s stress on democracy, accountable delegates elected in the workplace and the need for active membership participation constitutes important steps forward for British syndicalism. Crucially, the latter was now seen not only as a way to achieve democratic control, but also as a means through which workers can come together, developing their ideas. From this can spring a new working class culture on which a new society will be founded; this is the essence of the idea of building the new world within the shell of the old. Importantly, it also presented an alternative to both the dual unionist and the amalgamation (reforming) approaches. Now, through workplace organisation, the SSWCM would unite workers into the workplace, regardless of their union affiliation, as the first stage in building an industrial union for all workers. The plan was that the SSWCM would eventually supersede the existing unions and transform itself into a new industrial union.

The main weaknesses within the pamphlet surrounded how the move to workers’ control of society could be achieved. Many within the SSWCM still envisaged a peaceful transition from capitalism. The naivety of this was soon to be dispelled by events in Russia, when invasion by the capitalist powers opened workers eyes as to how far capitalism was prepared to go to defend its interests.

## **Works Committee Movement**

The SWC pamphlet sold some 150,000 copies and provided the foundation for the national Shop Stewards & Works Committee Movement, which was formally established at a national conference in August 1917, following the May strikes. Delegates attended the conference from 23 Works Committees and the problems of democratic control dominated much of the discussion. To ensure that control remained with the rank & file, a non-decision-making National Administrative Council (NAC) was set up. This was purely administrative, and was there to carry out decisions, all of which would be made at regular national delegate meetings.

The stress on democratic control immediately changed the SSWCM’s attitude towards existing unions. The SSWCM reasoned that standing for union positions not elected directly from the workplace would be undemocratic, so it decided not to stand for such positions. It also now recognised that current union structures were not based on accountable delegates, where officers carried out specific tasks set by the organisation, but on representation, where leaders were elected to act on workers’ behalf. This could only lead to union officials becoming detached from the workplace, compromising with employers, and selling out the workers. For similar reasons, the

SSWCM also opposed joint workers/management bodies. It was also similarly uncompromising towards political parties, and rejected the need for either parliamentary parties or revolutionary parties. Workers emancipation could not come about through political representatives acting (or not) on workers' behalf, but only by the workers themselves through self-organisation.

The SSWCM position brought it into direct conflict with pre-war militants, including Tom Mann, who was soon to be elected leader of the ASE on a platform of workers' control. It was also at odds with the Amalgamation movement, which had itself rapidly moved to a position of dual unionism. Following SSWCM concerns over democracy in the Amalgamation movement, but also over a split between the two organisations, talks led to the two organisations merging in January 1918. This move towards greater unity coincided with the SSWCMs growing influence. Since the May 1917 strike, war weariness had begun to set in. Events like a quarter of a million men dying at Passchendale over a few yards of swamp, led to a growing peace movement, much of it centred on the women's movement. Profiteering, rising food prices and chronic overcrowding, especially in munitions centres, where labour shortages had attracted workers, all added to the growing unrest.

The SSWCM was at the centre of much of the growing opposition to the war. During the summer of 1917, it became heavily involved in the campaign against food shortages. At Barrow, the Works Committee decided to focus its campaigning against rising prices. In Manchester, the Works Committee organised a mass meeting of all shop stewards to discuss the food shortages. In Woolwich, Coventry and Sheffield the SSWCM was close to calling strike action. By January 1918, strike action was called within the munitions industry, in support of equal distribution of food. The action was only defused after the introduction of rationing to ensure equal distribution and regulate food prices.

In addition to the food shortage campaigns, the SSWCM initiated a pay campaign that did much to unite both skilled and unskilled workers within the organisation. In a crude attempt to divide workers, the Government announced a 12% bonus for skilled workers within engineering, and the SSWCM immediately launched a national campaign to extend it to all workers across the sector. The skilled workers backed the claim for the bonus to be extended, for example, in Sheffield, a mass meeting of all engineering workers voted by 35:1 for strike action. The strike only ended when the government gave in and agreed to the extension of the bonus.

In Scotland, in November 1917, the CWC threatened national strike action over the victimisation of striking women workers at the Parkhead factory in Glasgow. After the National Federation of Women Workers had disowned the strikers, the CWC called on skilled workers not to set up the machines of scabs working in the factory. A general meeting of shop stewards from all grades of workers across Clydeside was called. The size of the meeting alone was enough to persuade the employers' federation to back down and reinstate the sacked women at Parkhead.

The success was quickly followed by a CWC campaign in Scotland over the 12% bonus. If anything, the struggle was more militant than that in England. The CWC was the focal point for strike action that involved not only engineering workers, but also 10,000 shipyard workers, plus bricklayers employed in engineering and steel workers. The militancy was such that the local employers' federation defied the government and extended the 12% bonus to all engineering workers prior to the official climb-down by the government!

By early 1918, the SSWCM was a national movement, which had successfully united all grades of workers. It now produced two national papers "The Worker" in Scotland, and "Solidarity" in England. Now, it used its growing power by calling for strike action to try to end the war. In

January 1918, the government introduced the Military Service Bill, which allowed further war recruitment of engineering workers in formerly reserved occupations. In introducing the bill, the government made clear that it would use this to crush rank and file organisations who “were attempting to stir up strikes in the munitions factories”. Learning the lesson of May 1917, the SSWCM decided to ensure that the campaign would not be seen as a defence of narrow craft interest, and promptly called for strike action against the “taking away of men to the army”, demanding that the government consider peace terms.

At first, the call for action to end the war was encouraging. A massive demonstration in Glasgow supported the Russian revolution and called for a negotiated peace. A ballot of all engineering workers on Clydeside was taken, which showed a clear majority in favour of “peace without annexation”. On January 27<sup>th</sup>, 10,000 engineers rallied in the Albert Hall and demanded peace negotiations. As the Daily Herald noted at the time, the struggle now taking place in engineering “centres far more round ...the possibility of a democratic peace rather than around any question of preferential treatment”. The Glasgow Herald called for “strong action” to be taken against the political activists on Clydeside, while “Solidarity” headlined “The Great Revolt. Awakening of the Engineers. Strike Movement to Stop the War”.

A week later, ballots for strike action were passed in Barrow, Coventry, Erith, London and Woolwich. The Labour Party leadership was now really scared that, as it put it;

*“the spirit of revolt among the rank and file, which openly declares its sympathy with the lurid doings in Petersburg...could result in an epidemic of “down-tools”.*

In an attempt to head off unrest, the Labour leadership declared that diplomacy had begun aimed at a negotiated peace, which could be fatally undermined if strike action went ahead. At the same time, it fought the SSWCM by setting up counter-propaganda committees in the munitions factories, such as the “War Aims Committee” which suddenly appeared in February in Glasgow. The aim was to counter the anti-war material being distributed by the SSWCM, and to create divisions between skilled and unskilled workers. It was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign against the SS & WCM in the press. However, by late February, the SSWCM had countered the government propaganda offensive, and massive unrest across the whole engineering industry ensued.

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, the Germans launched their last great offensive of the war. The resulting carnage was seized upon by the government and the press to attack the SSWCM and the anti-war movement. A delegate meeting of SSWCM in April reported that the workers were no longer ready to support the anti-war movement. Though there were still some areas in favour of action, notably London, the majority feeling was that the offensive had changed the popular view. It was recognised that skilled workers would probably be prepared to strike. There was concern that this would divide workers, and the conference voted to call off its anti-war campaign and resume workplace struggle, “as before long there might be a better chance for a more advanced programme”. The failure to organise strike action was a bitter blow to the SSWCM, and the calling off of the anti-war campaign was seen as a major climb-down by all concerned. In some areas, works committees collapsed and militants were victimised.

## After the War

By September, the SSWCM began to regain its strength but, in some ways, the end of the war proved a further setback in organisational terms. The mass unrest many had hoped for did not happen. As soldiers returned from the front, many women found themselves evicted from the workplace, and employers benefited from the sudden plentiful supply of labour by cutting wages and conditions and sacking SSWCM activists. Still, there were successes and, with unrest growing in the railways and mining industries, workers were joining the SSWCM from outside engineering for the first time in large numbers. Expansion occurred in Merseyside and London, while the Scottish Works Committee movement launched a big recruitment drive. Important theoretical changes were also taking place. Under the influence of the Russian revolution, the SSWCM now increasingly called for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. A SSWCM pamphlet entitled "Direct Action" in 1918 noted that workers control would only be established by;

*"a revolutionary struggle for power. We do not believe it possible to any great extent to win control by wringing step by step concessions from capitalists...(also social committees are needed to ensure that the)...workers must be fully organised both in the place of work and in the place of residence...we do not mean that the social committees would represent a different body of people, but merely that both the social and industrial aspects of the worker life should have adequate expression".*

The social committees were seen as the nucleus of the organisation, which would co-ordinate such activities as food and raw material distribution after the revolution. It would also take on the "educational role of the movement", through provision of educational centres and spreading the ideas of revolution. Thus, the British syndicalist movement came nearer to the position reached by anarcho-syndicalists in other countries, which saw the revolutionary union as central to all aspects of working class life, assisting in creating the new society within the old. The idea was still flawed, in viewing the social committees as appendages to the workplace committees. Indeed, those increasingly influenced by Marxism saw them as political organisations, which would give political leadership to the economic organisations in the workplace. Nevertheless, the general concept of a culture of resistance was an important one.

## The 1920s: Decline

The SSWCM 1920 Conference passed a motion calling for society's social machinery to be taken over in the interests of the exploited masses. It also reaffirmed its opposition to the nationalisation of industry, in favour of workers' direct control. However, the 1920 conference was also significant in that events in Russia were making themselves felt. A motion was passed calling for the affiliation to the newly established Third International (Comintern), and delegates were elected to its 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress due to take place in Russia (see Unit 13). In many ways, this Congress proved a turning point for the SSWCM, as the delegation split, with Murphy and others converted to the idea of the need for the formation of a Communist Party (CP) to lead workers. Conversion was the operative word. One delegate spoke in almost religious tones of how, after meeting Lenin, he was converted from syndicalism to communism. Nevertheless, a number of SSWCM delegates, including Tanner, resisted the evangelising.

On the delegation's return to Britain, the debate ensued, with Murphy calling for close relations with the communist movement, and Tanner arguing for the SSWCM to remain independent

of all political parties, including the CP. Unfortunately, the supporters of the Bolsheviks slowly gained increasing control. In this, they were assisted by the economic recession of late 1920, which caused mass unemployment. The employers were quick to exploit the situation, unleashing a wave of victimisation. Within engineering, the stronghold of the SSWCM, they unleashed an offensive that was to end in lockout and defeat. As a result, the local Works Committees were wiped out in many areas. This weakening of the SSWCM within the workplace assisted the Communists in arguing that the focal point of the organisation should be switched from the workplace to the structures of the wider unions and labour organisations. In line with the policy of the Red International, the argument was made that the SSWCM should seek to win control of the unions, principally through working in the branch and capturing union positions.

At the 1921 SSWCM Conference, the name was changed to National Workers' Committee Movement (NWCM), distancing itself from the idea of shop stewards and workplace action. A motion was carried which stated; "the time has arrived when the rebel elements in the unions must consciously and scientifically organise to work within their unions for a defiantly formulated policy". A new constitution was passed establishing branch committees, which, among other things, would conduct "systematic propaganda and attempt to capture all elective positions within the unions". This signalled the final defeat of those within the SSWCM who were still committed to syndicalist principles. The Communist take-over was quickly consolidated and, within weeks, it was announced (without recourse to the wider organisation) that the movement could no longer support two weekly newspapers, and that the syndicalist paper "Solidarity" would be dropped immediately. Tanner, its editor, immediately stated that he and his associates would start a new paper "The Liberator", which would be devoted to "class struggle...working for the industrial revolution...unhampered by connection with any official or unofficial political party".

After 1921, the NWCM came under increasing control of the newly formed CP, and therefore Moscow. Much of the NWCM activity now concentrated on attacking the "yellow international" and working within the trade unions to get them to join the Red International of Trade Unions, according to the Bolshevik leadership strategy. Not surprisingly, workers facing mass unemployment caused by the recession did not see the campaign to get the trade unions to affiliate to the Red International as their number one priority and membership soon collapsed. In 1922, what was left of the NWCM was merged with the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, an organisation whose sole concern was to get trade unions to join the Red International.

The collapse of the SSWCM was a tragedy. As a result, the CP increasingly dominated the British revolutionary movement, and it became increasingly pushed towards reformism. Much of the energy now went towards building support for the CP, and attempting to get Communist MP's elected to Parliament and local councils. The remainder mainly went into working within the Labour Party in an attempt to move it to the left.

After 1922, workplace organisation was seen by the increasingly Marxist-dominated left as merely an economic arm, subordinate to the more advanced political organisation — the CP. This bankrupt idea had brief 'success' in the shape of the "minority movement", which grew rapidly as militancy revived on the back of disillusionment with the first Labour Government in 1923. At its peak, the movement claimed a million members, though it was dominated by the CP.

## 1926 General Strike

The “leadership” of the CP was seriously tested in 1926. Under massive pressure from ordinary workers, the Trades Union Congress (TUC, umbrella organisation of the reformist unions) was forced to call a general strike. Even with syndicalism at a low ebb, they were fearful that the strike might turn into a revolutionary upheaval, so they refused to use the term ‘general strike’, with its association with syndicalism. Instead, they called the action a ‘national strike’. On the eve of the action, in a blind panic, the TUC general council met with the Prime Minister pleading for a solution to be found. As J.H. Thomas, the rail union leader, later recalled himself; “I never begged like I begged and pleaded all that day” for the government to find a solution to the strike.

The TUC leadership was on its knees to the government, because it was scared to carry out the wishes of its members. Surely, this was the time for the political leadership and forthrightness of the CP, guardians of the working class, to take charge. Well, in fact, numerous Communists were active during the strike, and many were arrested. However, the CP leadership was capable of no more than mealy-mouthed slogans. During the first few days they called for “all power to the General Council”. This referred to the TUC General Council, that is, R. J. Thomas and company — those who were scared to carry out the wishes of their members. As strikers became increasingly bitter towards the TUC Leadership, the CP changed its slogan to one calling for the “formation of a Labour Government” to nationalise the mines.

Meanwhile, away from the leadership, workers were rapidly organising themselves, creating alternative structures under their direct control, such as transport permit committees and hastily formed councils of action. Had there still been a mass-syndicalist organisation in the working class able to aid and direct this spontaneous action, perhaps British history would have been different. As it was, the 1926 strike ended in bitter defeat, and was followed by victimisation on such a scale that the National Union of Railwaymen, under the leadership of Thomas himself, threatened to resume strike action. The defeat put the British labour movement back 20 years, and militancy of any sizeable force would not resurface until after the Second World War.

## Postscript

The syndicalist movement was primarily an organisation of workers, whose ideas and practices were developed by the working class within the working class. This gradually changed as outside experts in the form of Marxist intellectuals increasingly came to dominate the revolutionary workers movement.

Once it had control, the Communist Party accomplished the destruction of an independent revolutionary organisation rooted in the working class more quickly than the capitalists would have dreamed possible. Thereafter, the workers were increasingly seen as voting fodder for the Labour Party, or subservient to the political leadership of the CP.

When we next return to Britain, we shall look at the rise of the next period of militancy within the British labour movement, after 1945. Sadly, syndicalism was not to play a prominent role within those struggles. Nevertheless, it had already left a legacy of workplace organisation and action, often in the face of severe hostility, that was to be a major feature of the revival of the Shop Stewards’ movement from the 1950’s onwards (see Unit 19).

## Key points

- The British economy was brought under greater state-control with the onset of the First World War. This was done with the compliance of the trade union leadership.
- As union officials became more isolated from the workers a worker-based shop-stewards movement developed, especially in the engineering industry.
- The engineering industry, initially on Clydeside and later in Sheffield, became a centre of wartime industrial unrest.
- After the War the shop stewards movement became influenced by events in Russia and the newly established Communist Party.

## Checklist

1. What were the main features of the “war economy”?
2. What were the main points of the Munitions Act and what part did the trade unions and the Labour Party play its implementation?
3. What were the factors in the growth of workers’ resistance in the engineering industry?
4. What were the main points of the pamphlet published by the Sheffield Works Committee?
5. The SSWCM declined after the war, what was the main reason for this?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the main features of the “war economy”?*

Within months of the war starting massive state control of the industry was immediately implemented and, within four years, the government controlled 90% of total imports, and the domestic production of food, coal, most other raw materials, shipping and railways. Food distribution was controlled through rationing and raw materials through allocation. Rents, wages and capital markets were also government-controlled. The arms industry was not brought under direct state control, rather, it came under overall state direction with individual companies operating within it. While allowing private firms to operate, the government also drafted 90 directors from British companies into the Ministry of Munitions, to ensure that capitalist expertise was used on the state’s behalf.

### *2. What were the main points of the Munitions Act and what part did the trade unions and the Labour Party play its implementation?*

The Munitions Act made strikes in war-related industries illegal and introduced compulsory arbitration in all disputes. It also allowed any workplace to be designated a “controlled” establishment, in which all restrictive practices were illegal and wages and workshop discipline were under direct control of the Ministry of Labour. Joint employer/union tribunals imposed fines on “controlled” workers who were deemed to have broken workshop rules or encouraged others to restrict the rate of production. To leave employment workers in munitions also needed a “leaving



certificate” which noted the reason for leaving. Workers without leaving certificates could not be taken on until a six-week period of unemployment had passed. Lloyd George invited the leaders of the TUC and the Labour Party to a meeting at the treasury to discuss the main points of the Act. At the meeting, the labour leaders accepted the proposals in what became known as the “Treasury Agreement”. The Munitions Bill was passed in Parliament with little opposition. A National Labour Advisory Committee was established under the Act through which representatives of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the Labour Party leadership were consulted widely. Joint union/ management production committees were established, and unions became part of the local Munitions Tribunals set up to administer the Act.

*3. What were the factors in the growth of workers’ resistance in the engineering industry?*

Because of the decentralised nature of the industry, the engineering unions had a local branch system and little workplace organisation. The union organisation itself was therefore divorced from the workplace. To maintain contact with workplaces, a shop stewards system unique to engineering had evolved. The shop stewards collected dues, checked union cards and reported grievances to the branch or district committee. As early as the turn of the century divisions had begun to occur as the unions were increasingly co-opted by the state. Shop stewards were going beyond their basic administrative duties and organising unofficially within the workplace to force concessions directly from management. This brought them into direct conflict with full-time branch officials. Management therefore increasingly looked to the latter to discipline unruly shop stewards.

*4. What were the main points of the pamphlet published by the Sheffield Works Committee?*

The pamphlet attacked the narrow ‘craftist’ views that divided workers, as well as the sexist attitudes of the ASE and many skilled workers. It argued that attitudes to women who were doing jobs previously undertaken by men were due to bigotry and male dominance. It rejected the idea that women could or should be expected to leave their jobs after the war so men could take them back. Instead of divisions based on “craft, trade and sex prejudice”, it called for unity in one Great Industrial Union, to revitalise the labour movement with democratic spirit. It argued against leadership, official or otherwise that led to passive. Branch organisation outside the workplace was rejected and, beyond the workplace, it envisaged elections of delegates onto committees to co-ordinate activity in the immediate locality, regionally and nationally, for both specific industries and all industries.

*5. The SSWCM declined after the war, what was the main reason for this?*

After the war the mass unrest many had hoped for did not happen. As soldiers returned from the front, many women found themselves evicted from the workplace, and employers benefited from the sudden plentiful supply of labour by cutting wages and conditions and sacking SSWCM activists. Events in Russia were making themselves felt and a motion was passed at the 1920 conference calling for the affiliation to the newly established Third International (Comintern), and delegates were elected to its 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress due to take place in Russia. In many ways, this Congress proved a turning point for the SSWCM, as the delegation split, with some converted to the idea of the need for the formation of a Communist Party (CP) to lead workers. In the economic recession of late 1920, which caused mass unemployment the employers were quick to exploit the situation, unleashing a wave of victimisation. Within engineering, the stronghold of the SSWCM, they unleashed an offensive that was to end in lockout and defeat. As a result, the local Works Committees were wiped out in many areas. This weakening of the SSWCM within the workplace assisted the Communists in arguing that the focal point of the organisation should

be switched from the workplace to the structures of the wider unions and labour organisations. After 1921 it came under increasing control of the newly formed CP and, in line with the policy of the Red International, the argument was made that the SSWCM should seek to win control of the unions, principally through working in the branch and capturing union positions.

### **Suggested discussion points**

- How relevant are the ideas of the Shop Stewards Movement to anarcho-syndicalist organisation today?
- What impact did the Russian Revolution have on the British labour movement?

### **Further Reading**

**Tom Brown's Syndicalism.** Tom Brown. Phoenix Press, 1990. ISBN 0948 984163. £3.95 -AK- -BS- Written by a prominent British syndicalist, in the 1940s and 1950s, this collection of six essays include good sections on the activities and agenda of the Communist Party in the 1920s. Includes coverage of the 1926 General Strike.

**Lenin and Workers' Control.** Tom Brown. Monty Miller Press. £1.50. -AK- Excellent short history and critique of Bolshevism.

**The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists.** John Quail. Paladin, ISBN 0586 082255. — LI- -BS- The only book of it's kind-British Anarchism from an Anarchist point of view-now sadly out of print. If you can find a copy, see especially chapters 13 'Anarchism and the Origins of the Syndicalist Revolt,1889 — 1910', and 14 'The Insurgent Virus'.

**Workers' Control.** Ken Coates and Tony Topham. Panther Books, 1970. -LI- Consists of direct reproductions of a whole range of material from the early 1920s to the 1970s on matters related to workers' control. Includes syndicalism, guild socialism and the later shop stewards movement.

**The Works Committees: An Outline of their Principles and Structure.** J Murphy, Pluto Press. ISBN 0902 818805. -LI- Excellent example of syndicalist principles in practice (ignoring the SWP introduction). Deals with the problems between workplace and branch-based (separate from the workplace) union organisation. Still relevant today.

**'Don't Be a Soldier!'** Ken Weller. Journeyman/LHWC. ISBN 0904 526569. -LI-On the radical anti-war movement in North London, 1914–1918. Demonstrates that anti-war movement had its roots in a 'rebel milieu' of syndicalists and the radical wing of the women's movement.

**British Syndicalism 1900–1914.** Bob Holton. Pluto Press. ISBN 0904 383229. -LI- Now sadly out of print, a detailed exposition of the early period of British syndicalism.

**First Flight: The Origins of Anarcho-Syndicalism in Britain.** Albert Meltzer. KSL, pamphlet. £1. -AK- A brief sketch of British anarcho-syndicalist history, from Chartism to the DAM.

**Dare To Be A Daniel: A History Of One Of Britains Earliest Syndicalist Unions.** Wilf McCartney. KSL, pamphlet. £1. -AK- Memoirs of an activist in the Cooks Syndicate. 38 strikes fought, 38 won!

**Anti-Parliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers' Councils in Britain, 1917–45.** Mark Shipway. Macmillan Press. ISBN 0333 43613X. -LI- -BS- Written from a

'councillist' point of view so not Syndicalist, but full of fascinating detail to be found nowhere else.

**Personal Recollections of the Anarchist Past. George Cores. KSL. ISBN 1873 605056. £1. -AK-** Cores was a shoemaker, and anarchist activist from the 1880s until 1939. Includes brief mentions of the Syndicalist Revolt and of Rocker's 'Workers' Friend' group.

Notes: The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

# Unit 15: Spain, 1868–1936 — Build-up to revolution

It was in Spain that anarcho-syndicalist ideas came to fruition. In particular, the period of revolution and civil war in 1936–9 constitutes, in many ways, the birthplace of modern anarcho-syndicalism (see Units 16–18). Here, we examine the build up and background to this period.

In an attempt to assess the nature, growth and success — as well as the failures — of the CNT, we look back at the political and social atmosphere of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Spain, starting with the arrival of anarchist ideas in 1868. We then look at the changing fortunes of libertarian organisations up to the establishment of the CNT, and the crucial period of the late 1920s and 1930s.

## This Unit aims to

- Examine the build up and background to the period of revolution and civil war in 1936–39.
- Assess the nature, growth and success, as well as the failures, of the CNT.
- Look at the political and social atmosphere of late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Spain, starting with the arrival of anarchist ideas in 1868.
- Look at the changing fortunes of libertarian organisations up to the establishment of the CNT, and the crucial period of the late 1920s and 1930s.
- Consider the approach of liberal and Marxist academics to the growth of anarchism in Spain.

## Terms and abbreviations

**CNT:** Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour) Anarcho-syndicalist union.

**FRE:** Federación Regional Española (Spanish Regional Federation). The Spanish region of the First International

**FTRE:** Federación del Trabajadores Regional Española (Federation of Workers of the Spanish Region)

**Mano Negra:** (Black Hand)

**Solidaridad Obrera:** Workers' Solidarity. Libertarian union organisation.

**Ateneos:** cultural-political centres set up by the anarcho-syndicalists.

**Obrero consciente:** conscious worker. A worker who “understood” and acted accordingly.

**UGT:** Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union) Reformist trade union con-

trolled by the socialists.

**PSO:** Partido Socialista Obrero (Workers' Socialist Party)

**FAI:** Federacion Anarquista Iberica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)

**CEDA:** Confederación Española de la Derecha Autónoma (Spanish Confederation of the Independent Right). Catholic quasi-fascist party

**POUM:** Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (United Marxist Workers Party) Dissident revolutionary Communist Party

## Introduction

The CNT (National Confederation of Labour) had a long gestation period. Long before it blossomed into a huge anarcho-syndicalist movement, it was experimenting and developing ideas of bringing anarchism and syndicalism together into an overarching people's social and economic organisation, fit to fight off capitalism and forge a new society.

It began in 1868, when the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin decided to try to help spread the word of the 'anti-authoritarian' tendencies in the First International. He paid the fare of his close friend, the Italian anarchist Giuseppe Fanelli who, despite knowing barely a word of Spanish, managed to convince a considerable number of workers and peasants of the value of anarchist ideas. The anarchist Anselmo Lorenzo described the scene thus:

*"(Fanelli's) black expressive eyes...flashed like lightening or took on the appearance of kindly compassion according to the sentiments that dominated him. His voice had a metallic tone and was susceptible to all the inflections appropriate to what he was saying, passing rapidly from accents of anger and menace against tyrants and exploiters to take on those of suffering, regret, and consolation, when he spoke of the pains of the exploited, either as one who without suffering them himself understands them, or as one who through his altruistic feelings delights in presenting an ultra-revolutionary ideal of peace and fraternity. He spoke in French and Italian, but we could understand his expressive mimicry and follow his speech".*

The message spread quickly from Barcelona to Madrid, and within days groups of workers were declaring themselves members of the International. In many ways, the country was ripe. Spain was a country with a poorly developed bourgeois democratic tradition, which gave little opportunity to the ruling classes to co-opt or negotiate with the workers and peasants, as happened in north-west Europe. There was also marked exploitation by landowners and employers that combined with a tradition of collective revolt and scepticism towards political parties. Indeed, the political and social condition of Spanish society at the time was a key-determining factor in the kinds of organisations that formed and the tactics they used to fight back.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (and really up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century), Spain was largely a rural society with two major industrial areas, the textile area around Barcelona in the north-east, and the heavy industry and port areas of the north, particularly around Bilbao and Gijón. As a result, there were huge disparities in lifestyle and wealth from one region to another. Also, communications were generally poor, and all train lines that there were led to Madrid. Mountainous areas, like Asturias in the north, were difficult to get to and it was not until the 1930s that an integrated railway transport system was consolidated. With strong regional identities, particularly in Catalonia and the Basque Country, and different languages spoken across Spain, 70% of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century population could neither read nor write. Poverty was widespread, especially in

rural areas such as the Andalusian plains, where farm workers would be hired on a daily basis and expected to work from dawn to dusk, only able to afford a meal of bread, olive oil and garlic at night. The Catholic Church wielded great influence and, unsurprisingly, pitched its lot in with the landlords and bosses.

Politically, Spain was slow to modernise and no real parliamentary tradition had developed by 1870. Frequent coup d'états took place, as the army participated in frequent changes of successive incompetent governments. A gap in this ongoing sequence of instability occurred around the turn of the Century. This period was characterised by corrupt elections, with power swapping pendulum-like between the two main parties, but no substantial benefit for the vast majority of the population. A major blow was dealt to the ruling class and army in 1898, as the Philippines and Cuba were lost to the United States, and with them, the last remnants of a once powerful global empire. Spain was now an ex-power on the world scene. Temporary stability ended with another coup in 1923.

The 1923 coup of General Primo de Rivera brought military rule back to Spain. This continued haphazardly until 1930, and was then followed by the formation of a progressive Republic in 1931. The Republic, or at least its leftist elements, so antagonised conservatives and the Church that, in July 1936, army generals, led by Francisco Franco, started a revolt which led to 3 years of Civil War (see Unit 17). As illustrated by these events, any libertarian organisation had plenty to contend with. Nevertheless, the anarchist organisations made steady headway against the tide of political uncertainty and violence, by pursuing two major goals. Firstly, they defended themselves and their communities from attack, and secondly, they set about creating a new world out of the ashes of the old.

## **The first organisations**

After Fanelli's visit to Spain, a number of groups appeared, claiming their adherence to the International. Throughout 1869 and 1870, they sought to consolidate a national organisation, and a congress took place in June 1870 in Barcelona, which established the Spanish region of the International, the Spanish Regional Federation (FRE, Federación Regional Española). Around 150 delegates were present from a wide variety of associations, and the very breadth of membership was to become a problem for the FRE from the outset — there were so many different opinions on what a workers' organisation should do and what structures it should establish.

In essence, there were three main categories of workers in the FRE: 1) reformist co-operativists, 2) radical co-operativists, and 3) apolitical and anti-political delegates. The debate in these early years centred on whether co-operatives alone would be enough to bring about a decent society. Eventually, most concluded that they wouldn't, and that in addition to co-operatives, direct action would be needed. Also, there was a strong recognition of the need to pursue an active policy of non-participation in political structures such as the state.

The basic unit of the FRE was the craft union. The unions of different trades in an area were grouped into a local federation, and the local federations were united regionally, and then nationally. This structure established the basic organisational units that other revolutionary unions were to adhere to. In addition to the federal structure, local direct democracy (mass-meetings) prevented burdensome bureaucracy and anti-democratic leadership cliques from being established.

The idea was also to bring local craft unions directly together in nation-wide federated industrial unions, but this took much longer to materialise.

With the FRE growing rapidly, the early 1870s became a hot bed of political activity in Spain, following on the heels of the European revolutions of 1868. As the temperature of resistance rose 1873 saw the creation of a Republic, which was broadly progressive and federalist in character. The FRE participated in various skirmishes throughout 1873 and 1874 to try to push the Republic towards anarchist collectivism and decentralise the country's politics in the process. Matters came to a head in the so-called 'cantonalist' uprisings in 1874, during which a number of autonomous areas free of state control were established, some of which persisted for many weeks. The ruling class looked on with increasing fear and alarm as they saw hundreds of years of privilege under threat. Eventually, able to stand it no longer, the military waded in on their behalf, and the uprising was brutally crushed. Thereafter, the ruling class decided that a progressive Republic was a bad idea, and Spain returned to military dictatorship.

Secured back in power, the military unleashed a wave of repression against the FRE (much of which was conducted in the name of the Catholic Church). In the face of sustained violence towards its members, the FRE gradually died out. It was not until the 1880s that a more stable political situation led to a relaxing of the repressive measures against workers' organisations. Immediately, in 1881, a new organisation, the Federation of Workers of the Spanish Region (FTRE) was formed. The FTRE differed from the FRE in its more focused anarchist ideological stance and commitment to syndicalist methods of organisation and action.

Growth of the FTRE was rapid and, by 1882, regeneration of the labour movement was well underway. By September, there were over 5,000 members, which bears comparison to the 7,000 members that the FRE had had shortly before its dissolution. In the period September to December 1882 alone, there were at least 8 public congresses convened by unions of similar crafts and 10 regional or district congresses held by the FTRE. This amazing rate of growth in activity is a recurrent theme in the Spanish libertarian movement. The ability to grow meteorically in a few years after collapse or severe state/military repression indicates outstanding tenacity. It was also a necessary attribute in the volatile political and social situation of 1930s Spain.

Despite this, the FTRE had its ups and downs. One of the 'downs' was the so-called Mano Negra (Black Hand) affair, which created shockwaves throughout Spain and further afield. It began in December 1882, when a tavern owner and his wife were killed by a group of farm labourers in Jerez, Andalusia. Over the next two months, several other killings occurred locally, and the police announced that a revolutionary group called the Mano Negra was behind them. A further killing in Madrid the following year was also apparently carried out by the Mano Negra. The government launched an urgent inquiry, and promptly wildly exaggerated the likely size of the group. Furthermore, it used the events as an excuse to label all anarchists and their organisations as mindless, violent thugs.

Despite the FTREs declared opposition to the group, if it really existed, the propaganda offensive that the events handed to the state was damaging. The FTRE was temporarily undermined, along with the growth of anarchist ideas in Spain.

It is still unclear how extensive the Mano Negra was and whether it had any links to the anarchists. What is certain, however, is that once a state commission had investigated it, it was provided with the perfect excuse to repress the FTRE. Due to the affair and the 'right to repress' that successive governments assumed as a result, the remaining decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw fluctuating fortunes for anarchism and anarchist union-based organisations.

Now on the defensive, the libertarian movement saw disagreements resurface, particularly over tactics. The so-called anarchist method of ‘propaganda by the deed’ had spread intermittently across Europe, and had even played its part in the libertarian movement in the USA. While such tactics were an understandable, desperate response to often-severe state violence (or even direct retaliation), they were not successful in building a mass-movement. However, during this period, the organisational power of the union-oriented anarchists began to steadily increase. It was this which formed the basis of the massive syndicalist movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In Spain, since the inception of the anarchist movement, there had been differences in the tactics of the regional groups that made up the FRE and later, the FTRE. There was a tendency for the Andalusian anarchists to organise cyclically, according to the strength of the harvests each year, and to disband when times were quiet. The Catalans, in contrast, seemed to favour more permanent and union-based organisations. There were frequent clashes at congresses over these differences.

After limping for a few years, the FTRE eventually went into demise in 1888. After this, a number of different organisations came and went, but it was not until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century that organisational and political difficulties within libertarian organisations were at least partly resolved, as the syndicalists gradually gained ground in the anarchist camp. The CNT was to grow directly out of these circumstances.

## The Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The first sizeable organisation of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the union federation “Solidaridad Obrera” (Workers’ Solidarity), based in Barcelona. In many ways, this was a continuation (or resurrection) of the union-based organisations of the FRE and FTRE, and it was significant that it grew in Barcelona, Spain’s industrial heartland.

In many respects, Solidaridad Obrera represented the triumph of the union-based organisations over the looser and less organised anarchist federations. In the face of employers’ onslaughts and a precipitous economic situation, workers in Spain saw the need for an organisation that would both defend their interests and enable them to move towards a world based on the principles of solidarity and mutual aid.

In July 1909, libertarian ideas came to the fore in a major episode of political and social turmoil. With much of its overseas empire gone, Morocco was one of the few parts that remained. Spain had fought battles for decades against the indigenous population seeking independence from either the French or Spanish, and the toll of the ongoing war had by now affected the majority of Spanish families. Against a climate of growing opposition to the war, and in a mistimed bid to oppose Catalan nationalist aspirations, the central government in Madrid issued another call-up for recruits to the war. For many people, disillusioned with the never-ending conflict, this was the last straw. They were no longer interested in the top-heavy army ploughing more millions and lives into its historic mission to save Spain’s honour against the ‘primitive’ natives.

A week of rioting and church-burning broke out in the streets of Barcelona, as young men refused to be called up and expressed their disgust of the clerics. The state and army seized on the unrest as an excuse to embark on a smashing and murdering spree, aimed at all radicals, Catalan nationalists and republicans, but especially the anarchists. This inexcusable and cowardly attack on unarmed civilians became known as “Semana Trágica” or the “Tragic Week” of July 1909. The



numbers of those imprisoned and killed are not known, but in one internationally-renowned case, Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, an radical anarchist school teacher with no involvement in the events, was tried and shot, so becoming another victim of the indiscriminate bloodshed.

## The Social Dimension

Ferrer was a good example of the educationalist strain of the Spanish libertarian organisations in which culture, knowledge, and different methods of schooling were recognised as important in the creation of independent-thinking individuals. The strong cultural dimension of the CNT was to grow out of such developments, and became vital to its significance to the Spanish working class (see Unit 17). In order to understand how and why the CNT's cultural and educational undertaking was so important, we must explain how its predecessors tackled these issues.

Right from the beginning in Spain, anarchists understood why and how it was important to integrate themselves in the daily existence of the working class. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century anarchists were no longer rooted in one organisation or federation and had spread their activities into many social and cultural areas through the creation of their own bars, cafés, clubs, workers' centres and "ateneos" (cultural-political centres). As one writer has pointed out:

*"In both rural and urban settings, neighbourhood clubs, bars, and other social centres became the focal points of anarchist activity. In this way, anarchism played a pivotal role in the socialisation and politicisation of the worker... A thriving anarchist cultural life was manifested in a variety of ways, but most notably in the proliferation of libertarian newspapers, sociological journals, pamphlets and books... The important role these associations played in the socialisation and politicisation of the worker cannot be overemphasised."*

By the outbreak of the First World War, anarchists had succeeded in demonstrating the effectiveness of a strategy that built on people's communal and neighbourhood connections. Already, they had established radical places of activity such as workers' centres and storefront schools. The linkages between work and community, workers and the poor, and women and men were clearly understood, and the modes of organisation reflected this. These links were to prove vital in the construction of workers' consciousness and confidence, as well as providing support for times of hardship and in strikes. The ateneos in many local neighbourhoods that helped create a sense of community and were a haven where any worker could go, whether of anarchist affiliation or not, was important in the development of an anarchist culture in Spain.

Moreover, these cultural-political links were not confined to the cities. Anarchist culture was highly developed in rural Andalusia, where women's sections, schools, libraries and cafés were all co-ordinated by the local anarchist councils. Cafés were important in both city and country. Already ingrained in Spanish social life, the anarchist versions provided an extra dimension, as daily chance or planned meetings in cafés and plazas helped engender a new sense of communal consciousness.

Another aspect of the growing movement that cannot be overstated is the role of written propaganda. This may seem surprising, given that the majority of the population were illiterate, but tracts and pamphlets of workers' groups were circulated and studied fervently, as the hunger for self-education took hold. As one historian who travelled around the province of Córdoba stated in 1928:

*“We who lived through that time in 1918–19 will never forget that amazing sight. In the fields, in the shelters and courts, wherever peasants met to talk, for whatever purpose, there was only one topic of conversation, always discussed seriously and fervently: the social question. When men rested from work, during the smoking breaks in the day and after the evening meal at night, whoever was the most educated would read leaflets and journals out loud while the others listened with great attention... Admittedly 70 or 80% were illiterate, but this was not an insuperable obstacle. The enthusiastic illiterate brought his paper and gave it to a comrade to read. He then made him mark the article he liked best. Then he would ask another comrade to read him the marked article and after a few readings he had it by heart and would repeat it to those who had not yet read it. There is only one word to describe it: frenzy.”*

Books and other publications traditionally denied to the impoverished workers were extremely important in what was seen clearly as the process of preparation for the ‘new society’. During the first years of the FTRE’s existence, its ideological platform was largely defined by two publications, “Revista Social” (1881–1885) and “Crónica de los Trabajadores de la Región Española” (1882–4). The former (Madrid) paper obtained the widest distribution of any working class paper of the period as, within three years, its circulation grew to 20,000 subscribers. Alongside these, hundreds of different local, regional and national publications were assiduously produced.

Anarchist ideas were not only published in theoretical form; as well as short tracts, various stories, such as the fortnightly “Novela Ideal”, were produced. Of all the publications of the period, “Acracia”, the Barcelona paper, stands out as the best anarchist theoretical journal. It published articles by William Morris, Herbert Spencer and Kropotkin, indicating its broad emphasis. A crucial aspect of this propaganda was the way in which it spread, which led to the anarchists being seen as within rather than detached from everyone else. As one commentator put it; “...the anarchists eventually became permanently integrated into the fabric of working-class society”.

The unique formula, which was soon to become known as anarcho-syndicalism, now began to really take shape. A mix of union militancy, ‘bread and butter’ demands, cultural ascendancy, literacy campaigns and country outings converged to create what was a diverse, empowering and powerful revolutionary movement. Within this, culture was placed in the centre, as one historian put it;

*“...it can be said without exaggeration that for anarchism, more than for any other political ideology, culture has had the greatest value, not as something which would create politico-social well-being, but which would be a politico-social achievement in itself.”*

The growth in confidence of the unions, which drew from the inter-linkages between workplace and community, all combined to provide both tactical focus and a vision of a new society. Above all, it was the relevance of anarchism in responding to people’s needs and problems, and the integration of anarchists within the wider population, which together provided the key to building a powerful anarchist movement in Spain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **Education**

Access to culture and knowledge made one an “obrero consciente” (conscious worker), and thus attracted paramount importance. There was no separation of what should happen in the new society from the preparation that was to take place in the old. Here, the ‘new society’ was already being created, through free experiment with culture and self-education.

Anarchist ideas on education featured early on in the development of the movement. At the 1872 FRE Congress, a plan of “enseñanza integral”, an integral form of education without religion or traditional learning by rote was proposed. Following this, anarchists established schools and integral cultural centres drawing on the concepts of Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia (see above) and supported endeavours to raise the population’s awareness on issues such as literature, reading and writing and scientific theories.

Central to ideas on education was the idea of the ‘conscious worker’, who understood and acted accordingly. Knowledge and its application to the service of humanity would aid the latter’s liberation. As a result, Spanish anarchism, and especially its Catalan element, embraced the new sciences that were appearing in Europe as the harbingers of new times of wisdom and justice. Against what anarchists saw as the deliberate obscurity, and therein the attempt to hide and deceive, of the Catholic Church, it was necessary to impose the rational anarchist word. As Ferrer himself put it:

*“In the first place it [education] should not be similar to religious teaching, since science has demonstrated that the creation is a legend and that gods are myths. As a result, the ignorance of parents and the credulity of children is taken advantage of, and the belief in a supernatural being, a creator of the world, to whom requests and wishes can be made in order to meet all kinds of favours, has been perpetuated.”*

For many workers, their first available source of information on many cultural, scientific and philosophical matters came from the anarchists. Indeed, it was the anarchists, with inexpensive, simply written brochures, who brought the French enlightenment and modern scientific theory to the peasantry, not the liberals or the socialists.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, anarchism was clearly in the forefront of a cultural change which was sweeping over Spain. The crisis which had enveloped the whole country at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was still a major feature of people’s lives. Anarchism and the way it embraced new ideas proposed a solution to this crisis, not on the basis of nationalist or imperialist assumptions on the worthiness of the Spanish race and empire, but rather as a means of achieving access to new heights of culture, knowledge and well being. The anarchists project went far beyond that of the intellectuals of the Republic, who proposed restricted liberal land reform and state schooling, here was a proposal for a free society without church, state or capitalism.

The anarchist’s solutions were not just applicable to Spain and to the current crisis, but the rest of humanity, and far into the future; a society organised on a rational and egalitarian basis would solve the problems of human kind. In the midst of this vision, the education platform of the anarchists was based on a mix of a search for the new, modern rationality and a deeper understanding of nature, culture and morality. Through this mixture, lay the route to individual freedom and collective liberation.

## **The CNT**

In December 1910, various workers’ craft and agricultural organisations came together in Barcelona to explore the possibility of creating a national organisation. During the congress, the idea of the national union was first discussed. In 1911, at a further congress, the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) was born. At the outset, the CNT contained 30,000 members in 350 unions throughout Spain.

True to anarchist organisational principles, the CNT shunned bureaucratisation and centralisation and based itself solidly on local unions built into regional federations. Strikes led by the CNT were expected to be short and no strike funds were created. Revolutionary violence was accepted, but only as a consequence of the contradictions and violence of capitalism itself. The organisation was committed to 'direct' rather than parliamentary action and reaffirmed its libertarian principles.

The CNT went into the fray immediately and was quickly made illegal in 1912 for its participation in strikes and violent action. For the next few years it remained a clandestine organisation, and entered a particularly difficult period after 1917. The years 1919–23 brought extreme repression, particularly in Barcelona, where the CNT was strongest. After a number of high-profile strikes and actions by CNT unions, employers resorted to establishing roving gangs of hired assassins, who would search out and murder CNT organisers. A response to this appeared in the form of quasi-official CNT gunmen, and a tit for tat gun battle ensued, lasting several years. This episode brought up once more the issue of tactics, the more moderate CNT members being against the more revolutionary aims of the CNT, while the anarcho-syndicalists argued for an out-and-out revolutionary programme.

Amidst the wave of enthusiasm sweeping Europe after the Russian revolution, the CNT sent a delegation from its 1919 Congress to the Moscow meeting of the International Red Trade Unions (IRTU), in order to assess the viability of joining the Red (Marxist) International (see Units 11–13). Soon after, news began to trickle through of the Bolsheviks' persecution of the anarchists in Russia. Although it had been initially favourable to the idea of joining the IRTU, the CNT now changed its mind. However, it was also aware of the need to organise internationally. In the event, a meeting of syndicalist organisations in Berlin in 1922 're-established' the Bakuninist spirit of the First International and created the International Working Men's Association (later renamed the International Workers' Association, IWA — see Unit 13). It was to this international (the AIT in Spanish) that the CNT affiliated. By this time, the CNT was broadly an anarcho-syndicalist organisation that pledged to pursue the anti-statist and anti-political party approach towards a classless society.

After joining the IWA, the CNT saw no immediate reprieve to its difficulties in organising in Spain. The years 1923–30 were again difficult, with gun battles in Barcelona and the dire economic situation prompting the 1923 military coup, and subsequent military 'Directorship' (read dictatorship) of General Primo de Rivera. The CNT was outlawed, and Primo de Rivera refused to recognise it, instead choosing to negotiate in a corporatist system with the socialist trade union, the UGT, in an attempt to undermine the CNT. Thus, the UGT, and indeed some top members of the Socialist Party (PSOE) did relatively well under Primo de Rivera, and Largo Caballero, later to be heralded the 'Spanish Lenin', was even a cabinet member from the mid-1920s onwards. As a result, the Spanish socialists emerged from the years of dictatorship in 1930 with much of their organisation intact, in contrast to the decimated CNT. The rift created between the CNT and the UGT, as a result of the latter's participation with the dictatorship was deep and would barely (if ever) be healed.

Another problem the CNT faced in the late 1920s was pressure from within to take a 'softer' less solidly anarcho-syndicalist line, and start participating in state structures. To some extent this was understandable, in the face of shrinking influence and membership, while the reformist UGT and socialists enjoyed direct power and influence. However, the vast majority in the CNT argued against this 'easy option' as a dangerous route away from principled politics. As a re-

sponse to these ideas, in 1927, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) was formed, by legendary figures such as Buenaventura Durruti and García Oliver. The FAI grew up in and around the CNT and set itself the task of keeping the CNT on the 'straight and narrow' of non-collaboration with the state and political parties. The FAI was avowedly pro-CNT, but operated in small clandestine groups, and for some gave the impression that it acted as an elite group, keeping the CNT on strict anarcho-syndicalist course. This was viewed positively or negatively, depending on how hard-line you were and how you viewed the idea of organisations operating within organisations. Suffice to say that the relationship between a labour union, which is anarcho-syndicalist in outlook and practice, and a specific anarchist organisation is problematic, particularly when the latter is allowed to give the semblance of creating a 'higher tier' of hard line anarchist 'elites' within the former.

## **The 2<sup>nd</sup> Republic, 1931–36**

By 1929, Primo de Rivera had managed to irritate all his main bodies of support; the Church, monarchy, army, and select group of politicians he had alongside his military advisers. When he disbanded an elite army corps protesting over pay and promotion without consulting the Chief of the Armed Forces, King Alfonso XIII, his last drop of support dried up. In January 1930 he asked his fellow generals for support. Without their pledge, he would resign. No support was offered, and he duly resigned and fled to Paris, to die shortly afterwards.

Throughout 1930, another army general, Berenguer, led a so-called 'soft-dictatorship', as the republican plots grew. The conspirators finally led an uprising, backed by 'progressive' sectors of the army, in mid-December 1930. The CNT, faced with a dilemma, supported the Republican uprising, although it carefully worded its support in apolitical anti-statist terms. The dilemma was that it was opposed to all political parties and governments, but it pragmatically recognised that the republic would be better in the short term than the tyranny of military dictatorship. As the dictatorship collapsed, it became clear that the force for a new republic and against the monarchy was considerable, even among the bourgeoisie. Elections were called, and in April 1931, King Alfonso XIII fled to France. The new administration proclaimed itself the Republic of 'all the workers'. The CNT's relationship with this new political system was to be problematic right from the start.

The Republic was certainly the first period in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in which Spain would get close to liberal democracy which, compared with the past political corruption and army-driven politics, was a step forward. Even in the CNT, despite the lack of faith in any real change from the regime, there was an expectation that things would be better, or at least not quite so bad. Celebrations were held across Spain and particularly in Catalonia, where bourgeois politicians of the nationalist parties believed they were one step closer to the realisation of an independent Catalan state.

There were three main recognisable periods in the Republican years of 1931–36. The first, the so-called reform years, was April 1931 to November 1933. At this point, elections returned a right wing majority, and this second period, of right wing coalition, lasted until the February elections of 1936. Then came the Popular Front government, which was left wing.

In the reform years, the oppression of years of military dictatorship seemed to visibly lift, as the progressive government set about tackling the terrible agrarian situation, by bringing measures

to ease rural poverty and restore land ownership to the rural working class. Landlords and the Catholic church reacted angrily to this undermining of their privilege, and there were pitched battles as they took on the peasants and the CNT.

The Republic soon realised what it was up against. It tried to deal with the army, a bastion of the former monarchist regime, by retiring reactionary officers and replacing them with more progressive ones. The policy failed totally, as officers saw their beloved institution being interfered with, and turned even more antagonistic towards the new regime. If anything, the Catholic Church was an even greater problem, being one of the richest, most powerful and most reactionary institutions in Spain. It was deeply hated by whole sections of the working class, as shown by their readiness to burn down churches and convents during uprisings. The Republican government tried to take it on, for example by stopping its monopoly on education by banning religious orders from running schools. However, the Catholic Church simply formed businesses that bought and ran the schools and, without the state resources to counter this, education stayed the same as ever — firmly in the hands of Catholic reaction.

For these and various other similar reasons, the government did not deliver the social legislation needed. Strikes became widespread, and the CNT's hatred of the socialist UGT reached new heights as UGT workers were sent in as scabs to break CNT strikes. The government was openly hostile to the CNT, and its CNT offices were closed down and in some areas even destroyed several times over the 2-year period. The socialists were particularly aggressive towards the CNT. Many anarcho-syndicalists were jailed or shot, and strikes or other means of direct action-based self-defence was the common result of such attacks. The net result of the intense repression of the CNT was that it was able to demonstrate how resilient and steadfast it was in both its principles and tactics. The working class, increasingly despairing of the left wing government's empty promises, began to turn to the CNT in ever greater numbers, and the membership figures were soon being measured in several hundreds of thousands, and within two years, topped a million.

After the 1933 elections, the CEDA (the Catholic right wing, quasi-fascist party) gained power, in a right wing coalition. Immediately, the new government set about undoing the legislation and social initiatives of the reform years. In October 1934, the CEDA took over the key ministries of industry and agriculture and immediately, a miners' uprising broke out in Asturias. The CNT was again in the front line of the action, and for a short period, the region was on the brink of full-scale social revolution, with workers taking over workplaces and producing weapons for their defence. However, the uprising was eventually crushed violently by massed ranks of the Civil Guard and army — Franco was in charge of this military campaign.

## **1936: CNT comes of age**

By February 1936, over a year of CEDA oppression was enough, and the government swung back to the left, as the Popular Front was elected to power. Though it immediately set about undoing the CEDA-influenced legislation, it was becoming abundantly clear by this stage that no amount of reform was going to stop the increasing momentum for real change.

Over 30,000 militants imprisoned by the CEDA regime were now released, either 'officially', or in some cases, by the workers themselves. The bosses refused to rehire the released prisoners, and strikes broke out all over the country in protest. The peasants began to seize the land from the big landowners and collectivise, and the Popular Front didn't dare move against them. Neither

did they act against the army, church and right-wing parties who were openly preparing a coup. The government quickly became ineffective, as events moved much faster than it could react, and power slipped away in two directions — the fascists, clerics and bourgeoisie on one side, and the anti-fascists on the other, consisting of workers from the rapidly swelling CNT and UGT. Full-scale class war broke out and between February and June, hundreds of churches were burnt down, there were 113 general strikes, over 200 other strikes, plus numerous gun battles, street fights, assassinations and bombings. With the Republic now discredited, Spain plunged towards inevitable civil war.

In May, the CNT held its National Congress in Zaragoza. As street action began to reach boiling point, the whole country's attention was focused on the Congress. Held within a climate of imminent expectation of full-scale social revolution, the Congress turned out to be an important event. Differences in tactics were again discussed, particularly between the more 'pro-insurrectionist, pro-FAI' activists and those who were more moderate in approach. Importantly, many tactical differences were overcome, and some unions who had briefly split away from the CNT over these now rejoined.

The Congress was for once united on all-important issues; it supported the expropriation of the land by the peasants, continued to push towards the revolution and an alliance with the rank-and-file of the UGT, and maintained its commitment to libertarian communism. Many of the resolutions passed fully recognised that there was now a historic opportunity to put ideas into practice. One stressed that it was impossible "to predict the structure of the future society...since there is often a great chasm between theory and practice." It also defined the true nature of revolution (rather than insurrection) as "a psychological phenomenon in opposition to the state of things that oppress the aspirations and needs of the individual". Direct action was only the first step, which would abolish "private property, the state, the principle of authority, and consequently, the class division of people into exploiters and exploited, oppressors and oppressed". The basic principles of the future society were also detailed, as were various human aspects of it:

*"the commune is most free, which has least need of others...(and this commune)...will have no bureaucratic or executive character. Apart from those who work as technicians or statisticians, the rest will simply carry out their job as producers, gathered together at the end of the working day to discuss questions of detail which do not call for reference to a general assembly... (The new society)...will be incompatible with any punitive regime...such as prisons...(for) man is not bad by nature, and delinquency is the logical result of the state of injustice in which we live...when needs are satisfied and (people have) rational and humane education (the causes of social injustice) will disappear. (Anarcho-syndicalism also) proclaims free love, with no more regulation than the free will of the men and women concerned, guaranteeing the children the security of the community."*

This resolution was written, discussed and unanimously adopted by the CNT, not in the 'enlightened' 1960s or 1970s, but in 'regressive', Catholic Spain in 1936. With ideas well ahead of their time, and in a general atmosphere of both tactical unity and confidence about the future, the Congress was another boost for the CNT. It was timely for, within a matter of weeks; the extreme right wing and the army attempted a coup, throwing the country into civil war, as the CNT and the Spanish people rose up in defence against the fascists. The following 3 years of revolution, war and turmoil is the subject of Unit 17.

## Postscript: Why Spain?

Many Marxist and liberal academics have addressed the question of why anarcho-syndicalism came to the fore in Spain from a 'racial temperament' perspective. The general idea here is that the 'hot-blooded Latin' temperament was somehow ideally suited to anarchism. This is frankly not tenable, certainly as any major force. If it were true, for a start, we would have seen similar anarcho-syndicalist revolutions in other Latin and Mediterranean countries, and we would not have seen the mass-movements that occurred in non-Latin countries.

There have also been offered a number of more plausible explanations for why it was anarchism, rather than Marxist-inspired socialism that grew into a mass force. These start with the idea that workers in Spain were won over by the electrifying character of one of Bakunin's emissaries, Giuseppe Fanelli, who went to Spain in 1868 to spread the word of the International. Undoubtedly, the way in which Fanelli expressed himself, even though in Italian, was fundamental to convincing workers he met of the validity of the International's case and methods of organising. However, to attribute the following sixty years of development of the mass anarcho-syndicalist movement to one visit by one man is tenuous to say the least.

Secondly, not unrelated to the hot-blooded Latin thesis, is the idea that there was/is something peculiar and particular about Spain that accounts for anarchism's ready acceptance by some sectors of the Spanish working class. One commentator has stated of the Andalusians of southern Spain that:

*"By temperament and psychology the Andalusian tends to the philosophical anarchy of Kropotkin; environment and experience tempt him to follow the violent path of Bakunin."*

Linked to this idea is a view of the anarchism of the rural south, as a primitive, spontaneous, and largely unplanned movement, where it was expected that the revolution would come almost of its own accord, with transformation taking place virtually overnight. One academic captured the characteristics of a revolt in 1933 at Casas Viejas:

*"The men cut the telephone lines, dug ditches across the roads, isolated the police barracks and then, secure from the outside world, put up the red-and-black flag of anarchy and set about dividing the land"*.

The government troops inevitably counter-attacked and the rising was suppressed, and it has been suggested that this indicates a simplistic view of the revolutionary process. On the contrary, the movement in the south was certainly characterised by spontaneity, but this is far from indicating a lack of planning or some overblown optimism. It is the suggestion of this writer that no one could suffer the well-documented appalling conditions of rural Andalusia, and the oppression of successive military dictatorships, and remain simplistic and naïve about their politics.

A third set of theories are the economic ones of various historians who attribute the strength of anarchism in Catalan industry to the small unit structure of the Catalan firms and the resultant proximity of employer and employee. It is suggested that, as a result, the struggle retained a personal note. However, such explanations do not forward any analysis of the regional variations of anarchism within Andalusia, or of the possible reasons for the lack of anarchist implantation in the Basque region, for example, where industry was also small unit based.

Interestingly, there was contemporary debate on the issue. The Republican Catalanist paper "L'Opinió" contained various pieces from April to December 1928. For example, in an August issue, Andreu Nin, later a prominent member of the Marxist POUM, discussed the reasons advanced by his comrade Joaquín Maurín as to the importance of anarchism in Catalonia. Maurín



had stated that this importance was due to two principal causes: 1) the invasion of non-qualified labour from the agrarian provinces; 2) the opportunistic nature of Spanish socialism. Nin accepts these but advances what was in his eyes a more important reason. For Nin, it was necessary to look at the politico-economic structure of Catalonia. Catalonia was not an industrialised country; it was mainly agrarian, and industry was concentrated in certain areas, and was technically backward. For Nin as a Marxist, therefore, Catalonia was primarily agrarian and therefore petit bourgeois. The lack of concentrated industry meant that the working class was not educated with the spirit of organisation and discipline. The floodgates were thus open to the predominance of petit bourgeois tendencies, and anarchism was viewed as an example of this. In reality, as we have seen, the Catalan workers were rapidly and highly educated in politics, and they clearly made their choice when they shunned the Marxist political parties.

This leads us to the often-stated idea that anarchism succeeded primarily because Marxism and socialism within Spain were weak. Certainly, if the Spanish socialist movement had been stronger, had not been so poor in its leading lights, had not been so rigid in its interpretation of Marxism, it may have met with more success. But this assumes that Marxism has some divine right – it ‘should’ have been dominant, and this therefore gives much away about the standpoint of the historians who hold this view, but little about the actual reasons for the situations which occurred at the time. Even overlooking this, Marxism’s lack of success in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries cannot be explained by lacklustre leaders alone.

A more likely explanation for the Marxists’ poor showing in Catalonia was that they were wrong, and the people knew it. They made tactical errors, not least by their extreme emphasis on electoral politics, in a country used to totalitarianism, rigged ‘democracy’ and fallible, self-centred political leaders. Put bluntly, in a country where elections had been fraudulent for years, perhaps this was not the best tactic.

Turning to more positive ground, some historians have suggested that, rather than the failure of socialism being the prime cause for the massive influence of anarchism, in fact there were several reasons why the anarcho-syndicalists were able to build such a movement themselves.

Firstly, its direct action tactics and uncompromising revolutionism appealed to a proletariat that was already becoming radicalised by the insurgent activities of militant elements in the Federal movement, which briefly attempted to implement its ideas in the Republic of 1873–4. Both anarchism and federalism were anti-statist and profoundly moralistic, opposed to capitalism and aspiring to bring about the spiritual regeneration of the people.

Secondly, no one trusted leaders or political parties, and the anarchists shared this stance, as well as making direct contact with people through local workplace and community organisation. This meant they could be trusted.

Thirdly, anarchism also was able to offer a language of class identity, in a country where the working class was a wide group, in terms of interests, backgrounds and lifestyles. Anarcho-syndicalism appealed to both industrialised factory workers and non-unionised rural labourers alike. Linked to this, was a crucial tenet of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, now adopted in modern anarcho-syndicalism throughout the world today – the central importance of developing a ‘culture of resistance’. Cultural aspects of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism undoubtedly played a major role in both cementing and broadening the movement, giving wider relevance to the revolutionary ideal, and ensuring that no-one was ‘left out’ of the process of building the new society within the shell of the old.

In summary, all political groups effectively disfranchised the workers of Spain for decades, until anarchism came on the scene. Parliamentarianism and the monarchy alike had persistently denied the workers access to the political process, then anarchism arrived, bypassed the electoral process altogether, and organised independently of it. No wonder they turned away from Marxism and socialism, which were still trying to attract the working class to the ballot box. Certainly, there were regional differences, for example, the lack of anarchist presence in the Basque Country (which may have been due to the more open nature of the Catholic Church there). However, one thing is certain; the appeal of anarcho-syndicalism was real, and it brought the most results where it was found to be immediately relevant to people's everyday lives and problems. On closer examination, anarcho-syndicalism, far from attracting the naïve, who if educated would have chosen Stalin's doctrine, was actually a highly complex formula, which could only have been developed by the combined efforts of thousands of like-minded people, all of who believed in the world they were striving to create.

## Key points

- Anarchism came to dominate revolutionary ideas in Spain towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Culture and education were critical elements in building anarchist consciousness.
- The CNT suffered continued repression from its birth, in contrast to the socialist UGT.
- Many liberal and Marxist academics have tried to explain away the rise of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain as an aberration, but the facts indicate otherwise.

## Checklist

1. What were the main components of the Spanish Regional Federation (FRE) and what was the main debate?
2. How did the anarchists spread their ideas to the workers and peasants?
3. What were the organisational principles that the CNT adhered to?
4. Why was the FAI formed in 1927?
5. What were the three phases of the Second Republic, 1931–36?

## Answer suggestions

*1. What were the main components of the Spanish Regional Federation (FRE) and what was the main debate?*

There were three main categories of workers in the FRE. Firstly there were the reformist co-operatives, secondly the radical co-operatives and finally the apolitical and anti-political workers. The basic unit was the craft union and the main debate centred on whether or not the co-operatives would be enough to bring about a change in society.

2. *How did the anarchists spread their ideas to the workers and peasants?*

There was a strong social dimension to the work of the anarchists and later the CNT. They understood how important it was to build a libertarian working class culture. They did this through the creation of their own workers' centres, clubs, bars and cafes as well as the *ateneos*, the cultural-political centres. They also understood the importance of education in a country where a high proportion of the population were illiterate and the Catholic Church was dominant. The anarchists established schools and integral cultural centres.

3. *What were the organisational principles that the CNT adhered to?*

The CNT rejected centralisation and bureaucracy outright basing itself on local unions built into regional federations.

4. *Why was the FAI formed in 1927?*

During the late 1920s there was pressure from within the CNT to take a more moderate line to ease the pressure from the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. The vast majority argued against this. As a response to this debate the FAI was formed with the task of keeping the CNT functioning on anarchist lines.

5. *What were the three phases of the Second Republic, 1931–36?*

From April 1931 to November 1933 were the "reform years". Then, after elections returned a right wing majority, there was a period of a right coalition that lasted until the Popular Front government that came to power in February 1936.

## Suggested discussion points

- Why did anarchism take such deep inroads into the consciousness of the Spanish workers and peasants?
- Does an anarcho-syndicalist organisation need an specific anarchist group to keep it on a revolutionary path?

## Further Reading

**Murray Bookchin. *The Spanish Anarchists*. AK Press, 1998. ISBN 187317604X (Old edition, Harper and Row, New York, 1977, ISBN 0060 906073 may be available in libraries or s/h shops).** — AK- -LI- Has become a standard text on the build up to the Spanish revolution, Bookchin's later work largely descends into reformism and electoralism, but this remains a triumphant classic.

**The Spanish Labyrinth. Gerald Brenan. Cambridge, 1943, repr. 1990. -BS- -LI-** A heavy-weight academic text which constitutes a detailed and informative reference guide to Spanish libertarian history.

**The Anarchists of Casas Viejas. Jerome R. Mintz. Indiana University Press, ISBN 0253 208548. -BS- — LI-** Based on personal narratives of survivors and family members of those involved in the Casas Viejas uprising in Andalusia, southern Spain. Decisively dispels the Marxist myth that the rural anarcho — syndicalists were backward or unpoliticised prior to 1936.

**Libertarian Communism. Issac Puente. Monty Miller Press/ Rebel Worker, pamphlet. £1.50. -AK-** Reproduction of the set of principles adopted by the historic CNT Congress in Zaragoza in May 1936.

**Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution. José Peirats. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384530. £6. -AK- -BS-** At nearly 400 pages, this classic is a highly detailed and value for money history of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement from 1868 to 1939. Written by a participant and CNT member, it deals frankly with the problems, challenges and mistakes in the Revolutionary period, as well as the collective movement and a chronology of key events.

**Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain. George Esenwein. Berkeley, 1989. -LI-** An academic narrative on the ideas and events in Spain.

**Marxism and the Failure of Organised Socialism in Spain. Paul Heywood. Cambridge, 1990. -LI-** Academic analysis of why party politics failed and the CNT succeeded in Spain. Detailed and often esoteric.

**Anarchists of Andalusia. Temma Kap5. What were the three phases of the Second Republic, 1931–36?lan. Princeton, 1977. -LI-** More academic narrative – this time specifically concentrates on the rural movement in the south.5. What were the three phases of the Second Republic, 1931–36?

**Durruti 1896–1936. Active. ISBN 8486 864224. £9.95. -AK-** Photo album with commentary, 200 quality pictures of Durruti/ Spain, captions in 5 languages.

**Durruti: The People Armed. Abel Paz. Black Rose, ISBN 0919 61874X. £10.95. -AK-** An exhaustive biography of the crammed, uncompromising life of this icon of the Spanish Revolution, who was finally killed on the Madrid front in late 1936. Half a million people attended his funeral.

Notes: Unusually for periods of revolutionary working class history, there are a number of relatively accessible books on Spain in the 1930s. This is a sample of some of the better ones. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13–18. The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK- available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), – BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or

# Unit 16: Spain – Culture, education, women and sexuality

As introduced in Unit 15, social and cultural issues were at the core of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain, right from the start of the first anarchist unions in the early 1870s. The level of discussion – and disagreement – on topics such as education and sexuality was high around the turn of the Century, as Spain took the first faltering steps towards ‘modernisation’. Anarcho-syndicalists were outspoken in their opposition to both the intransigent traditionalist right, often backed by the Catholic Church, and the liberal bourgeois lobby, which held education as the basis for modernising the country.

By the 1930s, the CNT had developed an integrated and sophisticated revolutionary culture of free expression, along with an impressive number of local social and educational facilities. In this Unit, we examine culture, sexuality and education, in an attempt to highlight the character and importance of the social dimension to the revolutionary struggle in Spain.

## This Unit aims to

- Examine attitudes toward women in 1930s Spain.
- Look at the approaches of the anarcho-syndicalists to women’s emancipation.
- Review the anarcho-syndicalist approach to culture, education and sexuality.
- Highlight the importance of the social dimension to the revolutionary struggle in Spain.

## Terms and abbreviations

**CNT:** Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour) Anarcho-syndicalist union.

**FRE:** Federaci3n Regional Espa1ola (Spanish Regional Federation). The Spanish region of the First International

**FTRE:** Federaci3n del Trabajadores Regional Espa1ola (Federation of Workers of the Spanish Region)

## Introduction

As introduced in Unit 15, social and cultural issues were at the core of the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain, right from the start of the first anarchist unions in the early 1870s. The level of discussion – and disagreement – on topics such as education and sexuality was high

around the turn of the Century, as Spain took the first faltering steps towards modernisation. Anarcho-syndicalists were outspoken in their opposition to both the intransigent traditionalist right, often backed by the Catholic Church, and the liberal bourgeois lobby, which held education as the basis for modernising the country. By the 1930s, the CNT had developed an integrated and sophisticated revolutionary culture of free expression, along with an impressive number of local social and educational facilities.

The task was massive. For several hundred years leading up to the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it was the Church that held the stranglehold on Spain's education system. It preached that liberalism – let alone socialism or any type of egalitarianism – were the works of the Devil, a sin to be avoided at all costs. The moral position and educational stance of the Catholic Church was so important that any movement that tried to alter educational provision incurred its full wrath. As a major landowner and source of great wealth and power, this meant very considerable consequences for anyone who questioned its authority, teachings or methods.

In 1899, a group of Spanish bishops declared that political liberalism, pluralism and the questioning of Catholic doctrine were questionable if not downright demonic, stating:

*“We repudiate all those liberties of perdition, offspring of the so-called new rights, or liberalism, the application of which to the government of our fatherland is the source of so many sins, and which leads us to the brink of the abyss.”*

The Catholic Church was still hankering after a unified empire, was steeped in nationalism and patriotism, and was in constant fear of ultimate decline into some vague notion of liberal, leftist chaos. As Spain stumbled on through an early 20<sup>th</sup> Century peppered with coups and experiments with parliamentarianism (see Unit 15), the Church expanded its attack to include an ever wider repertoire of social malaises.

A Catholic Action document of 1929 declared:

*“The diocesan committees shall procure: 1. The destruction of the social evils of ignorance of Christian doctrine, indifference and irreligiosity; blasphemy, both spoken and written; the profanation of feast days; evil publications; insubordination; indecency in dress, cinemas and other entertainments; pauperism and emigration. 2. The promotion of social well-being by the careful nurturing of religion, morality, obedience to the Church; respect for authority; charity towards the poor; religious instruction of the populace. The local committee shall stimulate the zeal of priests, religious and lay people to: 1. The extirpation of social evils everywhere. 2. The defence of the sacred interests of religion, the family, authority, private property and the poor.”*

As the pressure for change grew, the Church clung closer to strict hierarchy: the question of the indissoluble nation was increasingly critical to maintaining the sacred unity of Spain under strict Catholicism. The Catholic monarchy had ‘unified’ Spain, and this had led directly to the conquest of America from 1492 onwards. As they saw it, Spain was therefore defined by Catholicism, and would be lost completely without it. Certainly, it is no exaggeration, to state that the power of the Church in all areas, including education and social mores, was immense. This also covered areas of sexual morality, as we shall see below.

## **Women, liberation, and early anarcho-syndicalism**

Women's emancipation struck a chord with anarcho-syndicalists, liberals and radicals alike from the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Certainly, for the anarcho-syndicalists, this interest never waned,

quite the opposite. Ideas developed and became steadily more complex and intricate, especially in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as anarcho-syndicalists built mass organisations and enrolled women in them.

The topics and ideas developed were wide-ranging and, by contemporary Spain's standards, extremely radical. Not only were the rather more economic issues of women's liberation discussed, but also questions of free love, monogamy, sexuality and women's empowerment were debated from early on, as criticisms developed of society's unequal treatment of the sexes. The commonly held ideas on the supposed inferiority of women were sharply attacked. For example, one contemporary anarchist, writing in the 1910s, criticised the male sense of superiority and declared that "[t]his desire to believe that woman is seen as inferior to man is not acceptable in the times that we are approaching". He also criticised the false morality whereby men could entertain sexual relationships with more than one woman but not vice versa.

A lot of discussion on the subject of gender roles was also undertaken in the context of issues of the workplace, especially as the ideas of anarchism were put into practice in the growing anarcho-syndicalist organisations from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This drew partly on the growth of feminism in Spain from the mid- 1800s. Early feminism was mainly bourgeois, however, and reflected the concerns of other middle-class feminists in the United States and Britain. For example, a demand, which was often voiced by early feminists, was the desire to gain the right to vote, an objective that anarchists did not deem to be of capital importance beyond the general principle of 'equality'. In addition to making this basic democratic demand, which was, nevertheless, fiercely contested, many Spanish feminists displayed values which were conservative and which did little to attempt to adjust the order of male supremacy. Early feminists were careful to assure their opponents and those who were concerned about the demands of feminism that the 'new woman' would not be any less respectful, no less feminine and no less delicate. As one historian has put it, they insisted that man should not be afraid;

*"he will not lose his rights, his prerogatives, no-one will dispute his commanding position. Quite simply...if the woman is more educated, their children in the long run will gain from it as will men."*

While conservative and liberal feminists fought for the right for women to education and to the vote, the early organisations of the International fought on a different level. Seeing the right to vote as a mere cosmetic solution, the anarchist-influenced FRE and FTRE (see Unit 15) all attempted to assess the roots of capitalist social relations which produced inequality between men and women. Rather than relying on a corrupt parliamentary system, they then demanded extensive change in all walks of life.

The FRE (Federación Regional Española) was in part constituted by some women's groups such as that from Cadiz, from its initial founding Congress in 1870. However, at this point, the development of a libertarian perspective on women's liberation still had some way to go. For example, a motion was passed at the Congress whereby the organisation agreed that "everything would be done in order to free the woman from all work which was not domestic", an objective that was not at all radical. One delegate claimed he was happy to see so many women present in the congress but also stated:

*"I believe that woman has not been born to work but that she has a moral and hygienic mission to fulfil in the family, bringing up the children and bestowing upon the family her talents and love. In present-day society, if she works in the workshops, she competes with men, so increasing poverty from which corruption and prostitution are born. Our oppressors ignobly take advantage of this."*

Another delegate argued that women and children had been employed by the bourgeoisie as an attempt to exploit workers further. This apparent inability of the FRE to break completely and consistently with the sexual culture of the time is unfortunate. However, the solution to this rather shaky start lay within the ideas and tactics of the early anarcho-syndicalists, and they were able to revise their stance in the light of experience.

Already, by the following year, the September 1871 FRE conference agreed a vision of the family based on “love, liberty and equality”. The discussion was preceded by an article in the paper “La Emancipación”, which criticised the double standards of the bourgeoisie in affording men sexual excursions outside marriage but not women. The tone of debate within FRE was now certainly progressive, although still participating in ideas current in the period, about women “fulfilling the function that nature has assigned to her”, and being “head of the family, in charge of seeing to the moral education of children, of forming their hearts, and of sowing in their hearts the fecund seed of love”.

At this point, there was widespread agreement within the FRE over the problems, such as the bourgeoisie making women and children work. However, there was apparently still little agreement the role of women in the future society. For some, the capitalists had fleeced the workers of any sense of family because women were working in factories, and it was difficult to see what would be the position of women and the desirability of them working in the future. For others, however, there was recognition that it was not the act of women working per se that had caused the problems. One commented:

*“From the time when a woman earns her own wage, things are not like they were in the old family when she was a being who should in with the demands of her lord and master. She will be able to impose her own conditions and make her own contract and will be free and independent companion”.*

By 1877, the FRE agreed to “recommend to all its sections to seek the adherence of all those women who are in agreement with our principles and statutes”. But still, no advance was made on whether women should work or not. It was only later that women themselves began to participate openly in these debates, which had hitherto been the province of male activists.

As the participation of women increased, so further progress was made on women’s liberation. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the FTRE (which grew out of the demise of the FRE in 1881), significant developments were being made. In September 1882, as a result of the speeches and activities of two women textile workers, a motion, which stated that the FTRE would facilitate the means for women workers in the organisation to form their own sections, was passed. Consistent with this, the first women’s textile union was affiliated to the FTRE in 1884.

This new impetus does seem to have entailed considerable success. There may have been no more than 2 female sections in the FRE between 1870 and summer 1874. In the first 3 years of the FTRE (1881–4), there were 19 women’s sections in Andalusia and 3 in Catalonia/Valencia. The organisation of women in the anarcho-syndicalist ranks was now starting to get underway in earnest.

## **The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

By the turn of the Century, anarcho-syndicalism was slowly beginning to mature into an integrated social-economic movement (see Unit 15). This provided fertile ground on which ideas around women’s liberation could develop. At least one review magazine, “Salud y Fuerza” (Health



and Strength, 1904–1914), regularly contained articles and comments on issues such as free love, women’s emancipation, maternity and freedom. It was produced by group of anarchists in Catalonia and its message was clearly directed towards the working class as a whole. The ideas expressed bore close similarities to those of some later anarchist journals that held education and sexuality as a prime area of debate (such as “Generación Consciente” and “Estudios”). The fundamental aim was for a conscious and freely educated population, where people were capable of making informed choices themselves on subjects such as sexuality, venereal disease and maternity.

Both female and male writers encouraged a strong independent position for women. A succession of articles stated that women’s bodies belonged to women themselves and that they should be mothers only when they wished, after which this idea was continually reasserted. Some declared that women should decide the moment of conception, others that maternity must be consented to by the woman rather than imposed by the male. Thus, for those anarchists writing on the subject of maternity, emancipation of women was intrinsically tied up with freedom of choice to have children when women wanted. This was expanded to women’s control over their own bodies, while ‘economic emancipation’, which often meant earning a wage, was not particularly discussed. The more economic basis for women’s freedom had, as we have seen, been discussed in the FRE and FTRE and would return to anarchist circles in 1910, with the formation of the CNT.

Many anarchists and syndicalists, in contrast to the more economic Marxists (both in Spain and elsewhere), realised that ‘economic emancipation’ would not necessarily lead to the complete liberation of women. For anarcho-syndicalists, an alteration in attitudes and a general empowering of women were recognised, from their earliest experiences, as being as vital as economic change.

## **1930s; cultural revolution**

By the 1930s, ideas around freedom, women’s emancipation and control of one’s own body were becoming interlinked in an intricate fashion. Moreover, the importance with which such ideas were held is indicated by their incorporation into the ever-widening politics of anarcho-syndicalism. For example, all-encompassing solutions (or several solutions) were now being advanced to provide a model for a new kind of relationship and sexuality between men and women. Anarcho-syndicalists were now advancing and practicing ideas on the emancipation of women, love and motherhood, which were to profoundly influence European socialist movements in the longer term.

The growth of such ideas within and around the CNT was rapid from its inception in 1910, but it grew exponentially in the 1930s. Literally, hundreds of anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist journals and papers now existed, dealing with education and cultural change, embracing topics as diverse as vegetarianism and nudism.

A key component of anarchist culture was the production of small pamphlets and novelettes that professed anarchist ways of living and relating to others without authority and domination. Issues such as marriage, free love, maternity and chastity were dealt with. To give just one example, the Revista Blanca publishers under the series heading “Novela Ideal” produced a series of novelettes. Hundreds of anti-religious short stories were published, often focussing on love

and sexuality, and they were extremely popular in libertarian circles. According to the editor of the “Novela Ideal” series, between 10–50,000 of these novelettes were published every week and; “according to the Francoists (they) poisoned three generations of Spaniards”. By any stretch of the imagination, they had an extremely important counter-cultural role.

One of the most notable characteristics of the now rapidly growing anarcho-syndicalist movement, was not just the fact that revolutionary cultural ideas were developed, but that the means were created to put counter-culture into practice. Essential to this process were ‘ateneos’ or libertarian meeting houses, which grew up in most cities and towns (see Unit 15). Here, anarchist publications would be received, classes would take place and discussions would be held. Indeed, for one anarchist woman, the ateneo was the place “where we were formed, most deeply, ideologically”. She was not alone. The importance of these cultural and educational centres is difficult to overstate. They provided the building blocks for organised community politics of empowerment, where education and discussion were viewed as essential for the development of free people who would be capable of taking on the construction of a new society according to anarcho-syndicalist principles. The “ateneos” represented a unique forum where local people could come together to solve problems and broaden their horizons – in every sense.

A major attempt to create a new culture in place of the prevailing one was organised into a total programme for the reform of mentalities and material conditions. This anarcho-syndicalist cultural project was firmly placed within the basic libertarian principles of freedom and the right to act without the coercion of Church or state. In a society where the Church was omnipresent and omnipotent, anarcho-syndicalists believed that it was essential to create their own morality outside of bourgeois moralistic structures. This alternative moral system was seen as a mechanism for the subversion of existing structures of power and domination. Thus, not only was the acquisition of knowledge seen as important, but its application on a ‘personal-political’ level was recognised as vital.

## **Sex, love and relationships**

Within and around the Spanish CNT, intertwined with radical positions on education, eating habits, religion and culture, extensive attention was paid to how people should relate to one another, including showing love and practising sexual relations. While in this short space it is impossible to document the breadth and extent of anarcho-syndicalist attitudes to sexuality, it is nevertheless possible to pick out the main tenets of these ideas and illustrate the changes that the CNT championed after July 1936.

From the days of the FRE and FTRE, libertarians in Spain had severely criticised the moral code of the bourgeoisie, for example, on its support for compulsory marriage and attitudes towards sex. Anarcho-syndicalists, for the most part, rejected marriage by the Church as unnatural, restricting and authoritarian. They saw marriage as support for a society, which was based on inequality and power relations, and as the power of one sex over the other. Many anarcho-syndicalists attempted to live as a couple without being married, which, in a society riddled with rigid concepts of propriety and ‘decency’, was daring. Such behaviour was viewed with near horror by the Church, as was the use of contraceptives, whether used as a method of preventing venereal disease, or as a form of contraception – they indicated a means of enjoying sex for pleasure.

The promotion of 'free love' as opposed to the marriage contract was seen as a way of living out anarcho-syndicalist ideals under capitalism. Hence, it was an important part of the process of creating the new society within the shell of the old. Love, they believed, should be given freely or not at all, and marriage merely offers the possibility of sterilising love and sex into an oppressive relationship for both sexes. In addition, marriage was viewed as a bastion of capitalist society, mirroring the power of men over women and creating a kind of authoritarian mini-state in the worker's own hearth. Anarcho-syndicalists were also opposed to the oppressive and exploitative conditions, which caused prostitution, and which they saw as demeaning and exploitative for both participants.

Parallels can be detected in the way anarcho-syndicalists developed their views on love, with their faith in the role of culture and science. Love was even promoted as a factor that could help solve society's problems. Equally, in a future society without hate, exploitation, and competition, people living naturally and in harmony with nature would love in a fulfilled and fulfilling manner.

Martí Ibáñez was an example of the anarcho-syndicalist and sexologist rolled into one. He gave several courses on sexuality in the mid-1930s and wrote many articles on sex reform. To capture the flavour of his writing we reproduce translations of some of his articles. Some may sound a little quaint and over-lyrical, but they do reflect the way in which many libertarians wrote during this period. It was a period when everything seemed possible, including simultaneous revolution in economics and people's sex lives. In a 1934 article, he likened the revolution to an opening of the floodgates, a force which was supposed to sweep away old forms of existence. But the sexual problem, after the revolutionary events, was still present and had not been solved. This was because the solution to such a complex problem was a gradual one, and necessitated a change in mentalities as well as a material change in the way society was organised:

*"The war-like rumours which the last few days have brought still linger in the air. The disturbing severity of these days is clear to us all, as we assess them more calmly from the sad haven of their epilogue. Compared to the uniform unfolding of gently monotonous time, they appear to us with their jagged profile which spouts forth agony yet radiates lessons. But the spiritual life of Spain is so lowly and superficial that we will soon consign these tragic days to memory; the days in which some confronted death in the name of the Ideal. Nevertheless, we need still more time to be able to judge these days without passion, before History places upon them the seal of its inevitable verdict. However, let us open the doors to our spiritual curiosity and attempt to extract some lessons from those burning hours that we can apply to sexual morality. Can a revolution change the flow of things? In the case of sexual morality, is it possible to alter its course through a revolutionary process, as a sailing ship alters course with a single touch on the tiller? I have posed this problem in articles and conferences, aiming to increase my and others' torrents of concern and to kindle that of those spirits which have not yet concerned themselves with this matter. We are still under the rule of the old sexual morality. A sector of the Spanish population is waking up to our cries, but there is still a large group of men who consider themselves advanced thinkers, who are victims of the web of sexual prejudice which the Church since its origins has cast over Humanity (...) The sexual question cannot be resolved by a revolution, at least by a rapid, theatrical, ostentatious revolution. The sexual revolution must be begun now, it must forge itself systematically and without interruption (...) Sexuality cannot be dominated and channelled by some hastily written decree, drawn up on the barricades of victory; it needs to be preceded by an evolutionary process (...) The sexual revolution, the supreme liberation of collective sexuality, should be the humble silent task of a phalanx of tenacious fighters, who by means of the book, the article, the conference and personal example, create and forge that sexual*

*culture which is the key to liberation (...) We have in our hands the soft clay of new generations, with which we need to mould the figures of new people, to blow into that clay the breath of freedom and the understanding of the duties it brings with it. It is only in this way that we shall lift love out of the mire which surrounds it nowadays, so that it can raise itself in elegant flight towards the bright light of freedom.”*

The idea that sexuality is an indomitable biological force, to be thwarted at one's peril, became increasingly common amongst anarcho-syndicalists in the 1930s. In particular, the throwing off of the chains of the current culture, and 'giving in' to the desire to have sexual contact, was particularly pertinent to women – simply because they were the main victims of the repressive Church-led norms of the time. Another literary service which Martí Ibáñez performed, was responding to letters to “Estudios” asking for advice on sexual matters. His reply to 'Iris' in February 1935, addresses her worry over the dilemma of satisfying her sexual impulses, without being married. She is 'terrified by the existing social prejudices', her youth is fading away, and it is more than necessary to decide on the course of action to take. The lengthy advice offered includes the following:

*“Forced chastity, woven into repression and monotony, which suffocates and oppresses, is no solution; it is a betrayal of Nature which is paid for with the deep sadness of a life which exudes dark anxieties. Live no more in this falsehood, my friend. Break resolutely the bind which links you to your past of sexual repression and launch yourself in full sail off into the sea of sincerity.”*

Despite the 'pro-sex' position stated here, it was still common among anarcho-syndicalists to espouse a gender-bound philosophy of sexuality. Indeed, both female and male activists in the CNT generally backed this, and very few libertarians at the time questioned the 'natural' status of motherhood and rigid gender roles. Equally, few questioned the primacy of sexual relationships between men and women over same-sex ones. Indeed, the general zeal for understanding of nature and application of 'natural' principles to sexuality was a double-edged sword. On one hand, it was a suitable concept to organise around and press for change, presenting sexuality as a force that could not be held in check even by the most reactionary and repressive of regimes. On the other hand, it prescribed a rigid version of what sexuality should be.

Masturbation and homosexuality were usually still out; 'gendered' sex roles and heterosexual reproduction were in. For men, there was much debate over sexual methods, and encouragement of the ability in those not seeking a permanent relationship to separate sex from love while maintaining respect for the partner. In another piece of solicited advice, Martí Ibáñez replies:

*“In the garden of life, new young women are flourishing who are capable of understanding the amorous desires of a sincere man. But be courageous, proletarian friends, and always carry the truth on your lips. If you do not seek a definitive companion, but an amorous friendship, do not hide your desires. Learn how to disconnect love from the sexual experience when necessary and know how to practise it without binding yourselves or binding anyone else to anyone. And above all, do not demand from women that they submit to any limitation of sexuality that you would not submit to yourselves; do not demand more than you offer. Mutual respect, tolerance, comprehension, are indispensable qualities for loyal love comradeship. And when the moment arrives for you to join together for all time, be capable of tolerating in your companion a sexual freedom like your own. Do not demand more than pristine moral purity, that supreme feminine jewel, in whose radiance the happy waters of conjugal delight will flow.”*

## Mujeres Libres

Campaigning around issues of sexual equality, free love and opposition to strict monogamy was a natural development from the more tentative concern for women's issues that libertarians had shown in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. However, the next substantial organisational development in the heart of the anarcho-syndicalist movement was to take this campaigning an important step further.

In mid-1936, a number of women members of the CNT and broader anarcho-syndicalist circles decided to create a specifically female organisation, which would attend to the problems that women experienced in wider society, as well as within libertarian organisations. Concerned with the exploitation of women both 'in the factory and the hearth', Mujeres Libres (Free Women) was established, and it rapidly grew in membership. According to one woman at the time, Mujeres Libres was created in order to free women from their "triple enslavement to ignorance, as women, and as producers".

Within a few months, Mujeres Libres was able to mobilise some 20,000 women members, and developed an extensive network of activities designed to empower women as individuals, while building a sense of comradeship and community. The former may sound familiar, and has been a feature of the mainstream feminist movements since that period. However, the latter was and remains a distinctive element of the Mujeres Libres' brand of feminism, and it was drawn directly from applying the anarcho-syndicalist principles of the movement within which Mujeres Libres was rooted.

Responding to real oppression of women in Spanish society, as well as the problems that women encountered in less-enlightened quarters of the CNT, drew up a programme of education and 'enabling', which attempted to free women from their down-trodden status of mid-1930s Spain.

Still unable to break completely with gender roles, and prescribed forms of behaviour, many male anarcho-syndicalists reproduced patterns of inequality in their organisations and home life. Mujeres Libres countered this. One member of Mujeres Libres discusses the situation in the libertarian organisation Juventudes Libertarias (Libertarian Youth), where some young (male) members clearly still clung to the cultural norms of their recent upbringing:

*"I did not agree with the idea of Mujeres Libres. I thought, the struggle affects both men and women. We are all fighting together for a better society. Why should there be a separate organisation? One day, when I was with a group from the Juventudes, we went to a meeting Mujeres Libres had organised at the Juventudes headquarters, where they also had an office. The boys started making fun of the speakers, which annoyed me from the outset. When the woman who was speaking finished, the boys began asking questions and saying it didn't make sense for women to organise separately, since they wouldn't do anything anyway. The debate was impassioned. The tone of their comments disgusted me, and I came to the defence of Mujeres Libres... In the end, they named me delegate from our neighbourhood to the meeting of the Federación Local de Mujeres Libres de Barcelona."*

## 1936 Revolution

When Revolution and Civil War broke out in 1936 (see Unit 17), the opportunity was taken to put years of development of counter-culture ideas into practice. While this task was seized upon

with relish, however, the Civil War and overwhelming international financial and military support for the fascists was to ensure that the cultural revolution was short-lived. Indeed, from 1937 onwards, the pressures of war put paid to any real free time with which to enjoy the possibilities of living within a newly enlightened society.

Nevertheless, in the short time of the revolution, amazing steps were made to put counter-culture into practice, while at the same time organising the economy and collectivising rural and industrial production (see Unit 18). In Catalonia, for example, during the early months of the July revolution, Church weddings were abolished and the 'free union' was available to all those who wished to partake. While people were sometimes 'married' in the CNT offices with a short ceremony, the couple believed that their union was entirely different in nature from that endorsed by a Church or state marriage ceremony.

Also in Catalonia, a decree allowing legal abortion for the first time in Spanish history was passed on 25<sup>th</sup> December 1936, and on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1937, norms by which hospitals and clinics would be regulated were established. The enthusiasm of the CNT-controlled Catalan Health Department (SIAS) was considerable with regard to this provision. However, the curtailment of CNT involvement in SIAS in June 1937, as they were ousted by non-revolutionary elements, meant that impact was probably minimal. In addition to abortion on demand, anarcho-syndicalists planned to establish rehabilitation centres for prostitutes in an attempt to remove prostitution, sex-counselling consultancies for the youth and an Institute of Sexual Science. Unfortunately, none of these came to fruition.

## Conclusion

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalists, in addition to fighting on an 'economic' level in numerous strikes and land occupations (see Unit 18), attempted to create a counter-culture in place of both liberal and Catholic-dominated versions of culture and sexuality. Not content with mere sex education, the anarcho-syndicalists attempted to introduce a different way of thinking and behaving into their social and sexual relationships. While, in the short time it operated, it certainly did not eliminate sexism and repressive attitudes towards sexuality, it did signify the very serious attempts of women and men to effect change in working class communities, raising the banner of opposition to repressive and hierarchical relationships from wherever they might come.

The major successes of *Mujeres Libres* were drawn from the simple fact that, like the CNT and all other successful libertarian organisations, they connected directly with the reality that their members (and women in wider society) were living through.

Through networks made between like-minded people, and those in similar situations, whether they were women, young persons, in the same industry or in affinity groups connected to the FAI (Iberian Anarchist Federation), anarcho-syndicalists and others drew upon and bolstered community resistance to oppression in its many forms. As with other anarcho-syndicalist organisations, the idea of the revolution meant ridding society of all oppression, whether sexual, gender-based, cultural, social or economic.

## Key points

- The Catholic Church had immense power over all areas of Spanish life in the 1930s, including education and social morality.
- The idea of Women's emancipation and liberation grew within the anarcho-syndicalist movement.
- A key concept of the growing anarchist culture was the way in which people should live with, and relate to, each other.
- Anarcho-syndicalists questioned the moral code of the bourgeoisie including marriage, sex and sexuality.
- Mujeres Libres developed to challenge the view of gender roles taken by many less-enlightened male workers.

## Checklist

1. What were the differences in the approach of the anarcho-syndicalist to the ideas of women's emancipation compared to the liberal and conservative feminists?
2. How did this approach differ to the Marxists?
3. What was the "Novela Ideal"?
4. What was the idea of "free love"?
5. Why was the Mujeres Libres formed?

## Answer suggestions

*1. What were the differences in the approach of the anarcho-syndicalist to the ideas of women's emancipation compared to the liberal and conservative feminists?*

Middle class feminists were careful to assure men that their demands for the political equality and the right to vote would not mean they were any less feminine, respectful and delicate. The anarchists saw the vote as a superficial solution and attempted to assess the roots of capitalist social-relations that produced the inequality between women and men.

*2. How did this approach differ to the Marxists?*

Marxists believed that economic emancipation would then lead to the liberation of women. Anarcho-syndicalists argued that this was not enough and an alteration in attitudes and an empowerment of women was also needed.

*3. What was the "Novela Ideal"?*

The Novela Ideal was a series of novelettes that professed anarchist ways of living. They were anti-religious short stories often focusing on love and sexuality.

*4. What was the idea of "free love"?*

Anarcho-syndicalists promoted free love as opposed to the marriage contract. They believed love should be given freely or not at all. Marriage was an authoritarian institution that supported a society based on inequality and power relations.

*5. Why was the Mujeres Libres formed?*

Despite all the attempts by anarcho-syndicalists there were still a lot of men who were unable to break with rigid the gender roles of society. Anarchist women sought to challenge these stereotypes head on and so formed Mujeres Libres.

## Suggested discussion points

- How important is it to challenge the dominant ideas of sexual morality in society?
- What do you think the women of Mujeres Libres in the 1930s would feel about the concept of “Girl Power” today?

## Further Reading

**Free Women of Spain. Martha Ackelsberg. Bloomington, 1991. £11.99. -LI- -BS-** A unique account of the working class womens’ organisations in 1930’s Spain that struggled for the social revolution alongside the workers and the CNT. Detailed exposition of the ideas and practical projects developed by revolutionary women in this anarcho-syndicalist experiment that was far in advance of post-war “feminism”.

**Mujeres Libres. Organising Women During the Spanish Revolution. DAM, 1987. 60p. -SE-** Now sadly out of print, this reprint of an article by Martha Acklesburg provides an excellent introduction to the work of this anarcho-syndicalist women’s organisation during the revolution.

**Women in the Spanish Revolution. Liz Willis. Solidarity, pamphlet. £1.50 -AK-** Important, non-academic, informative and reasonably priced. An extremely rare contribution to a topic which has been consistently under-represented in history – women in Revolution.

**Women. Mary Low. (in; M.Low & J.Brea, Red Spanish Notebook, City Lights Books, ISBN 0872 861325) -LI-** Tragically out of print and hard to find, this time the subject is from a POUM perspective. Deals with Mujeres Libres etc.

**Anarchism, Ideology and Same-sex Desire. R. Cleminson. KSL. £1. – AK-** Anarcho – syndicalist ideas on same sex desire, by a member of Solidarity Federation who is also a historian on the Spanish Revolution.

Notes: Unlike other topics on revolutionary Spain, this Unit topic is poorly catered for. Mujeres Libres is still thriving today; if you speak Spanish, SelfEd can put you in touch with them/more recent literature. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13–18. The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK – available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), – BS – try good bookshops, -SE – ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).



# Unit 17: Spain 1936–39 – Revolution and civil war

This Unit is a short introduction to the Spanish Revolution and Civil War of 1936–39. Ideally, it should be read in conjunction with Units 15, 16 and 18, which deal with the events leading up to 1936, the cultural and social programme of the anarcho-syndicalists, and the collectives respectively. Following on from Unit 15 and intertwined with Units 16 and 18, this Unit provides a chronology and commentary, particularly on the political and military events of 1936–39.

Although many books and articles have been written on the Spanish Revolution, few attempt to draw practical lessons from it that we can apply to the modern world. This is one of the intentions of these four Units. This one is particularly concerned with how the state and forces of capitalism went about attacking the revolution and protecting their wealth and privilege, and how the revolutionary working class acted in trying to achieve the best outcome possible, given the prevailing situation.

## This Unit aims to

- Give a short introduction to and provide a chronology and commentary on the political and military events of 1936–39 in Spain.
- Chart the reasons behind the entry into government by the CNT.
- Examine the workers' militias.
- Discuss the rise in influence of the Communists.

## Terms and abbreviations

**CNT:** Confederacion Nacionaln del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour). Anarcho-syndicalist union.

**PSO:** Partido Socialista Obrero (Workers' Socialist Party)

**POUM:** Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (United Marxist Workers Party). Dissident revolutionary Communist Party

**FAI:** Federacion Anarquista Iberica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)

**UGT:** Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union). Reformist trade union controlled by the socialists.

**PSUC:** Partido Socialista Unificat de Catalunya (Catalan Unified Socialist Party). The combined Socialist and Communist Parties of Catalonia.

**FIJL:** Federaci3n Ib3rica de Juventudes Libertarias (Iberian Federation of Libertarian Youth).

Anarcho-syndicalist youth organisation.

**SIM:** Servicio Militar De la Investigación (Military Investigation Service). A secret police network set up by the Stalinists after May 1937.

**Falange:** Main fascist party in Spain.

## Introduction

This Unit should ideally be read in conjunction with Units 15, 16 and 18, which deal with the events leading up to 1936, the cultural and social programme of the anarcho-syndicalists, and the collectives respectively. Although many books and articles have been written on the Spanish Revolution, few attempt to draw practical lessons from it that we can apply to the modern world. This is one of the intentions of these four Units. This one is particularly concerned with how the state and forces of capitalism went about attacking the revolution and protecting their wealth and privilege, and how the revolutionary working class acted in trying to achieve the best outcome possible, given the prevailing situation.

## The 1936 Revolution

The Popular Front was elected to power in February 1936 (see Unit 15). A few weeks later, the generals and politicians who would eventually stage the fascist uprising of July 17<sup>th</sup> started meeting secretly in Madrid to formulate their plans. The rising was scheduled for between 10–20<sup>th</sup> July, at which point General Sanjurjo (leader of an aborted coup in 1932 and now in Portugal) would fly back to Spain and take overall command. In the event, he was accidentally killed in the flight, and it was the vindictive General Franco who was to emerge as the coup leader, through quick thinking, scheming and opportunism. Posted to Morocco against his wishes, Franco already had a well-deserved reputation as a devious butcher of working class people. Indeed, this single person, together with his followers, were to ensure that Spain embarked on the most vicious modern Civil War in western Europe.

The CNT knew what was coming (see Unit 15). Indeed, as early as February 14<sup>th</sup>, it issued a prophetic warning that day by day;

*“the suspicion grows that right-wing elements are ready to provoke a military coup. Morocco appears to be the focal point of the conspiracy. The insurrection is subject to the outcome of the elections. The plan will be put into effect if the left wins. We do not support the Republic, but we will put all our efforts into an all-out fight against fascism in order to beat the traditional oppressors of the proletariat”.*

During June and July, 10–20 strikes per day were breaking out (there were an average of well over 100,000 workers on strike at any one time), and the success rate of these actions was high. The years of agitation, propaganda, ideas and action began to pay off for the CNT, as people began to put theory into practice. Factories and land were occupied everywhere, and bosses and landowners fled. Faced with the rising confidence and activity of the working class, the bosses increasingly bypassed the crumbling state and resorted to assassinations (see Unit 15).

By mid July, the bourgeoisie had put the finishing touches to its plans for an army coup, while the CNT had begun to prepare for the revolution. CNT informers in the barracks monitored the fascist plans, and the organisation began to develop a strategy for sustained guerrilla warfare.

Arms were seized whenever possible (often from churches where the monks and priests hid them for the fascists).

It was in anarcho-syndicalist Barcelona, stronghold of the CNT, that preparations and effective defences had been made to repel the military coup. When local government and businesses stood by and refused to supply arms to the CNT, they went and helped themselves from ships in the docks, arms depots, and even shops. Sympathetic Assault Guards distributed arms directly from their barracks. On the 18<sup>th</sup> July, cars hastily splashed with the letters 'CNT' began to patrol the streets as a warning to the army, and the same day, the latter announced their coup.

In the early hours of the 19<sup>th</sup> July, the army of the Barcelona garrison, perhaps the largest in Spain, began to occupy strategic centres of the city. However, the CNT and the workers were already out on the streets waiting to meet them. Everywhere, they were massed behind makeshift barricades, or spilling over in massive crowds in front of the aggressors, unarmed, or poorly armed, but determined to stop the fascist coup. They pleaded with the soldiers not to shoot, and where they were disregarded, they surged forward, simply overwhelming the troops despite their far superior fire-power.

The infantry had been told they were defending the Republic and, on realising what was really happening, some soldiers shot their officers and joined the workers. The Assault Guards eventually joined the revolutionaries and the Civil Guard remained largely neutral. The CNT set up an operations base at the building workers union premises, and within 33 hours, the working class was in control of the whole city.

Red and black flags flew everywhere and revolutionary euphoria broke out amongst the masses. A feeling of solidarity and comradeship existed throughout the city and soon the whole of Catalonia was in the hands of the working class.

District and defence committees sprang up everywhere to organise arms and food distribution. The army barracks, which were still occupied, were bombarded with leaflets announcing the defeat of the coup and the workers militias moved into them as the soldiers surrendered.

Elsewhere, in Madrid, resistance was paralysed as the UGT, the majority union there, waited for orders from the indecisive government. Eventually some soldiers began to supply arms to the communists and socialists, but the CNT/FAI received nothing, so they ambushed the trucks and set about surrounding the fascist forces of General Mola. Madrid was soon in the hands of the working class and, as in Barcelona, prisons were emptied and pressure was put on the government to concede to considerable workers' demands. However, Morocco, Seville, Granada and Cadiz in the south all fell to the fascists, despite fierce resistance from peasants in rural Andalusia, often armed only with scythes and pitchforks. When they were eventually overcome thousands were butchered in cold blood. Once consolidated in the south, Franco's army began its march northwards through Estramadura, and on towards Madrid. In the north, the fascist forces took Galicia and parts of Aragon, but the Basque region and most of Asturias remained in the hands of the Republic or the workers.

## **Compromise & consolidation**

By the 21<sup>st</sup> of July, the police and army no longer existed in Catalonia, as the district committees set up by the new collectives were distributing food and other essentials, while the workers began

running society, from factories to trams to shops (see Unit 18). People burned money in the streets in huge spontaneous celebrations.

The republican President of Catalonia, Lluís Companys, had taken refuge in the palace of the Generalitat (regional government) of Catalonia. The revolution had failed to deal with the now powerless capitalist politicians, and Companys set about regaining his position of power by trying to gain favour with the CNT. He called a meeting of all the political parties and unions in Catalonia, where he told the CNT members present that they had been wrongly persecuted in the past, and that now a new era of co-operation with the CNT must begin. In persuasive political rhetoric, he called on the CNT, the bourgeois republican parties, the socialists (PSOE) and the United Marxist Workers Party (POUM) to form a Militia Committee to be led by his party, to organise the fight against fascism in the rest of Spain.

As 80% of the workers in Catalonia were in the CNT, any decision without them was worthless, and a Regional Plenum of the CNT considered the 'offer' on the same day. Here, a clash of viewpoints ensued. Many delegates insisted there should be no collaboration with political parties and the state, and that the push to consolidate the revolution and extend it to the rest of Spain was the only way forward. However, others argued that Catalonia's isolation from the rest of Spain, large areas of which had been taken by the fascists (including anarcho-syndicalist strongholds in Zaragoza and Andalusia), meant the odds were against any revolution succeeding at this point.

They forcefully made the point that, if the decision was made to go for full-scale revolution across Spain, the anti-fascist forces would be split, as the republicans would turn on the CNT and the revolution. Additionally, they pointed out that help for the CNT and the revolution would be minimal outside the anarcho-syndicalist strongholds, as the international proletariat was either controlled by social democracy or enslaved to fascism. Poor military strength was also a crucial factor – there was little doubt that if the CNT fought the well-equipped (and internationally supported) fascist army on their own they would be massacred.

The result of the Plenum was that the CNT refused to agree to the politicians proposals. However, as a compromise, they proposed that a Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias be set up in Catalonia, involving the CNT, FAI (anarchists, almost all of whom were in CNT – see Unit 15), POUM, UGT, PSUC (Catalan Socialist Party and Communist Party united together), and the bourgeois Republican parties. The majority at the Plenum naïvely believed that the Madrid government would fully arm the workers in Catalonia, because of the appearance of state control that this new organisation would give. Companys accepted the CNT proposal, forced to compromise on his desire to control the Committee due to his lack of power base. However, the formation of the Committee was a backward step for the revolution.

The CNT had never before broken with its anarcho-syndicalist principles, and now, it had entered into a power sharing executive with the local politicians, some of whom had been directly responsible for brutally oppressing the CNT and the workers over the past 5 years. In retrospect, this was a tragic mistake, since it provided the political parties with a base to rebuild – without it, they would have been completely powerless, and the CNT and the workers would have remained in complete control (albeit for the time being, and under constant threat from the Republic and Franco's forces). Now, the workers still controlled industry and agriculture, but the workers and the political parties (through the Committee) jointly controlled the military response to fascism.

The CNT entered the deal primarily because it put the fight against anti-fascism higher than the revolution. It felt the revolution was at this stage unsustainable (which was probably true,

given the war and the strength of the fascists' backing), whereas the Civil War was thought to be winnable, with the help of the government. However, it was wrong to trust the government at all and, on the crucial issue of relying on the government to supply the CNT militias with arms, it misjudged the deviousness of politicians the world over. The new Committee also gave an opportunity to the small (but vehemently opportunist) Communists to gain a power foothold and begin their counter-revolution. Finally, the CNT misjudged the price it would pay for compromising on its anarcho-syndicalist principles. Not only did it not gain anything from the exercise, it stood to lose a great deal.

In defence of the CNT's decision, it must be said that these were chaotic times, and the choices were hard. A wider revolution outside Catalonia was almost certainly unattainable, meaning that outside forces would eventually crush the revolution inside Catalonia anyway. Thus, with a bleak outlook, the idea that the revolution was lost, and that the 'next best thing' was to defeat fascism by any means necessary was clearly sensible.

However, the problem lies with the means. The CNT was to learn a hard lesson — that 'no compromise with politicians' is an anarcho-syndicalist principle, which if broken, leads to dire consequences. In retrospect, not only was the compromise wrong, but also the CNT probably underestimated its power, and thus signed up to a deal which immediately gave ground to the politicians. It is indefensible and unquestionably naïve that the CNT, which had been oppressed and denied power on its own terms for so long, when offered compromised power by the oppressors themselves, agreed to it, almost on the politicians own terms.

With the Committee in operation, the CNT did not embrace the power it offered, as he political "the suspicion grows that right-wing elements are ready to provoke a military coup. Morocco appears to be the focal point of the conspiracy. The insurrection is subject to the outcome of the elections. The plan will be put into effect if the left wins. We do not support the Republic, but we will put all our efforts into an all-out fight against fascism in order to beat the traditional oppressors of the proletariat".parties did. Indeed, it urged the working class to organise themselves and take as much responsibility as possible, since it realised the danger of the body it had just helped to set up. They found themselves in a difficult position and tried to steer a dual course — but, in the end, only one of them could be successful.

## **Anarcho-syndicalist action**

Meanwhile, on the ground, anarcho-syndicalism was still very firmly in action. The general strike that had been declared on the 19<sup>th</sup> began to wind down, as workers started to collectivise the hospitals, railways, docks, trams, buses, factories, shops, bakeries, etc., and the metallurgical and chemical plants were modified to make rifles, bullets, armoured cars and other arms for the war. The farms in Catalonia were collectivised and communal stores created to feed the towns and cities (the urban and rural collectives and anarcho-syndicalist economy are discussed in detail in Unit 18).

In the first few weeks after the uprising, there was a general belief that a new world had been born and that capitalism was gone forever. Old rivalries were forgotten and replaced by a feeling of solidarity and mutual aid. Capitalist ways of life and thinking began to disappear and a feeling of respect for others as well as for oneself began to appear. Greed and enmity were becoming things of the past as the material conditions of life changed and people began

to work collectively and take control of their own lives. With the end of the class system and the beginning of communal ownership, 'petty crime' started to end (particularly theft) and this, combined with the greater individual liberty created, caused a massive decline in 'violent crime'.

Abortion was made available for the first time during the revolution as well as contraception and advice on birth control. Previously, women were rarely seen with men in public but during the revolution they openly mixed in cafes and on the streets. Women began to wear trousers for the first time and traditional sexual roles began to be broken down (the massive impact on education, women's rights, and sexual, cultural and social liberation in the revolution are discussed in Unit 16).

## **Aragon and Zaragoza**

The fall of Zaragoza to the fascists had been a bitter blow to the anarcho-syndicalists, as it was their second largest stronghold after Barcelona, and was in a key position. The Zaragoza CNT had been promised arms by the Governor on the eve of the coup but had received none. Immediately, the fascists had searched working class districts, rounded up the anarcho-syndicalists, and shot them on the spot.

Soon after the creation of the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias in Catalonia, the CNT made plans to liberate Aragon and Zaragoza. This would clear a path to the northern enclave of Asturias, controlled by the CNT and UGT and isolated from the rest of 'Republican Spain', where most of the arms factories were. Workers would then control the vast majority of Spain, including most large cities and nearly all the industry. Thus, as the hard line CNT members who had opposed the Committee saw it, the revolution could be regained and the Committee disbanded.

Three armoured columns were organised by the CNT-FAI and a fourth by the Committee. Within 5 days, 12,000 anarcho-syndicalists were on their way, along with another 3,000 fighters in the fourth column. By the 24<sup>th</sup> (2 days later) the fighters of the CNT's central column (the Durruti column) were 20 miles from Zaragoza, having liberated towns and villages on the way. However, they then had to wait precious days for the remaining columns to cover their flanks, and Durruti began to grow impatient. Makhno, the Russian anarchist who had fought the Bolsheviks and capitalists, had described to him the effect of war on revolutionaries, and he recognised that it turned even the best people into 'irresponsible killers'. After two weeks of fighting, they completely ran out of ammunition, and 20–30,000 militia men and women were left idle. Despite desperate appeals, the Committee in Catalonia failed to send significantly more arms, as it was mounting other campaigns, and the Madrid government flatly refused to arm the CNT. They resorted to raids into enemy territory.

## **CNT enters the government**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> September, Caballero replaced Giral as head of the Republican government and on the 26<sup>th</sup>, the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias was dissolved and the Catalan government established. The UGT and CNT representatives formed a minority on it, and the political parties began to strengthen their position by rearming the state. This act was carried out without consulting the membership; for the first time in its history, the CNT was developing a

bureaucracy which was rapidly becoming divorced from the rank-and-file and, as a result, the federalist structure of the organisation was becoming weakened. The FAI, once advocated as the organisation to keep the CNT on a 'pure' revolutionary path, was now at the forefront of leading it 'astray' into collaboration. If involvement in the Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias wasn't enough, the involvement of the CNT in the government did irreparable damage to the revolution.

Due to poor wartime communications and deep involvement with the militias and collectives, many of the rank-and-file members of the CNT were initially unaware of the collaboration. Some CNT members saw entry into government as a temporary move to defeat fascism, after which they could continue the fight for the revolution (an idea actively encouraged by the communists). Alas these individuals did not realise that the fight against fascism was inextricably linked with the fight for a revolutionary society; for once the revolution had broken out, there could only be one of two things – anarchism or fascism.

The CNT joined the Catalan government to get arms, raw materials and money from the central government, since they considered that this was the only way of defeating fascism under the unfavourable conditions they found themselves in. The Madrid government then refused to arm the workers or supply them with raw materials. Though it had the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest gold reserve in the world, it clearly preferred fascism to anarchism. The railway workers union even planned to seize the gold from the Bank of Spain in Madrid, using 3,000 CNT militia, transporting it back to Barcelona by rail. However, this was eventually abandoned on the grounds that it could create Civil War between Barcelona and Madrid.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> November, the CNT entered the central government. Horacio Martínez Prieto -the General Secretary of the CNT – chose four ministers without consulting the organisation. These were Juan Peiró and Juan López, along with two members of the FAI – Federica Montseny and Juan García Oliver. The latter refused to join at first, but arms were promised to the CNT if they did, so he capitulated. In the event, few were delivered, and the exercise was a disaster for both the war and the revolution.

Neither the Catalan nor the Central government delivered their promises of arms to the CNT militias and, meanwhile, the rank-and-file CNT and the working class pushed the revolution forward, organising collectives, and generally creating a libertarian society. As news of the collaboration spread amongst the CNT rank-and-file, many began to actively oppose it. By the end of November, the majority of the FIJL (Catalan anarcho-syndicalist youth organisation) were actively opposed to the moves, calling for a return to non-collaboration. Those that entered the government thought that they could use the state for the benefit of the workers and the revolution, but anarcho-syndicalists generally make poor politicians and they were continually outmanoeuvred and outwitted by those that had spent a lifetime learning the 'art' of politics.

The Republican government wanted to wait a while before winning the war, since a quick victory over the fascists would ensure victory for the revolution and leave the workers in control of the country. Instead of this, the Popular Front parties wanted to re-establish their position of power and then launch an attack on the fascists, so they could once more rule Spain. The Republicans, Socialists and Communists spent all their efforts destroying the revolution by squabbling and clamouring for power, before turning to the problem of the war, which the CNT and the workers had been trying to fight right from the start. The incorporation of the CNT into the two governments was essential for the politicians because of the huge following for anarcho-syndicalism and the CNT amongst the working class.

## Workers' Militias

The CNT workers generally believed that the forces fighting the war had to be in keeping with the new society being created, and so their militias were decentralised, self-governing and democratic. There were no uniforms, no officers, no marching or saluting, no barrack-style discipline and no enforced conscription. They formed themselves into military units called centuries, which met regularly in general assemblies, and also elected a delegate. The centuries came together to make up a column, and the delegates of the assemblies made up the war committee of the column. The delegates were chosen to lead the various forces but had to fight alongside the rest of the militia. They were instantly recallable and received no special privileges, as in all anarcho-syndicalist organisations.

There was great enthusiasm for the militias and over 150,000 CNT members immediately enlisted for them. They relied on self-discipline, revolutionary enthusiasm and an understanding of what they were fighting for to keep them going. Training was brief – often by Republican Army officers who were kept under close scrutiny by workers committees. Everyone discussed all manoeuvres and battles beforehand and the militias only followed orders from the delegates when they could see the sense of them. However the militias suffered from a chronic lack of arms and ammunition and were only able to fight sporadically.

The Madrid government starved the militias of arms, whilst weapons were secretly hidden by the Republicans and arms garrisons kept under heavy guard by troops loyal to the government in areas with a weak anarcho-syndicalist influence. As the Republican government regained its strength by recreating the police and the army, they began to physically oppose the militias. In late September, Largo Caballero did a deal with the Communist Party and agreed to buy a large supply of arms from Russia, including tanks and planes, using the gold in Madrid. They used these to strengthen the People's Army (the Republican army, increasingly controlled by the Communists) and, in early October, they issued a decree that made the militias illegal and incorporated them into the People's Army. The CNT militias resisted, but the government starved them of pay, food, and supplies and many were forced to submit.

Some left the front, preferring to work in the collectives rather than submit to the degrading discipline and Communist tyranny in the Army, while others knew that the revolution couldn't be won without revolutionary fighting units but weren't prepared to die to save a capitalist regime. The militarisation decree greatly demoralised the fighters and, in turn, enthusiasm began to decline among the masses. Whilst the militias existed and were armed, they had made some early gains but, by the end of 1936, the war was going badly for the Republicans.

In Asturias, where nearly all the arms factories were, the courageous defenders fell victim to a powerful pincer movement by the fascists and were slowly being worn down. In much of Andalusia, the peasants and workers had been massacred as Franco's army moved northwards towards Madrid. In Malaga, the anarcho-syndicalists gained the upper hand but the government starved it of supplies, money and arms and it fell to the fascists. In the Basque region, the 'autonomous government' had fled, more afraid of the CNT than the fascists, and Irun fell before the year was out. Only in Catalonia, Aragon and Levant – the CNT strongholds – were the fronts holding their own. In Madrid, the CNT and UGT worked together, but were surrounded on three sides by the fascists, who were moving closer all the time.



## Rise of the Communist Party

In July 1936, with 3,000 members, the Communist Party (CP) had very little influence amongst the working class except in Seville and parts of Asturias. It was pro-Moscow and strongly Stalinist, and now became a major tool of Stalin's foreign policy. He ordered it to form an anti-fascist alliance with 'progressive sections of the middle and upper-classes'. Stalin knew that a European war was imminent and wanted to keep it away from Russia so that Russia could remain a spectator and pick up the pieces afterwards. When revolution broke out in Spain he saw a chance of keeping the war limited to Western Europe. Stalin also had long term economic interests in Spain, as did Germany and Italy, who helped Franco's troops on the opposing side. They were able to test their new planes, tanks and arms and train their troops in preparation for the big European conflict they were gearing up for, while holding out the possibility of encircling France on three sides.

After July 1936, the CP united with the PSOE (Spanish Socialists in Catalonia) to form the PSUC (Catalan Unified Socialist Party). The aggressive Stalinists found the PSOE easy to infiltrate and take over, as did the Communist Youth with the Socialist Youth Movement (which merged to form the 200,000 strong Unified Socialist Youth). Before 1936, they had tried to infiltrate the CNT, but found it impossible because of its anarcho-syndicalist structure. Instead, they set about taking over the UGT, which they found a lot easier.

The Stalinists exploited every political, military and economic opportunity that arose. A large group of specialists in political intrigue were sent by the Comintern under the guise of advisors and technicians — among them were many agents of the GPU (later the KGB). Then, as the Madrid government received tanks, planes, arms and ammunition from Russia, the Stalinists were given important positions in the government and Army in return. From here, they gradually began to take over the government and army. As they grew in power and confidence, they began to launch verbal, then increasingly physical attacks on the POUM and the CNT. The POUM was a small Marxist-Leninist Party of fewer than 10,000 members, with Trotskyist connections. However, it found itself in a situation that didn't fit in with its dearly held Marxist theory — the Catalan masses had bypassed the 'Revolutionary Party', missed the 'transitional period of state socialism' and formed an anarcho-syndicalist society instead. It now opposed the collectives and advocated 'workers control through the state' on Bolshevik lines. Despite this, the Stalinists organised its expulsion from the Catalan government, who then proceeded to wipe out the entire POUM, 'Trotskyism' and any criticism of the Soviet Union by Marxists.

The CNT were too strong to take on at first but, by the end of 1936, the PSUC claimed a membership of one million. Some 90% of these were middle or upper class, including many fascists and nationalists stranded in the revolutionary areas, for whom it provided relative safety from the 'anarchist hordes'. Landowners, entrepreneurs and Army officers joined in large numbers, as they saw it as the force most likely to defeat the anarcho-syndicalists. In December 1936, the PSUC began to organise the International Brigades, which provided the Comintern with a big propaganda boost abroad and helped it control even more fighting units. The CNT requested foreign anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists to stay in their 'own countries' and spread the struggle internationally, but the Comintern encouraged Communists to go to Spain so they could control the fighting there.

As the Stalinists gained strength and confidence, they started to attack the CNT and the revolution. Armed Communist squads attacked the collectives, workers were shot, and the press was

taken over. The Stalinists, who had very few principles or scruples to stick to, pronounced that the CNT were fascist agents deliberately sabotaging the war effort and forcing peasants to form collectives at gunpoint. While everyone knew this was preposterous, it sowed seeds of doubt and signalled that the Stalinists were getting the upper hand.

By the end of April 1937, the revolution in Catalonia was in decline in the face of the attacks of the Communists and the state. The police and army had been recreated and the courts were once again filling the prisons with anarcho-syndicalists. Torture was increasing, and militant workers began to 'disappear'. The collectives were being harassed, starved of materials and their organisations destroyed. The workers saw their gains destroyed and they began to get more and more angry. By the beginning of May, they had had enough.

## **May Days**

The usually massive May Day parade in Barcelona was cancelled in 1937 because of the tension between the CNT and the Stalinists. Instead of celebrating, CNT members were harassed, searched and disarmed by the police. The next day, the Assault Guards tried to take the Telephone Exchange in Barcelona from the CNT, on the orders of a Communist Minister. The workers who had collectivised it repelled them, but were surrounded. Within two hours, the workers had taken to the streets and erected barricades throughout Barcelona. The incident sparked off a general uprising against the government throughout Catalonia.

The CNT, FAI, FIJL and POUM now faced up to the PSUC, UGT (now taken over by the Communists) and the bourgeois Republican Parties. The government resigned, but the fighting continued. Renewed CNT district committees were organised, and the workers took control of large parts of the city. The CNT Ministers García Oliver and Federica Montseny arrived from Valencia to placate the CNT members, but they were no longer trusted by the workers and were ignored. The street fighting continued for 5 days, in a desperate bid to recreate the revolution which everyone knew in their heart of hearts had now been lost. Eventually, the Madrid government took advantage of the uprising and sent 5,000 troops to Catalonia to crush the rebellion and take firm control of the whole region, which had been autonomous since July 1936.

The CNT left the barricades on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 1937, totally demoralised. The new troops launched a bitter wave of repression against the remnants of the revolution, invading collectives and jailing and shooting anarcho-syndicalists, workers and bystanders indiscriminately. With 500 dead and over 1,000 wounded, the death toll was not enough for the Stalinists, who now unleashed a wave of terror across Catalonia. This period had all the hallmarks of the Bolsheviks' crushing of the Kronstadt Commune in Russia in March 1921 (see Units 11–12). The numbers of anarcho-syndicalists and POUMists tortured in the secret police's prisons, shot, imprisoned or 'disappeared' will never be known.

The Stalinists also took the opportunity to disarm everyone but the government forces and launch full-scale assaults against CNT buildings. The May Days signified the abrupt end of the revolution in Catalonia -the Stalinists had finally taken on the CNT and destroyed the revolutionary gains of the working class. The CNT still managed to keep control of a lot of the industry in Catalonia, but with few arms and severely demoralised, the revolution was definitely over.

After May 1937, the CNT finally parted with the government. In August, the Stalinists set up the Military Investigation Service (SIM), which was supposedly a counter-espionage network set up to catch fascists. In fact it was a spy network, controlled by the GPU (secret police), to

follow militants in the Republican zone. Even the police were scared of SIM agents, and all SIM agents were watched by other SIM agents. The secret of the Communists 'success' was terror and torture. Even concentration camps, modelled on those in Russia, were set up and packed with anarcho-syndicalists and POUMists.

## **Invasion of Aragon**

Aragon had been a de facto anarcho-syndicalist society since the beginning of the revolution, being run extremely successfully by the workers themselves through the collective movement (see Unit 18). By August 1937, the front line was roughly in the same place it had been 12 months before (55% of Aragon being controlled by the workers and peasants). The decentralised and non-hierarchical collectives had operated so well for over a year, that they had effectively put the UGT and all political parties out of business. People saw no need for them. Stalin's Communists therefore found it impossible to infiltrate or otherwise gain power from within, even when they had now gained a monopoly of state power elsewhere.

The only alternative was open military attack. So, instead of fighting the fascists, on 10<sup>th</sup> August, four Communist-controlled Army divisions marched into Aragon. The defence committees set up by the collectives were powerless against such a force, and the orgy of destruction was so severe that even some Communists dared to criticise it. Militants were shot and arrested and the collectives smashed. The land, produce and hardware were returned to their former owners, many of whom were nationalist, fascist sympathisers!

Immediately, strikes broke out against the new rulers, and since they were supplying the Aragon front with food and supplies, the Communists had to let them reorganise the collectives so that the harvest could be gathered. They were also forced to release many prisoners. Nevertheless, the presence of an invading force demoralised the workers, to such an extent that much of the subsequent harvest was not even collected from the fields.

## **Decline, fascism & genocide**

The rank-and-file of the CNT and FAI, remaining true to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism, increasingly opposed any continued attempts to collaborate with the Communists and government throughout 1938. In January 1939, following a series of strikes against the re-introduction of management into workplaces, the Republican government ordered a general mobilisation of all workers.

However, by this time, the war was as good as over. Since early 1937, Hitler's Nazis had been investing vast amounts of military hardware in Franco's fascist war, and the balance of military might was now tipped firmly in favour of the fascist forces. In April 1937, in a now infamous and bloody experiment, the Nazis tried out their new attack technique of 'blitzkrieg' on the defenceless town of Guernica in the Basque Country (Franco hated the Basques with almost as much venom as he hated the CNT). Untold hundreds of civilians died in a single massacre, which became a foretaste of what was to come elsewhere in Europe two years later.

By April 4<sup>th</sup> 1939, the fascists had conquered the whole of Spain. Many working class people now decided it was too dangerous to stay and try their luck with fascism, and probably the largest exodus in Spanish history occurred, as hundreds of thousands of workers fled the country.

Large numbers of these ended up in concentration camps in France, but small groups of Spanish anarcho- syndicalists appeared in many countries throughout the world. Some continued the fight against fascism by fighting with the various resistance groups against the Nazis, a number ending up in their concentration camps.

For those that stayed in Spain the repression was terrible – Franco had more people killed after the Civil War than died during it (over half a million according to some sources). One in ten of the workers in each factory were taken out and shot and thousands ended up in concentration camps and prisons for their political views. Franco used the ideas of the Falange – Spain’s largest fascist party – as the only way to crush the rebellious Spanish proletariat. Along with genocide, he instituted fully-fledged fascism – dictatorship, strict state economic control, an end to free speech and elections, and greatly increased police powers. All strikes and independent workers organisations were banned, women were virtually confined to the home, and the reactionary views of the Catholic Church and the Monarchy once more dominated society.

The orgy of murder and terror lasted until the end of the Second World War. With the fall of the two fascist powers that helped him to power – Germany and Italy – Franco briefly eased the repression, thinking the Allies might turn on him for aiding their enemies. However, the Second World War had been an imperialist war, not one against fascism, and these governments felt no threat from Franco. So, the terror resumed, and the prisons filled up further. For simply being a member of the CNT, the punishment was a 30-year prison sentence, and any workers who dared to strike were brutally attacked. Despite this, the CNT maintained a clandestine organisation throughout the 1945–75 period, which only ended when Franco died and the subsequent social democratic government legalised the organisation. Immediately, the CNT sprang back to life, having learned the hard lessons of collaboration with any politicians, on any level, at any time. The modern development of the CNT (along with other anarcho-syndicalist movements across the world) is continued in Block 4.

## **Conclusion**

The difficulty of reconciling theory and principles with complex practical reality is an inevitable feature of any large revolutionary movement looking to take on the status quo. That the CNT made mistakes as a result of complex external problems brought on by the war is not in doubt. Collaborating with bourgeois parties, and then participating in government, whatever the circumstances, was a mistake. What is critical, is that we (a) learn from the mistakes of the past and (b) do not allow these to overshadow the amazing demonstrations of anarcho-syndicalist society in action, which the workers and the CNT created and maintained for over a year (see Units 16 and 18).

The decline of the CNT and FAI once they began to participate in the State is ironically a testament to the ideas of anarcho- syndicalism. Those who participated in it soon lost touch with people and the ‘corruption of power’ quickly took hold of them, as it does anyone put in that position. The Spanish Revolution showed decisively that no government (not even one with ‘anarchists’ in it) can be of any use to the working class. Far from joining the state, it would have been better to have taken it on and been smashed in the process (which it was subsequently anyway), for only in this way can the revolution have any chance of long-term success.

It would be wrong to react to the CNT's experience by attempting to construct a set of 'never to be changed' tactics and strategies. In such cases, the state can change tactics at the drop of a hat, and the revolutionary movement is exposed as a result. While the state's actions are largely predictable, and we have a toolbox of methods of direct action to counter them, new ones will always appear, and we must be flexible enough to recognise these and alter our action accordingly. However, what we must have 'set in stone' is a set of uncompromising principles, which define how we can proceed without losing our aim of transformation of society (for example, through well-intended but naïve negotiation with the state).

The CNT has a long and remarkable history, and this remains both a long-standing testament to anarcho-syndicalism, and an outstanding practical example of a successful 'trial-run' of a society based on these ideas and principles.

## **Postscript: Academics and Spain**

As pointed out in Unit 15, academics and historians have often dismissed the achievements of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists both before and during the revolution and civil war. This can be attributed to an elitism that sees liberal and Marxist academics unable to come to terms with mass movements that lie outside the control of privileged elites.

In developing an alternative culture of resistance, anarcho-syndicalists reject intervention by outside experts and parliamentary intermediaries within the social struggle. Instead, there is a reliance on the mass experiences of the workers and peasants. This characteristic is called "ouvrierism" and can be identified in anarcho-syndicalist movements the world over.

Academics tend to rely on what they see as "experts" to construct their own theories. They use "official" sources, often ignoring or dismissing oral and non-academic sources of information. This produces a bias that becomes more prominent within academic circles as their arguments become further removed from the original sources of evidence. Noam Chomsky has called this a "failure of objectivity", and he questions the objectivity of such historical accounts;

*"it is characteristic of the attitude taken by liberal (and Communist) intellectuals towards revolutionary movements that are spontaneous and only loosely organised, while rooted in the deeply felt needs and ideals of the dispossessed masses. It is a convention of scholarship that the use of such terms as those of the preceding phrase demonstrates naïveté and muddle-headed sentimentality."*

Because the Spanish Revolution did not fit into the accepted pattern and by-passed the accepted means of change favoured by academics and experts it is seen as a kind of aberration and a nuisance that stood in the way of a successful prosecution of the war to save the bourgeois regime from the Franco rebellion. Since anarcho-syndicalism rejects theorising as an abstract exercise, preferring to concentrate on practical solutions to problems, without the need for one great theorist, it is often dismissed by academics as "primitive" and "naïve". This can account for much of the dismissal and distortion of both contemporary and modern accounts of the events that took place in Spain during the revolution and civil war.

## **Key points**

- From the election of the Popular Front government in February 1936 it became increasingly obvious that there would be right-wing coup staged by the army.

- It was the workers who resisted the coup, while the government hesitated.
- A crucial compromise was made with anarcho-syndicalist principles by the CNT when it entered into a power-sharing executive with the political parties.
- Factories and industries collectivised themselves and were successfully controlled and operated directly by the workers themselves.
- The CNT-FAI workers' militias were run on anarcho-syndicalist principles, decentralised, self-governing and democratic.
- The Communist Party was able to gain influence by exploiting the political situation.
- In May 1937, the Stalinists launched an attack against the CNT and the POUM that marked the end of the revolution.

## Checklist

1. How did the government react to the coup in contrast to the CNT?
2. What were the reasons for the CNT entering into power-sharing in Catalonia?
3. Why did the CNT join the Catalan government?
4. How were the workers' militias organised?
5. In what way did the Communist Party gain influence?
6. What were the "May Days"?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. How did the government react to the coup?*

The Popular Front government hesitated and was unsure what to do. The CNT declared a general strike and arms were seized to overcome the fascists.

### *2. What were the reasons for the CNT entering into power-sharing in Catalonia?*

It was argued that the anti-fascist forces would be split if a full scale revolution was implemented and, with large areas of Spain controlled by the fascists, the revolution had little chance of succeeding at this point. Poor military strength was also a factor.

### *3. Why did the CNT join the Catalan government?*

The CNT joined the government to get arms, raw materials and money. These were not forthcoming. Many of the rank and file membership were unaware of this move and vigorously opposed it when they found out.

### *4. How were the workers' militias organised?*

The workers' militias were made up solely from volunteers and were decentralised, self-governing and democratic. There were no uniforms, no officers, no marching and saluting or barrack-style discipline. General assemblies chose delegates to lead them who were instantly recallable.

5. *In what way did the Communist Party gain influence?*

The CP merged with the Socialist Party and began to gain political influence. In return for arms from the Soviet Union communists were given important positions within the government and army.

6. *What were the “May Days”?*

Once the communists felt powerful enough, they began to attack the anarcho-syndicalists and other dissent revolutionaries. In May 1937, the Assault Guards, under orders from the communists, attempted to take the telephone exchange in Barcelona from the CNT. A general uprising ensued against the government throughout Catalonia. Some 5,000 troops were sent to crush it, and Catalonia came under the direct control of the central government in Madrid.

## Suggested discussion points

- Should the CNT have collaborated with the government and what was the alternative?
- Can the fight against fascism be separated from the fight for a social revolution?

## Further Reading

**The Tragedy of Spain. Rudolf Rocker. ASP, pamphlet. £1.20. -BS- -SE-** Now sadly out of print, a well-proportioned account of the events of 1936–39, with particularly telling sections on the collectives and social movements and the antics of the Communist Party.

**Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution. José Peirats. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384530. £6. -AK- -BS-** At nearly 400 pages, this classic is a highly detailed and value for money history of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement from 1868 to 1939, written by a participant CNT member.

**The Anarchist Collectives: Workers’ Self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–39. Sam Dolgoff (ed.). Black Rose Books. ISBN 0919 618200. £9.99 -AK-** Probably the best single text on the Spanish revolution (provided you ignore the Bookchin introduction). Contains an excellent section by Gaston Leval, a contemporary, on how the revolution was hampered by the beurocratisation of the CNT.

**Spain 1936–39: Social Revolution – Counter Revolution. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384549. £5. -AK- -BS-** Selection of original documents from the period, covering the collectives, reports on meetings and demonstrations, and the events surrounding the CNT.

**The May Days, Barcelona 1937. Freedom Press, ISBN 0900 384395. £2.50. -AK- -BS-** Another Freedom Press selection, this time on the May Days uprising. Contributions from Souchy, Peirats and other CNT veterans.

**Blood of Spain: The Experience of Civil War 1936–1939. Ronald Fraser. Allen Lane, 1979 (reprinted Pelican Books, 1988). ISBN 0140 228292. £7.99. -BS- -LI-** Oral histories by participants (including anarchists, Marxists, fascists, nationalists, Catholics etc.). Popular and illuminating.

**Anarchist Organisation: The History of the FAI. Juan Gomez Casas. Black Rose, ISBN 0920 057381. £10.99. -AK- -LI-** The first English language history of the FAI, including its role (both detrimental and positive) in the Spanish Revolution and the CNT.

**No Gods No Masters, Vol. II. Daniel Guerin. AK Press. ISBN 1873 176694. £11.95 -AK-** Anarchist reader of original/contemporary works, contains 1936 articles and communiques of the Spanish CNT.

**American Power and the New Mandarins. Noam Chomsky. Penguin, ISBN 1 4021126 8. — AK- -LI — -BS-** A collection of essays, the first of which, “Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship” deals with how academics and historians have interpreted the Spanish Revolution and the anarchist part in it.

**1936, The Spanish Revolution. The Ex. AK Press. ISBN 1873 176015. £16.95. -AK-** More of a piece of art than a historical source, this double CD single boxed set of revolutionary songs contains a photo-book of the Revolution. Well-produced, vivid pictorial record.

Notes: Unusually for periods of revolutionary working class history, there are a number of relatively accessible books on Spain in the 1930s. This is a sample of some of the better ones. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13–18. The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).



# Unit 18: Spain – The Collectives

Some of the many social and cultural aspects of the run up to the Spanish Revolution are described in Unit 16, and the main events of the period are presented in Unit 17. Here, we turn our attention to the collectives, which lay at the heart of the socio-economic system established wherever anarcho-syndicalism was put into practice.

The collectives built by the CNT and the Spanish people remain, to this day, a most striking example of the possibilities of collective organisation and economy. Both the scale and pace of collective development (despite the rigours of fascist attack) and the confidence and zeal with which it was embraced are remarkable. While the achievements of this period were short-lived, one purpose of this Unit is to indicate how lessons learned from the Spanish collectives are still relevant today. Indeed, over 60 years on, collective organisation based on workers self-management of society on the Spanish model still offers a modern and real alternative to both capitalism and the Marxist state run economy.

## This Unit aims to

- Give an overview of how the collectives in the Spanish
- Revolution were organised.
- Consider the problems faced by the collectives.
- Describe how the collectives functioned internally.
- Examine the mechanisms for the production and distribution of goods.
- Indicate how lessons learned from the Spanish collectives are still relevant today.

## Terms and abbreviations

**CNT:** Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour). Anarcho-syndicalist union.

**LEC:** Local Economic Council

**UGT:** Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union). Reformist trade union controlled by the socialists.

## Introduction

The collectives remain, to this day, a most striking example of the possibilities of collective organisation and economy. Both the scale and pace of collective development (despite the rigours

of fascist attack) and the confidence and zeal with which it was embraced, are remarkable. While the achievements of this period were short-lived, over 60 years on, collective organisation based on workers self-management of society on the Spanish model still offers a modern and real alternative to both capitalism and the Marxist state run economy.

The collectives were built by the anarcho-syndicalist CNT (see Units 15 and 17) and the Spanish across many areas of the country, during the Revolution and Civil War of 1936–39. They are often described as the ‘economic’ or ‘work-based’ form of anarchist organisation, although in fact, they had a large ‘social’ content too. Nevertheless, the collectives were the means by which the CNT organised production (and to some extent, consumption) of goods and services.

It is useful to start by putting the anarcho-syndicalist socio-economic system of collectives in context, by outlining the alternatives on offer to humanity. Firstly, we have capitalism, the so-called ‘Free Market’ system. Under this, individuals or groups of individuals own the means of production. The theory is that efficiency is ensured through competition, while motivation is provided through the pursuit of profit. Though production is owned and run in the interest of the few (rich), those who support the free market would claim that democratic control of the economy is ensured through the market mechanism. In other words, by choosing to buy product “A” as opposed to product “B”, the individual is casting his or her vote in choosing what society should produce. In theory then, it is not capitalist production power, but consumer choice, which dictates production through purchasing power. In practice, the theory is well known to be nonsense. One anarchist, proposed an alternative theory of how capitalism really functions;

*“..the aim of modern capitalism (is) an international political economy which is organised by powerful states and secret bureaucracies...(their)... primary function is to serve the concentrations of private power, which administer markets through their own internal operations and networks of corporate alliances, including the inter-firm transactions that are mislabelled ‘trade’. They rely on the public subsidy, for research and development, for innovation and for bail-outs when things go wrong. They rely on the powerful state for protection from dangerous ‘democracy opening’. In such ways, they seek to ensure that the prime beneficiaries of the world’s wealth are the right people: the smug and the prosperous.”*

The alternative to capitalism advocated by much of the revolutionary movement since the 1920s has been the state run economy. Under this system, the economy comes under state control. Decisions are made by political leaders, usually the communist party, acting on behalf of the rest of society, in whose interest they supposedly rule. Having decided what needs producing, a 5-year plan is drawn up which lays down production targets for every sector of industry. The ‘plan’ is then passed to state agents who carry it out and run the economy in the process. The most obvious drawback is that, in reality, the vast majority have very little say in how society functions (much like the capitalist free market). However, since under the state-run system, production, technology and ideas are even more controlled than under capitalism, people retreat into passive acceptance, under an oppressive, stagnant economic system devoid of initiative and motivation.

The only other form of society yet envisaged by humanity is a socio-economic system under which the means of production is owned and controlled by the whole of society for the benefit of the whole of society. Rather than attempt to demonstrate how this society would function in theory, let us now turn to the Spanish collectives, to examine how such a society began to function in practice.

## Spain in 1936

The events in Spain were not of anarcho-syndicalists' making (see Unit 17). Far from planning and initiating events, they simply responded to the actions of fascists. The General Strike called by the CNT on the eve of the fascist uprising on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1936 was aimed at defeating fascism, not overthrowing capitalism. The CNT was not prepared or strong enough to start a revolution, and they knew it. However, with the government in disarray and in the face of a fascist coup, people quickly organised to meet the fascist threat. The anarcho-syndicalists formed armed militias, which stood up to the fascist forces, ensuring the failure of the coup in many areas of Spain. With the state having temporarily 'melted away', it was left to the anarcho-syndicalists to organise society in many areas, while also co-ordinating military support for those pockets still struggling with the fascists.

Anarcho-syndicalists had never before been presented with the task of organising society on anything like the scale required in Spain. Nevertheless, they were well prepared. As an activist who took part in these events noted later;

*"For many years, the anarcho-syndicalists of Spain considered their supreme task to be the social transformation of society. In their assemblies of syndicates and groups, in their journals, their brochures and books, the problem of the social revolution was discussed incessantly and in a systematic fashion."*

Building the new society within the shell of the old, which was now a core principle of anarcho-syndicalism, was to serve the CNT well in 1936. Democratic ideas and methods had been developed over a long period within the CNT, and these were now swiftly applied to the Spanish economy and the wider society. Thus, the transition from capitalism to workers' control was achieved quickly and orderly. Before examining in detail the way in which the CNT ran the economy so successfully, it is worth noting the problems they faced in accomplishing this remarkable achievement.

Firstly, they did not inherit a self-contained national economy, since they only controlled a number of regions. Many areas of the economy, both production (e.g. raw materials) and consumption (e.g. trade and supply) were in fascist hands.

Secondly, even in the non-fascist zone, the country had not been functioning properly for some years and was therefore in need of massive overhaul and investment.

Thirdly, the republican government did still maintain control in some areas, and the CNT could not depend on them for mutual support. The republican movement vehemently opposed the CNT's bringing of the economy under workers' control and did all it could to sabotage the collectivist movement. For example, Barcelona and the Catalonia region, which came largely under anarcho-syndicalist control, had been using 56,000 tonnes of coal per day prior to the Revolution. Apart from 300 tonnes mined locally, this was imported from other areas of Spain. However, the main coal producing region of Spain, Asturias, came under republican control. Rather than export coal to Catalonia, the republican government stockpiled it. As a result, Catalonia was faced with a severe fuel shortage throughout the Revolution.

Fourthly, at the same time as facing all these problems, the CNT had to fight off the threat of the fascists' invasion, and attempt to liberate the areas the fascists controlled, in a war that was one-sided from the start (see Unit 17). In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the CNT militias, having defeated fascism in their own areas, marched to Aragon to liberate it from fascism. Lacking modern weaponry, the assault became bogged down, leading to a front line being

established across Aragon, where anarcho-syndicalists and fascists confronted each other. Fearing an anarcho-syndicalist victory, the Republican government cut off supplies to the militias. This meant that the areas under self-management now had to carry the burden of supplying the militias with clothes, food and even arms. Conventional economists estimate that, for this type of warfare, for every 30,000 soldiers, an economy of some 200,000 people is needed to keep it supplied. Such were the problems faced by the self-managed economy from the moment it came into being, it is surprising that the collective movement ever got off the ground, and a testament to its appeal that it spread so quickly.

## **Collective mechanisms**

Turning to the collectives themselves, we should start by ridding ourselves of a common myth – namely, that the collectives were largely agrarian, and would be unable to function in a modern industrial economy. Certainly, Spain's industrialisation lagged behind the advanced capitalist countries of Europe and North America, but it was well underway. Some 2 million workers out of a population of 24 million were employed in industry. Also, 75% of Spanish industry was located within the region of Catalonia, where the anarcho-syndicalist movement was strongest. Thus, widespread workers' control of industry did take place within the Spanish Revolution, as the collective movement rapidly spread through Spain's industrial heartland.

Within Catalonia alone, textiles, construction and engineering industries, bakeries, public utilities, trains, buses and taxis, health services, theatres, cinemas, beauty parlours, hotels, restaurants, and many other workplaces were all collectivised under workers' control. The collectivisation movement was especially strongly centred on Barcelona, which was even then an industrial city of 1.5 million people. All of the collectives functioned in a basically similar fashion. Each workplace held a full meeting of all workers (workplace assembly) and elected a committee to co-ordinate production within the immediate workplace. Thereafter, workplace assemblies were held regularly. The committee in each workplace was recallable and answerable to all workers through the assemblies. In other words, the workplace assembly could replace or remove the committee or its members at any time. The committee was there to carry out the decisions made at the assembly, and was controlled directly by it.

In each local area, all the collectivised workplaces in the same industry met together to form a local workplace federation, which co-ordinated local production. This meant, instead of competing and duplicating production as in capitalist times, far greater efficiency was achieved by this local federal system of co-ordinated production. In addition, all the workplace federations in a local area organised themselves into a Local Economic Council (LEC). Since all production and service facilities were represented here, co-ordination of all work in the locality was made possible. In turn, the local workplace federations and LECs were organised regionally and nationally into National Confederations of Industry and a National Economic Confederation.

This integrated collective system was not the result of a master plan imposed from outside. It came about by the workers themselves using the ideas and methods of anarcho-syndicalism and applying them in practice. For instance, immediately after the defeat of fascism, the most urgent task was to feed the population. This was no small task in a city the size of Barcelona. Even while fighting was still going on in the streets, the CNT began to organise food distribution. Food committees were established in neighbourhoods throughout the city. These collected and stored

provisions in large warehouses, which acted as distribution points. Markets were re-opened under workers' control. Mobile committees went into the surrounding countryside to collect freely donated food to supply the markets. No compulsion was used in this task, and since many farmers in Catalonia were members of the CNT or at least sympathised with its aims, solidarity between town and country was easily established.

The food committees worked with the CNT workplace organisations of the food, catering and hotel industries to establish communal feeding halls in local neighbourhoods. Within a couple of weeks of the Revolution, these food halls were feeding upwards of 120,000 people per day. The system soon began to evolve into an established, democratically controlled food distribution system. Large wholesale food distributors came under collective control, and workers in 30 food-related industries formed themselves into the Food Industrial Union to co-ordinate food production.

Before the Revolution, most of Barcelona's bread was baked at night in hundreds of small bakeries, the majority of which were damp, gloomy cellars infested with roaches and rodents. The Food Industrial Union immediately set about systematically building new bakeries, with modern ovens and equipment. As a result, better working conditions, higher productivity and lower prices were quickly achieved through collective modernising effort. As the new self-regulating democratic system of food supply evolved, a barter system emerged between the countryside and city, as surplus goods and services were traded. The food that came into the city this way was distributed by food co-operatives and the Food Workers Union. What had been a real threat of city starvation was rapidly overcome. The efficiencies of the new collective and barter systems were such that the availability of many foodstuffs actually increased, despite the war conditions.

Once it started, collectivisation spread rapidly. For example, the Barcelona transport system, critical to the life and productivity of the city, was quick to reap the benefits of workers' control.

The most important method of transport in Barcelona was the tram system, which had over 60 routes criss-crossing the city. It was privately owned, employing 7,000 workers, 6,500 of whom were members of the CNT. After the fascists were evicted from Barcelona, the CNT transport section requested members of the Militia to accompany them to the offices of the Barcelona Transport Company. There, they found the management had already fled, taking all available funds with them.

An appeal was immediately put out over the radio for tram workers to return to work. A mass meeting was then held, at which it was decided to run the tram system under workers' control. Delegates were elected to a general committee to co-ordinate the tram system. Each section within the workplace organised its own workplace committee and took decisions that affected them directly. Regular assemblies were organised at which the activities of the general committee were monitored and overall strategy, improvements, and so on were discussed.

Within days, the tram system was functioning again. Damage caused by street fighting was already repaired, and the trams had been re-sprayed in the red and black livery of anarcho-syndicalism. Far from the chaos that your average boss would predict, the service ran smoothly, and plans were soon being laid to improve the infrastructure of the tram system. Safety was number one priority, as old and dangerous trailer cars were replaced with power cars, and poor sections of tracks were re-laid. Sharp bends were straightened and sections of single track were upgraded to double track to end diversions and delays.

The repair shops, which before the Revolution had been restricted to general maintenance and emergency repairs, were transformed. New lathes, furnaces, milling machines and electrical

wiring machines were installed. These improved productivity, and allowed the repair shops to complete repairs and maintenance faster. They then began to also replace the old power supply system and even build new tram units designed by the workers themselves, which were lighter, safer, and able to carry more passengers. New machines also meant less manual workshop space was needed, and sections were converted to arms production. Before long, the workers at the repair shops were building howitzers and rockets too.

Fares for tram journeys were also revolutionised. A low, flat- rate fare was introduced which was the same for all journeys. Many, including the old and young, were allowed to travel free. The number of passengers increased, as efficiency rose dramatically. Also, despite fares being lowered, finances did not suffer, since there were now no fat cat salaries and shareholders, and more journeys meant more fares being collected.

Working conditions for the tram workers improved, wages were equalised, and the working week was reduced to 35 hours. The retirement age was reduced to 60 on full pay. Alongside these improvements and shorter week, the efficiencies continued to accumulate as workers regularly reviewed their working practice to make it better. As time went on, an increasingly large proportion of production was geared to the war effort through arms manufacture. On top of all this, the tram system was still able to run at a surplus. The extra money was used to subsidise the bus system and other less prosperous collectives within Barcelona.

In a similar way to the trams, the privately owned regional railways were also quickly collectivised. There was an urgent need to transport fighters and military equipment to Aragon to halt the fascist advance. For this, the railways in Catalonia had to start running again. Even while fighting was still going on around Catalonia, the railway workers took control of the railways. By July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1936 the first train load of militia left for Aragon. The railway collectives were based on a complex system of interlocking accountable committees elected from mass assemblies. A number of committees answerable directly to the workers were established to examine ways of improving efficiency. Despite the constant lack of fuel, the number of trains running daily was maintained at the same level as prior to the Revolution.

A survey of the railways was quickly undertaken, and plans were drawn up to eradicate waste and duplication. As these plans were brought into action, an integrated train system was developed in Catalonia for the first time. Like on the trams, the train workshops were modernised and partially converted to production for the war effort. Within a week of the fascist uprising, the first ambulance was produced by the railway workshops. The design and efficiency of the vehicles quickly won praise from medical staff.

## **Arming to Fight Fascism**

The defeat of fascism was the overriding concern of the collective movement. Thousands of young men and women volunteered for the militias, with some 20,000 workers alone volunteering from the Barcelona textiles industry. There was no shortage of fighters volunteering to risk their lives against fascism. Indeed, many workers across the western world were prepared to go and fight. However, the CNT issued an international appeal for workers to stay in their country and organise support where they were, instead of travelling to Spain. Nor was the problem in supplying the militias with food, clothing or medical supplies. Both the agricultural and urban collectives donated freely to the militias. The overriding problem was the shortage of modern

arms and equipment. The main culprit in this was, as already stated, the Republican government, which feared workers winning their battle on the Aragon front even more than it feared fascism.

Faced with a chronic shortage of arms, the collectives began building a munitions industry within Catalonia from scratch. This was no easy task, given the lack of engineering industry within the region. Yet, as we have already seen with the tram and train workers, they did not have to be told to begin arms production. As what little engineering there was became collectivised, it was converted to the job in hand. The largest engineering factory, the Hispano-Suzia Automobile Company, was collectivised and producing armed cars within days.

Nevertheless, converting factories was not enough, and there was little choice but to build new munitions factories. Within a year, a collective-run munitions industry of 80,000 workers was established within Catalonia. The workers themselves designed and built the machinery needed to produce arms. Over 200 heavy-duty hydraulic presses, 178 revolving lathes, and hundreds of milling and boring machines were built in order to produce the hardware needed to keep the front supplied.

## Health

It remains a great shame that the fascist threat hung over the entire period of the collective movement. What could have been achieved if only the fascists had not been there, or had not been so strongly backed by international capitalism and fascism? Nevertheless, despite the war effort to defend Spanish people from fascism understandably taking priority, the CNT was still able to put into practice some of the basic principles it had long been arguing for. One of the most important achievements was the collectivised health system established within the anarcho-syndicalist areas.

The general health of the Spanish working class in 1936 was appalling. Infant mortality rates were the highest in Europe, and diseases such as tuberculosis were endemic. The CNT had a record of fighting for improvements in health provision, as well as in general living and working conditions. The CNT also targeted sexual health and education, both as part of a wider campaign for women's equality, and specifically against sexually transmitted diseases, which were also endemic across Spain.

In Catalonia, living and working conditions were horrific, as in industrial centres everywhere experiencing the first stages of capitalist development. Immediately after the Revolution, the CNT health union in Catalonia began to create a health system, 'create' being the operative word. It was not a case of taking over existing hospitals and clinics. For a large percentage of the population, these did not exist. In embarking on this mammoth task, the CNT first split Catalonia into nine sections, which were then divided into 26 secondary centres, according to population and health requirements. A central administrative committee was established to coordinate health services provision across Catalonia. As with the entire health industry, this was under workers' control, federalised and run from the bottom up. In other words, the delegates to all committees were put there by workers in mass meetings, and were fully accountable and recallable, as with all collectives.

The massive efforts that were put into developing health care started to pay off immediately. Indeed, the achievement of the collectivised health service remains truly a triumph of the Revolution. Within a year, every single isolated village was covered by free access to health care. Large

stately homes were taken over and new hospitals began to be constructed, all within weeks of the Revolution. By the year-end, Barcelona boasted 18 hospitals, 17 sanatoriums, 22 day-clinics, 6 psychiatric hospitals, and several specialised hospitals, including a large tuberculosis facility. Dental work was free, as were optical care and glasses. After a worker-controlled review of the pharmaceutical industry, it was totally reorganised, from research laboratories to pharmacies, with new dispensaries being set up throughout Catalonia. It is worth noting that doctors, especially young doctors, who had been closely aligned with the Church and had opposed both collectivisation and public provision, were quickly won over when it became increasingly obvious just what could be achieved under workers' self-management.

## **The Wider Economy**

The urban collectives were not just restricted to the transport, health and food supply sectors. Every conceivable type of workplace was collectivised, and many sectors virtually entirely so. The textile industry, which employed a quarter of a million workers, was completely collectivised. And the process was not only widespread in Catalonia. Although this was undisputedly the anarcho-syndicalist stronghold, many industries outside Catalonia were also collectivised. Nor did it just take place in large-scale workplaces; small firms and small-scale service industries and shops were included. To cite just one case, a mass meeting of all the owners and workers employed in Barcelona's hairdressers led to all the shops being merged into one sector controlled by the workers, as the employers agreed to hand over possession. The industry was totally reorganised under collective control, and many small or run down shops were closed. Large salons were established across the city, providing a far more effective and better-equipped service.

However, space does not allow us to examine the urban collectives in every type of workplace. What is important, is to look at how the wider collectivised economy was run beyond the individual industries. As mentioned above, industries in each locality came together to form a Local Economic Council (LEC). This was controlled by the local workers, and had the necessary job of co-ordinating production and supply of goods and services. This involved assessing both production levels and immediate overall needs (consumer demand). In August 1937, what had by then become regional economic councils were federated into a National Economic Council, at an economic congress of workers' organisations held in Valencia. The aim of this body was to co-ordinate the entire system of industrial and agricultural collectives nationally.

As with all anarcho-syndicalist organisations, the economic councils were democratically controlled, being run on the now-familiar system of recallable delegates. The LECs made decisions affecting the general economy in their area. For example, in Barcelona, it was decided to introduce measures to deal with pressing unemployment inherited from capitalism. The Barcelona Economic Council consulted with the surrounding agricultural collectives and drew up a plan to modernise agriculture outside the city. This would employ more people more productively and raise food production. The collectives agreed the plan, and the money was released to set it in motion.

In another example, the munitions industrial union federation of Catalonia approached the Catalonia Economic Council to explain that they were experiencing an aluminium shortage, due to Spain's aluminium production falling into fascist hands. A commission was quickly established



involving technicians, chemists and engineers, and a new plant was designed. These were put before a conference and it was decided to proceed with the building of the factory.

In a rather different industry, the National Economic Council was approached for assistance. Spain's shoe production industry, which was already under collective control, was suffering from rising leather prices due to the economic blockade. Under the threat of a shoe shortage, an investigation of the options was undertaken, which led to a plan to invest in raw materials and modernise the collectives' production facilities. Again, it was passed, the plan implemented, and shoe production increased.

Finance for investments considered by the Economic Councils came from the collectives themselves. Surpluses from collectives were pooled into the non-profit making Central Labour Bank in Barcelona. Through the work of the Economic Councils, the Bank was able to direct resources to where they could be best utilised, and redistribute funds from rich collectives to poor ones. It also arranged foreign exchange for the import of goods and raw materials.

In many urban areas, money was still used as the main method of exchange on a daily basis, particularly between the non- collectivised economy and the collectivised one. The anarcho-syndicalists accepted this partial form of collective economy as inevitable given the situation. To make collectivisation fully integrated, where all aspects of the economy were included, would have meant direct conflict with the Republican government and breaking up the anti-fascist alliance. Thus, the urban collectives, though non-capitalist internally, were forced to operate in a wider capitalist economy. Despite these drawbacks, they stand as a remarkable example of a socio-economic system run directly by the workers themselves. In a short and stressful period not of their making, people proved they were able to meet society's needs through self-organisation, and make large steps towards equality in the process. They remain proof, if proof were needed, that modern industrial production can be run extremely successfully and efficiently, entirely free of capitalism and the profit motive.

## **The Agricultural Collectives**

Turning our attention to the agricultural collectives established during the Spanish Revolution brings us to another major anarcho- syndicalist success story. With a massive following in the countryside which easily matched that of the urban areas, the amount of land brought under collective control was huge. Around 1,700 agricultural collectives were established during the Revolution, involving some 3,200,000 workers. The scale and intensity of the agricultural collective movement was huge by any measure. So much so, that they were able to go much further towards a completely collective economy, and a socio-economic system based on the principles of libertarian communism.

In many ways, the agricultural collectives represented a new phenomenon in human relations. This was a huge (and hugely successful) socio-economic experiment, and it pioneered a new way of living based on mutual aid and solidarity. Indeed, the fact that this movement appeared in rural Spain at all puts paid to the myth that apparently 'backward' rural farmers are incapable of understanding highly progressive ideas. Incidentally, this fact also finally destroys Marx's theory that the peasantry by nature is reactionary, and exposes it as pure bias on his part.

As in the cities, the peasantry moved quickly to collectivise. Land vacated by landlords fleeing after the failure of the fascist coup was quickly collectivised and pressed into the service

of the workers. Again, much as in the cities, the method of collectivisation was governed by deep-rooted anarcho-syndicalist culture, which had evolved over several decades. Firstly, land was collectivised on a purely voluntary basis. Secondly, those who wished to join agreed that all but three personal possessions would be pooled into collective ownership. Thirdly, special provision was made for those who didn't want to join — and not everyone did. The Marxists had long-agonised over what to do about peasants who did not wish to collectivise, and they ended up forcing them to do so, and thus brought tyranny and famine. But the anarcho-syndicalists solution was simplicity itself. Those who wished to stay out of the collectives were allocated land and allowed to farm it, so long as they did not employ labour. Furthermore, every effort was made to support them. They were even given access to the collective's resources such as agricultural machinery and fertiliser, and were generally allowed the same democratic rights as the collective members. This strategy avoided friction, and many individuals subsequently joined the collectives when they saw for themselves what the advantages were.

The agricultural collectives themselves were run in a similar manner to the urban ones. Regular mass assemblies were held (usually weekly), normally centred on the village or town. All members of the collective were welcome, and all had equal speaking and voting rights. The level of debate was usually high, with many contributing, in an open and encouraging atmosphere. Indeed, non-collectivists living in the area were usually welcome too, and often voted. From this assembly, an administrative committee or commission was elected to co-ordinate the activities of the collective. This was subject to the usual anarcho-syndicalist principles of workers' control, recallability and accountability. In larger towns, these committees were broken down into industrial sectors, e.g. food, education, health, transport, etc.

Typically, land was divided according to cultivation type. Workers were then recruited to each sector, and these elected delegates. The delegates would work alongside their fellow members by day, and meet at the end of each day to co-ordinate production in their own time. As in the urban collectives, economies of scale and eradication of profits and absentee landowners led to increased production and greater yield. Surpluses were ploughed back into newer agricultural machinery, to continue the rising productivity cycle. Keen to make use of scientific knowledge, many collectives set aside areas to experiment with new and improved crop trials, and consulted experts on all areas of agro-research. Agricultural schools were set up in all regions in order to further foster the culture of modernisation and development.

Here, we begin to see what it was that lay at the heart of collective life. Though the mass assemblies formed the basis of the democratic structure, it was the social interaction and cultural spirit of freedom and experimentation that made the collectives so attractive. Workers had time, interest and the knowledge that they would all benefit from dealing with practical realities facing them. The result was an endless process of improvement and refinement. Work became creative and enjoyable, and social life became more complex and interesting. The striving for constant improvement is a feature of the collectives, and is evidence that innovation and motivation are not intrinsically linked to the capitalist profit motive. In fact, getting rid of this actually led to an explosion of these precious attributes in the collective movement.

In the orange growing region of Seville, peasants began to grow potatoes and cereal crops amongst the fruit trees, reducing dependency on the single orange crop. From the initiatives of the collectives, a whole new large-scale manufacturing industry was created based on agricultural by-products. They also built and operated fruit and vegetable canneries and other processing plants, including large-scale facilities in five towns across the region.

Most agricultural collectives abandoned money completely within the organisation. Some established warehouses, where members took what they needed, with records of what was taken kept as a guide for planning production. Some agreed a set amount of goods for each family. Many established their own coupon system based on the family wage, with the amount varying according to family size. All introduced rationing of goods if they became scarce, when those in most need (children, elderly, pregnant women, etc.) were given priority treatment.

Facilities in towns and villages were upgraded, with investments made in local collective industries such as bakeries, construction and carpentry, ironwork, etc. As in the urban collectives, health care and education was introduced and made free. Great importance was attached to culture and knowledge as a liberating force and an instrument of struggle in anarcho-syndicalism (see Unit 15). Every collective introduced schools and nurseries for children (most also provided free education for children outside the collective system), and many went well beyond this basic provision. The Amposta collective organised classes for semi-literate adults, kindergartens and a school of art and professions. Graus organised a print library, a school of fine arts and a museum. In Levant, Castille, Andalusia and Extremadura, where illiteracy had stood at 70% prior to the Revolution, programmes ensured that it was soon eliminated. A University was established in Valencia available to all members of the National Federation of Peasants.

## **The Levant Federation**

As in the urban areas, individual agricultural collectives came together to form regional organisations to co-ordinate regional scale production. Let us now turn to how these regional federations worked in practice, using the Peasant Federation of Levant as an example.

The Levant Regional Federation covered an area containing 78% of Spain's most fertile land. The total population was 3.3 million, of which 45% were organised into some 900 collectives. The Levant collectives had to struggle constantly against the Republican Government in Valencia, which used police and assault guards and eventually tanks and soldiers to prevent the land from being collectivised, protecting all the landlords who expressed sympathy for the Republicans. This repression checked the spread of collectives, which were more extensive in areas such as Aragon, where anarcho-syndicalist militias protected them.

A regional committee administered the Levant collectives, which was subject to recall. This was in turn broken down into broad administrative sectors; food industries, which included crops, wine, etc.; non-agricultural industries, including manufacturing, clothing, packaging, etc.; commerce, which included imports, exports and transport facilities; and public health and education, which included medical care, schools, cultural initiatives, etc. Thus, production was co-ordinated throughout the region. For example, if a local collective wanted to build a fruit juice factory, it would approach the appropriate industrial sector of the federal committee. Fruit juice production would be reviewed to assess supply and demand, estimates of raw materials available would be made, and trends in consumption would be calculated. If it appeared viable, a plan would be drawn up in conjunction with the collective, and the factory built. If the plan was rejected, reasons would be given, and grievances could be pursued through the democratic structures of the Regional Federation.

The Levant Federation was subdivided into 54 local and district federations, all run on the recallable delegate system. Each local centre organised panels of technicians, accountants and

bookkeepers, as well as an agriculturist, a veterinarian, a specialist on plant disease, an architect and an engineer. These specialists drew up plans with workers both locally and for the region as a whole. An irrigation plan was drawn up and put into practice, and a large number of irrigation canals were excavated and wells sunk. In Villajoyosa, a single large dam was constructed, which enabled a million almond trees to be cultivated. Housing, sanitation and roads were maintained and modernised, and several schools of agriculture were established, including a centre for the study of plant diseases and tree culture. It is worth noting here that, while they embraced new ideas and expert advice, the anarcho-syndicalists were very sensitive to the dangers of bureaucratic organisation emerging. Tight controls were kept over the specialised inputs, and experts always worked with delegates from the workplace. Regular meetings were held in order that workers could have direct input into plans being drawn up.

The Levant Federation produced over 50% of Spain's total orange crop, some 4 million kilos, and 50% of Spain's total rice production. Most of the surplus produce was exchanged or sold through its own distribution service or that organised by the CNT. Information from each district was passed to a regional information centre, ensuring a detailed record was kept of the Levant collective economy, through which future planning could be conducted. The Federation was also a major supplier of food to the militia on the Aragon front, as well as to anti-fascist fighters in Madrid. On top of this, many local collectives donated food directly. The Levant Collectives also took in an increasing number of refugees fleeing from fascism, all of whom were welcomed, supplied and treated equally.

## **Life in Aragon**

The region of Aragon contained the longest standing and most vigorously fought front line in the civil war, where the anarcho-syndicalists were lined up face to face against the fascists (see Unit 17). However, Aragon was also home to the most highly collectivised communities of the Revolution, through the Aragon Federation of Collectives. With a population of 500,000 and a strong anarcho-syndicalist tradition, some 433,000 of these people organised themselves into 500 collectives.

Following the same organisational pattern as Levant, all the agricultural collectives were voluntarily started at local village level, and within months (by February 1937) these had organised themselves into district federations and then into the regional federation to better co-ordinate production and distribution. District committees gathered economic statistics for their area to assist the regional federation in its task. Money was abolished and replaced with a standard coupon based on the family wage. Equipment and materials for production were pooled and freely available within and between collectives as needed.

In the spirit of experimentation and mutual aid, many initiatives were taken to increase and improve output. The collectives integrated their work, for example by co-ordinating and pooling labour during harvesting. Experimental farms and technical schools were set up, and a technical team toured the region to assist in improving working and living conditions and production.

Amidst the drive to revolutionise and improve work and its products, there was also considerable attention paid to culture, social development and public services. A section was dedicated to free public education, and the regional federation promoted various plans to advance education and culture. Each collective established adult education and seminar discussion groups, along

with night schools. They also planned excursions and days out on a village (collective) level, while district and regional facilities, such as cinemas and theatres, were funded by the individual collectives through district or regional bodies.

The village of Calanda had a population of 4,500, of which 3,500 were in the CNT. As elsewhere, money was abolished, and basics such as food, housing, building repairs, water, gas, electricity, medicines, medical care and schooling were all freely available. Other more 'luxury' items were also free but more likely to be rationed when in short supply. Clothing was in plentiful supply, due to exchange agreements with textile mills in Barcelona. The cinema was collectivised, as were all the shops.

Teams worked the surrounding land, each choosing a (recallable) delegate to a general committee to co-ordinate collective production. A village committee was elected to administrate village life. The few who did not wish to belong to the collective had their own land and freely exchanged their goods with the collective.

In northern Aragon, Graus had no strong anarcho-sindicalist tradition. Despite this, collectivisation took hold. With a population of 2,600, Graus was a small town centred on an important transport junction, making it a trading centre in what had been an isolated region prior to the Revolution. The small CNT membership on the anti-fascist committee argued immediately for social reforms. Duly, a social wage was introduced and money was replaced with a coupon system. Commercial markets were replaced with co-operative communal markets. Some 23 textile and haberdashery shops came together to form a single market, as did 30 retail food shops and 4 bakeries. Much of the land was collectivised, and transportation came under joint control of the workers' unions (CNT and UGT). Production rocketed by 50% in some sectors, while the retirement age was lowered to 60. Innovations ensured local collective supplies, for example, a new process allowed oil residues to be turned into soap. Housing and health were free, and a school of fine art was established for singing, sculpture, painting and pottery, etc. Land in a former large private estate was turned into a recreation area.

In Binefor (population 5,000), 700 out of the 800 local families joined the collectives, which covered both agriculture and industry. As one member noted at the time, the administrative committees of the village were all linked "like the gears of a machine". Bread, oil, flour, potatoes, meat, vegetables and wine were distributed freely normally and rationed when necessary. Electricity and telephones were installed as part of a regional plan. Commodities not distributed free were paid for in a local currency. Wages were equalised and health, housing and education were became free.

In Muniesa (population 1,700), the commune was organised at a general meeting of all villagers. Most foods were distributed freely in the village centre, where villagers deposited their produce. Commodities not available locally were bought in through the communal council. It was decided that supplementary goods should be paid for individually, and the council printed a local currency not usable outside the village, which was distributed at a standard rate of one peseta per person per day (each child got half a peseta).

The agricultural collective experiment was at least as successful as those in the urban areas. Today, the usual arguments against such communal ownership are that no one will bother to work, they will over-consume, that motivation, initiative and development will stagnate. These problems only arise where the process is forced and a state, government or political party is controlling decision-making. None of this happened in the anarcho-sindicalist collectives. Since people did it voluntarily, made their own decisions, knew that they were in control, and were

imbued with a wider anarcho-syndicalist culture, they didn't even consider cheating the system – that would have meant stealing from themselves. While excess consumption, such as people getting permanently drunk, did not occur, enterprise and initiative did – on a scale never seen before. Even money was largely dispensed with, as goods were exchanged and accumulation of wealth was discouraged. No inflation took place and no interest was paid, and where it was found necessary, money became merely a neutral means of exchange.

## Money

The role of money in the Spanish collectives movement is worthy of particular attention. The idea of the anarcho-syndicalists to abolish money in its present form is one of those most likely to raise cries of “impossible, can't be done”. With the collective movement fresh in the mind, perhaps some of the myths around the issue can be dispelled.

Anarcho-syndicalists are against money because it ensures the continuance of inequality. Capitalists use it to store value taken from the labour of workers in the form of profit. However, money, like most devices of capitalism, performs several functions and some of them are indeed useful. For example, anarcho-syndicalists recognise the need for some form of **common measurement** of value. In the collectives, a uniform standard was established for the exchange of a huge variety of dissimilar goods and services, and great emphasis was placed on the gathering of statistics on values, demand and consumption, with even the smallest transactions being recorded. The importance of such statistics cannot be underestimated. To plan and regulate the economy, and have the flexibility to respond to demand and predict trends, the collection and analysis of such information is crucial. While it may be argued that the agricultural collective economies were relatively simple by today's standards, the principles of successful collective economic management remain the same, and there are now much more sophisticated forms of technology and analysis to assist in the task.

In the collectives, information was gathered by first setting a local common unit of measurement, for example, rationing books, coupons, local currency, etc. However, this only worked locally, so records were also kept in pesetas for the purpose of wider trade. This was seen as a temporary measure and, within months, discussions were underway to establish a common unit of measurement for the entire movement. For example, the Aragon Regional Federation began replacing the local currencies with a standard uniform ration book for the whole region.

Another important role of money is in **distributing goods and services** appropriately amongst the population. The aim of the anarcho-syndicalist economy is to establish economic equality. The best way to achieve this is by free access to goods and services as needed. The complexity here, however, is agreeing ‘need’, and to what extent all goods and services can be freely accessible. In all societies, rationing of goods and services takes place, according to the available resources. Under capitalism, the rationing is unequal; under anarcho-syndicalism, it is equal. Therefore, for democratic rationing to work after an anarcho-syndicalist revolution, some form of common exchange will be needed to ensure equal access to scarce goods and services. This was what happened in the Spanish collectives.

A third useful part money plays is as a form of **credit or stored value**. This is a source of inequality on an individual level, but can be accomplished through a collective form of banking system. Many Spanish collectives set up such a system, with a non-profit bank to regulate trade,

issue credit and act as a value clearing house. Unlike in a capitalist bank, whose main aim is to issue and receive credit on the basis of interest or some other form of profit, the collective bank is merely a means of directing society's wealth where it is most needed and can best be used. The role of the banks within the Spanish Revolution was summarised by a contemporary as follows:

*"...widespread and complex transitions made it necessary for the Federation of Levant to establish its own bank. The bank, through its federated branches, co-ordinated the exchange and sale of products within Republican Spain and regulated all matters pertaining to foreign trade. The Federation's bank was, of course, administered by the Bank Workers' Union. In the Central Labour Bank of Catalonia, organised in 1937, cash transactions were reduced to a minimum. Credit was not given in cash. The bank balanced accounts between collectives and arranged credit when needed, not in cash but in exchange of goods and service. It served as a co-ordinating agency."*

An example of the complexity of the transactions undertaken is seen in orange exports within the Valencia region. To cut out capitalism, the CNT set up an organisation to purchase, pack and export oranges. With a network of 270 committees in communities across the region, this organisation clearly needed a common unit of value and a means for storing and distributing such value in order to carry out its work.

## Conclusion

Tragically, the Spanish collectives were smashed by Republican troops under communist command (see Unit 17). In many cases, they had existed for barely a year. However, in this short time, not only did they prove that an alternative to the capitalist and state-run economies is possible, they also brought to light the amazing creativity of people, when they are suddenly freed from the drudgery of wage slavery. Today, they remain a brief but telling glimpse into the possibilities of a world free from the twin evils of capitalist and state oppression.

The relevance of the Spanish collectives is greater as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century than ever before. The failure and collapse of the Soviet Union has now exposed the false foundation on which much of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century 'revolutionary' movement was built. With the final decline of the Marxist state-run economy idea, we are left at present with rampant capitalism, and apparently little alternative. But capitalism is not the only choice, and the collectives are proof that formulating an alternative social economic system to replace capitalism is possible. The collectives were a huge economic, social and cultural experiment, based on anarcho-syndicalist theory and ideas. As it turned out, the theory worked in practice near-perfectly, despite the problems of war, shortage and opposition from all sides.

The role of money within the anarcho-syndicalist economy merits a book in itself, while the scope and range of the Spanish Collectives has hardly begun to be explored. However, hopefully, this brief introduction provides an insight into how the collectives were established and functioned. While this series of units (15–18) may be a starting point for further reading on the momentous events in Spain in 1936–39, it is also designed to illustrate how the future anarcho-syndicalist socio-economic system can be organised. We could do a lot worse than updating and learning from the Spanish collectives in developing a modern anarcho-syndicalist strategy for re-creating the society of the future. This will be explored in greater detail in Block 4 (Units 19–24).

## Key points

- Spain in 1936 was the first and only time anarcho-syndicalist ideas have been applied to the task of organising society on a large scale.
- There were both agrarian and industrial collectives, the latter including both small workshops and large scale manufacturing plants.
- The basis of all decision-making in the collectives was the workplace assembly.
- The collectives were federated regionally and on the basis of industry to co-ordinate production.
- Collectivisation of the Barcelona transport system was crucial for the life and productivity of the city.
- The fascist threat hung over the collectives and so a collectivised munitions industry was built from scratch.
- The collectives largely abandoned the use of money.

## Checklist

1. What were the main problems faced by the CNT in organising the collectives and the economy?
2. How were the collectives organised?
3. How was investment managed?
4. Was everyone forced to be part of an agricultural collective?
5. How was money replaced in the collectives?

## Answer suggestions

*1. What were the main problems faced by the CNT in organising the collectives and the economy?*

The Spanish economy was already in a ramshackle state and in need of enormous improvement. Many areas of the economy were in fascist hands and even in the areas controlled by the republican government the CNT met fervent opposition to the collectivisation of industry and agriculture. There was the constant fascist threat and after the republican government cut off supplies, the need to provide the militias with clothes, food and arms.

*2. How were the collectives organised?*

The basis was the workplace assembly where all decisions were made. Committees were formed to carry out the wishes of the assembly and were recallable at any time. Collectives formed local federations to co-ordinate production in a Local Economic Council and industrial federations that, in turn, formed a National Confederation of Industry and a National Economic Confederation.

*3. How was investment managed?*



Investment for modernising, or even building an industry from scratch, came from the Economic Councils. These were financed by the collectives themselves who pooled their surpluses into the non-profit making Central Labour Bank.

4. *Was everyone forced to be part of an agricultural collective?*

Special provision was made for anyone who did not want to take part in the collective. Those who wished to stay out were allocated land as long as they did not employ labour to farm it.

5. *How was money replaced in the collectives?*

Money was replaced by a local common unit of measurement in the form of ration books and coupons. It was intended that this would be extended to whole regions replacing the peseta entirely.

## Suggested discussion points

- How far did the collectives go towards establishing libertarian communism?
- How would modern technology help in such a process today?

## Further Reading

**The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–39.** Sam Dolgoff (ed.). Black Rose Books, 1974. ISBN 0919 618200. £9.99 -AK- Probably the best single text on the Spanish revolution (ignore the Bookchin introduction). Contains excellent, detailed, accessible and contemporary accounts of the urban and rural collective movements, including organisation, economics and money, land administration, etc. 'Essential' – if you only buy one book from the course, buy this one!

**The Spanish Collectives.** Garston Leval. Freedom Press, 1975. ISBN 0900 384115. £8 -AK- Good, solid, in-depth analysis of the collectives. Provides an excellent illustration of anarcho-syndicalism in practice, and how people responded to the popular collectivisation movement. Excellent.

**Anarchist Economics – an alternative for a world in crisis.** La Presa. £1. -AK- Some useful pointers for a world economy based on examples from Spain in 1936–39. **With the Peasants of Aragon.** Augustin Souchy. Ed Stamm. £3.95. -AK- Personal account written from this prominent CNT activist's wanderings amongst the collectives in Aragon in 1936–37. A rare and valuable insight – one for the 'must read' list.

**After the Revolution.** D A De Santillan. Jura Media. £8.95. -AK- Santillan was an academic and one of the CNT members who joined the government. Nevertheless, a still-relevant and valuable contribution on anarcho-syndicalist economics and reconstruction in a post-revolutionary society.

Notes: Unusually for periods of revolutionary working class history, there are a number of relatively accessible books on Spain in the 1930s. This is a sample of some of the better ones. Please note, you may find useful sources on the topic of this Unit in the Further Reading sections of any or all of Units 13–18. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: – LI- try libraries (from local to university), – AK – available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if

you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), – BS – try bookshops,  
-SE – ask SelfEd about loans/offprints).

## **Block 4**

## Unit 19: Britain, 1930–1950 – The era of reformism

This Unit and the following one cover a time during which anarcho-syndicalist ideas were at a low ebb in Britain – the 1930s to the 1970s. Instead of examining the small (though active) anarcho-syndicalist groups that existed, the main focus is on the wider political scene. In particular, this Unit concentrates on examining the reforms and state interventionist policies which came to dominate most of the advanced capitalist world.

While anarcho-syndicalism had little influence during the period, such wider events, and the lessons learned from them, were important in the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism. Thus, the period under examination can be seen as a backdrop to the re-emergence of the anarcho-syndicalist movement onto the world stage since the 1970s.

### This Unit aims to

- Examine the period when reforms and state interventionist policies came to dominate Britain and the rest of the advanced capitalist world.
- Look at the role of the trade unions during this critical time.
- Analyse the role of the Communist Party during the inter-war period.

### Terms and abbreviations

**SWF:** Syndicalist Workers' Federation. Anarcho-syndicalist group formed in 1950.

**DAM:** Direct Action Movement. Anarcho-syndicalist group formed in 1979.

**TUC:** Trades Union Congress.

**NUWCM:** National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement.

**CP:** Communist Party.

**TGWU:** Transport and General Workers' Union.

**NUR:** National Union of Railwaymen.

**AEU:** Amalgamated Engineering Union.

**Gold Standard:** First used in Britain in 1821, the gold standard signifies a monetary system under which gold is the only standard of value, freely convertible at home or abroad into a fixed amount of gold per unit of currency. By definition limited to the actual gold reserves of the Earth, the gold standard was phased out in the 1920s for the gold bullion standard, under which nations backed their currencies with gold bullion and agreed to buy and sell the bullion at a fixed price. In reaction to the Great Depression, the gold bullion standard was abandoned in favour of a system

in which countries fixed their currencies to the U.S. dollar and retained dollar reserves in the United States.

**Trades Dispute Act of 1927:** Passed as a result of the 1926 General Strike. It made sympathetic strikes illegal, debarred trade unions from requiring their members to contribute to a political fund unless they contracted in writing to do so, prevented civil servants from joining a TUC affiliated union, and defined “intimidation” as a legal offence.

**Keynesian Economics:** An economic theory, which advocates government intervention, or demand side management of the economy, to achieve full employment and stable prices. **Bretton Woods:** In July 1944, representatives of 44 countries met in Bretton Woods, New Hampshire to create a new international monetary system that would foster full employment and price stability, without imposing barriers to trade. The Bretton Woods agreement fixed exchange rates against the U.S. dollars, and fixed the price of the dollar to gold at \$35 an ounce. Member countries had the right to sell dollars to the Federal Reserve for gold at the official price. The goal of the gold exchange standard was to prevent inflation by tying down gold’s dollar price.

**Marshall Plan:** On June 5, 1947, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall called for American assistance in restoring the economic infrastructure of Europe. The official reason was, faced with famine and economic crisis in Europe in the wake of World War II; the United States would rebuild the continent in the interest of political stability and a healthy world economy. In reality it was to prevent any chance of communist revolts or influence and to ensure a stable, and compliant, market for US exports.

**NATO:** North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. US dominated anti-Soviet military coalition.

## Introduction

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In making sense of today’s society, we have to have an understanding of the forces that have shaped British capitalism. To gain this understanding, we need to trace its development in Britain back towards its roots (see Unit 1). Britain was unique in that it was the first country to experience the industrial revolution. This had a profound effect on the development of British capitalism, for it was the free market that drove Britain’s industrial revolution. The state played only a secondary role – mainly in removing the obstacles hindering capitalism’s development (see Unit 2). The response from the labour movement was a period of development of anarcho-syndicalist tactics and ideas around the turn of the century and up to the First World War (see Units 5, 6 and 14).

Since the First World War, Britain has been in long, slow decline from its former world power status. Various attempts have been made over the years by both Tory and Labour governments, to deny and/or halt this decline, culminating in the Thatcher government and the return of free market orthodoxy in the 1980s. These attempts had a considerable effect on the development of the British economy, but did not stop the decline. However, the role of the trade unions changed dramatically, as they were increasingly incorporated into capitalism.

British capitalism and its development is very different from that in the rest of Europe. European governments saw the economic dominance which the industrial revolution brought to Britain and soon realised that, if they were going to compete with Britain, they would have to speed up their own industrialisation process. As a result, the state sought to encourage the growth of capitalism. This resulted in the development of a 'state interventionist' tradition in mainland Europe, where governments have long-practised active policies to control and develop the economy.

Broadly, the two approaches have developed to become known as free market capitalism (the British model) and social market capitalism (the European one). Thus, in Britain, the central idea of free market capitalism has dominated — that the running of society should be left wherever possible to market forces and that market forces perform best when they are free from state interference. Social market capitalism, on the other hand, looks to state regulation, both to direct the markets and ensure greater co-operation within society, which it is argued, leads to greater stability and efficiency.

Major long-standing differences between Britain and Europe also exist in the development of the financial sector. Britain's financial position largely grew out of the enormous profits gained from being the world's first industrial economy. As such, the banking system was a response to the industrial revolution, and only began to expand after it was well underway. As a result, British banks did not evolve to provide finance for the emerging capitalist system. Rather, they evolved in order to deal with the massive wealth being created by British capitalism. This is in marked contrast to financial sectors in countries such as Germany and Japan, where banks were developed to meet the investment needs of the growing industrial sector. Here, the banks were also regulated by the state in order to ensure that enough money was available to fund the industrialisation process. From the outset, the banking system in Europe was closely linked to domestic industry and specifically, to the provision of long term loans for inward investment.

Since banks did not actively finance Britain's industrial revolution, they had no strong links with industry and were not dependent on its success. Instead, Britain's banks found themselves with vast sums of money pouring in from the proceeds of the industrial revolution. These vast sums were soon attracting foreign borrowers keen to draw on these surpluses and willing to pay high returns in order to fund their own industrial process. As a result, Britain's financial sector quickly became internationally orientated, and most of its energies were devoted to channelling funds into and out of Britain, rather than to the provision of finance for domestic industry. As demand for British money grew from abroad, sterling strengthened. In turn, as the strength of sterling rose, the City of London became the world's leading financial centre. Pounds sterling became the world's trading and reserve currency, and it took on a similar role to that played in today's world markets by the US dollar.

## **Money problems**

Since the British banks were first and foremost about protecting the wealth of the industrial revolution by investing it abroad, British finances rapidly became dominated by the need to maintain the conditions in which export capital was safe. This meant defending the value of sterling and ensuring international commercial and financial operations could freely function (therefore ensuring British capital could continue to dominate in world markets). British industrialists there-

fore found their bankers and government preoccupied with such issues, and not with investing in British industry. With little support from the state, British industry had no means of persuading bankers to make long-term loans to industry on any scale, or put up risk capital in sufficient quantities, and hence it was forced to heavily rely on its own inadequate internal funds for innovation and modernisation.

Starved of investment, Britain's domestic economy began to decline, while at the same time, the financial sector became the most vibrant part of Britain's economy. As a result, the City of London acquired a powerful and often dominant position within domestic affairs, both economically and politically. This was to have far reaching consequences for the British economy. As the importance of the financial sector grew, Britain's political class increasingly directed policies aimed at maintaining dominance as the world's financial centre. This centred on maintaining the high level of the pound (incidentally making British goods expensive abroad), and increasingly intervening militarily and politically in order to protect overseas financial interests.

At first, this extension of British imperialism benefited domestic industry. The maintenance of the empire ensured the continuation of protected markets for increasingly uncompetitive British-made goods, as colonies were forced to accept and pay for them. But undercapitalised British industry could only be sheltered from modern competitors for so long. As Britain's share of world trade began to steadily decline, the need for state intervention to protect domestic industry and to boost investment became increasingly urgent.

However, the investment needs of the domestic economy could only be met at the expense of the financial sector. Boosting British industry meant reducing the level of the pound, lowering interest rates and new protectionist measures to prevent the import of cheaper foreign goods. The financial sector, dependant on free trade and a high pound, would suffer, and thus Britain's position as a leading world power would be threatened. Each new generation of Britain's political elite saw the problem but couldn't face the solution consequently, maintaining Britain's 'greatness' as a world power won the day time and again, and government policy repeatedly supported the financial sector, at great cost to the domestic economy. The result being that Britain's manufacturing base was in serious decline from the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

With exports falling and imports pouring in from the US and Europe, some British politicians, academics and industrialists sought increased support for Britain's domestic sector. Even as early as 1903, Tory leader Joseph Chamberlain launched a campaign to abandon the free market and introduce protectionist measures, mainly on employment grounds. This was fiercely resisted by the City of London, and a bitter debate ended once again in victory for them, with free trade policies maintained. The cost was borne by the working class. Unemployment rose and wages fell, and this was one of the major factors contributing to the rise of militancy prior to the First World War culminating in the Syndicalist Revolt (see Units 5, 6 and 14).

In the City, the victory brought yet further investment abroad. Between 1905 and 1914, some 7% of national income was invested abroad; more than that invested in Britain. It was during this period that Britain's dual economy was firmly established, with the dynamic, powerful financial sector servicing imperialism and operating profitably, and the investment-starved domestic economy fixed in relative decline, unable to compete with the high-tech US, German and Japanese economies. This dual economy is still very much with us today.

After a brief period of state intervention during the First World War, Britain returned to free market policies, and 1925 saw it return to the 'gold standard', with the pound set at its pre-war value, overvalued by some 10%. The result was the collapse of British exports and a flood of

cheap imports. Again, it was the working class that bore the brunt of the economic stagnation that followed, as unemployment rose and wages fell. Elsewhere, the world economy was booming. Britain's disastrous return to the gold standard led to further demands for the state to support the domestic economy. The influential economist, John Maynard Keynes, headed these demands but, for the rest of the 1920s, both the Tory and Labour governments resisted the calls. The 1929–31 Labour government was particularly loyal to the free market philosophy, as it attempted to prove to capitalists that they had nothing to fear from a Labour government. The “socialist” government eventually fell over its attempt to cut dole provision, as part of a package to cut public spending in the face of rising unemployment.

## **Social Capitalism?**

It was the 1930s worldwide depression that eventually led Britain's politicians to rethink their free market policies and advocate state intervention. Macmillan, the Tory paternalist, was appalled by the effects of unemployment and embraced the Keynesian plan to boost spending to raise demand and lift the economy out of recession. Smarting from its disastrous 1929–31 government, Labour also became firmly in favour of state intervention. Importantly however, it did not argue for the state to control the economy, rather that it could be used to ensure capitalism was more efficient.

By the late 1930s, the Tory government was intervening to boost the domestic economy, bringing industries under state control, including sugar (British Sugar Corporation) and electricity (Central Electricity Board). In 1939, BOAC was nationalised and became the state airline. Nonetheless, the move away from free market orthodoxy did not immediately change attitudes towards trade unions. British capitalism had always been grudging in its acceptance of trade unions, and politicians had a relationship with them, which was shaped by expedience rather than conviction, and were openly hostile whenever possible, for example during recessions; and saw them as “a medicine they were forced to swallow”, as one trade unionist put it, in order to contain unrest in periods of full employment.

After the 1926 General Strike, British capitalism was in no mood to compromise with the trade union movement. In 1927, the Trades Dispute Act was introduced, which severely limited rights of trade unions. The introduction of the Act was marked by a wave of repression that saw the wholesale sacking of militants within the workplace. The effect on the trade union movement was profound. From 1927 to the Second World War, workplace organisation struggled to survive. Militancy virtually disappeared. The number of work days lost due to strikes reached 31.8 million in the syndicalist period of 1917–21, and rose even further to 41.8 million between 1922–26, before plummeting to 4.4 million between 1927–31 and just 2.6 million between 1932–6. Post General strike despondency and anti-trade union laws were joined by rising unemployment in undermining workers' militancy. By 1933, union membership was half what it was in the 1920s.

## **Leaders turn to reformism**

Far from recognising their own cowardice as the problem behind the General Strike debacle, the trade union leaders blamed militancy for their fall in favour. They claimed militancy had marginalised the unions, and became determined to replace militant tactics with peaceful ne-



gotiation. A General Council motion before the 1928 Trades Union Congress (TUC) Conference summed up their thinking; *“having rejected revolution ...the unions should involve themselves in the formation of economic policy and seeking to improve material standards in the immediate future.”*

The problem for them was that there was no sign this was about to occur. Nevertheless, in 1927 there was a rare high point for the union bosses of the time, when they were invited to talks, chaired by ICI chairman Alfred Mond, by a number of company owners. Represented there were the heads of some of Britain's largest chemicals, electrical industries and car manufacturing companies, including firms such as ICI, Shell, BP and Lucas, who were to form the backbone of the post-war British economy. More sheltered from foreign competition than coal and textiles, these companies were more relaxed towards the unions, seeing them as a source of stability in the workplace.

The Mond-Turner talks, (Ben Turner was the TUC General Secretary), led to the setting up of joint negotiation bodies within which the unions acted as little more than rubber stamps to designs already taken by management. In return for management recognising the unions, union leaders were more than happy to accept management proposals aimed primarily at raising productivity and lowering wages. In doing so, the unions were giving respectability to management proposals that were fundamentally undermining their members pay and conditions. The unions attempted to justify their position by arguing that without union input, the job losses would have been higher and the wage cuts deeper. Hence the old adage of union leaders claiming victory on the grounds that they had managed to reduce the size of the pay cut.

The talks were significant in that they were to prove a foretaste of the industrial relations of the post-war period. Though union leaders were still very much given to declaring their support for the establishment of socialism, the talks demonstrated just how happy they were to work within capitalism. The talks were also significant in that they were to prove highly controversial, drawing considerable criticism from activists. This criticism demonstrates that there remained a deep commitment to socialist ideas among the rank & file, and that they knew their own bureaucracy was selling them out.

As the union leaders fought to develop their respectable image, they were clearly prepared to go to considerable lengths. However, it was their attitude to the unemployed that was to prove the most scandalous. As unemployment began to rise to horrendous levels in the 1930s depression, instead of extending the hand of solidarity to the unemployed, they chose to ignore them. They realised that a mass organisation of the unemployed would inevitably come into conflict with the state, and that these impoverished people, with little to lose, would look to militant action to further their ends. As such, union leaders saw the unemployed as a threat to their respectability in the face of the establishment, and so deliberately distanced themselves from them. They did not even campaign for better dole entitlement.

Initially there was token union support for the non-union National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement (NUWCM), as a way of evading the accusation that they were doing little to help the unemployed. However, with Communist Party (CP) influence growing within the NUWCM, the state, fearful of NUWCM's growing strength, sought to portray it in the media as a communist front inspired by Moscow. On this, the TUC took fright, ordered branches to disaffiliate and actually joined in denouncing the NUWCM. Though attempts were made in 1927 and 1933 to set up a trade union unemployed organisation, both attempts floundered due to opposition from union leaders.

Throughout the 1930s, the union leadership issued the usual platitudes and simply sat out the depression, waiting for better times. This stands as a major missed opportunity to extend trade unionism beyond the workplace into the wider community. The unions could easily have established union halls in working class areas to act as focal points for the unemployed and wider community struggle. Instead, they retreated into the workplace and kept their heads down. From the 1930s onwards, the unions' interests were to end at the factory gate. For this reason, the 1930s was a defining moment in the history of British trade unions. During this period, they became entrenched in the workplace and in their aim to become acceptable to the political and capitalist establishment. Their consequent rejection of the unemployed working class points to an attitude towards workers that still shapes the nature of the trade unions and their leaders today.

The unions' shameful attitude towards the unemployed paled alongside their venomous attitude towards the Communist Party (CP), which was growing in influence within the unions. After its founding in the early 1920s, the CP had looked to the political struggle and sought to work within the Labour Party, with the aim of pushing towards a revolutionary position. However, attempts to affiliate to the Labour Party were blocked, so the CP turned to organising within the trade union movement and the growing ranks of unemployed. In turning to an industrial strategy, the CP (which from its inception had drawn many syndicalists into its ranks) increasingly moved towards syndicalism, arguing for the formation of industrial unions and workers' control.

With the unions happy to sit out the depression and the Labour Party arguing for policies indistinguishable from the Tories, the CP began to be seen as the only organisation prepared to take action on behalf of the working class. As a result, it grew in influence, both within the unions and the wider working class, while developing a marked hostility to parliament, in favour of direct action. The unions' reaction to the growing influence of the CP was alarm, followed by a hasty witch-hunt. As one leading TUC leader stated;

*"The Trade Union hierarchy, pledged to eternal opposition, resisted Communism by revising union constitutions, conducting 'disruption enquires', and expelling recalcitrant members".*

Nor were these empty words. The TGWU, NUR, AEU, boilermakers', shoe and boot operatives', and steelworkers' unions, to name a few, took action against CP activists.

## **In from the cold**

The union leaders' betrayals of their members, the unemployed, and witch-hunt of the CP began eventually to reap some personal rewards. In 1935, the TUC general secretary Walter Citrine and the steelworkers' leader Arthur Pugh were given knighthoods. Their acceptance of these caused considerable controversy and was widely seen as further betrayal. Even moderate socialists within the Labour Party were outraged. As the intellectual RH Tawney noted;

*"...who will believe that the Labour Party means business so long as some of the stalwarts sit up and beg for social plums like poodles in a drawing room?"*

He had missed the real point, which was that union leaders were now moving towards (or had already arrived at) the position of seeing capitalism as a permanent fixture. This attitude was later to become further entrenched during the long post war boom. In fact, from the 1930s on, British trade union leaders dropped what little commitment they had to a new socialist utopia and were at best looking for better regulation of capitalism. They had no intention of "doing the business" when it came to establishing a socialist society. Unfortunately for the union leaders,

being knighted did not mean that they had been accepted as part of the establishment. While the state had bought their loyalty cheaply, the government's attitude towards the unions remained hostile. Despite union leaders' pleas, it refused to repeal the 1927 anti-trade union legislation.

It was not until 1939 and the outbreak of war that the union leaders were able to shake off the effects of syndicalist militancy and gain wider acceptance with the ruling establishment. Remembering the workers' militancy of the First World War period, the Churchill-led wartime coalition government now turned to the union leaders to help them avoid and subdue workers' unrest likely to arise with the war-induced labour shortage and full employment. Churchill brought several union leaders into the government, most notably the leader of the TGWU, Ernest Bevan, who was made Minister of Labour.

Bevan organised meetings at which he addressed up to 2,000 trade union leaders (executives). In return for their co-operation, they were promised involvement in the machinery of government. The long-ostracised union leadership rushed to accept Bevan's offer and soon found themselves sporting various government titles. By 1941, they were fully integrated into the wartime administration. Union officials served on innumerable committees for encouraging production, operating rationing schemes, and so on. As a contemporary noted;

*"...the annual report of the TUC began to read like the record of some special government department responsible for co-ordinating policy in the social and industrial sphere".*

The price for gaining respectability with the establishment was high. In return for being brought in from the cold, the unions had to accept new draconian anti-trade union legislation. The new Emergency Powers Act gave the government complete power over both persons and property. Under the Act, Defence Regulation 58A was issued, which gave the government enormous power to control labour. It included Order 1305, which made strikes illegal and disputes subject to binding arbitration.

By 1941, the Emergency Powers legislation was being used to severe effect on the skilled labour force, especially within engineering. One order forbade anyone from leaving their employment without permission – almost identical to the sorts of measures taken during the First World War (see Unit 14). Then, the response was widespread workers' unrest, centred on engineering. This took the form of well co-ordinated syndicalist-based action, which was channelled into a wider attack on the war and capitalism itself. However, sadly, by the outbreak of the Second World War, syndicalism had been replaced by the Communist Party as the dominant revolutionary movement in Britain. The CP was to attempt to steer any signs of unrest along a very different path this time around.

## **The Communists sell out**

The single most important influence on the activities of the Communist Party from its inception was its strict, hierarchical, leadership – which was itself increasingly controlled by Russia. Hence, before the Second World War, the British CP line was to encourage political and workplace militancy to destabilise the British economy. As the war started, this militancy was abruptly dropped. After the short-lived Hitler-Stalin pact ended with the invasion of Russia in 1941, the call went out from Russia to the Communist Parties around the world to fully support the war effort. Obediently, the British CP began supporting the war with the patriotic fervour of a Daily

Mail journalist. Every effort was made to persuade and spur on workers to throw all into their work. Any workers participating in strike actions were castigated for sabotaging the war effort.

The workers were not stupid, nor did they unquestioningly follow the CP's changes of policy. However, largely due to its militant record prior to the war, the CP did enjoy strong support among activists. This record was used to aggressively push its new message to support the war in the workplace. In the engineering industry, where there was a strong shop stewards' movement, the argument was pushed strongly. At a rank and file engineering shop stewards meeting in London in 1941, the CP was able to rally support for the war effort. Thus, instead of taking advantage of massive war profits to improve workers' conditions, they discussed ways to improve production. The conference passed a resolution supporting the idea of joint management and workshop production committees. Both capitalism and the state seized on this initiative, and the committees were introduced throughout industry. As a government report noted at the time;

*"...(these joint production committees) were able to help management, which were at a loss to know how further to quicken the tempo of output".*

The effect of the CP and the joint production committees was that unrest was kept to a minimum. However, workers realised that they were being used by the CP, and soon began to turn against the joint production committees and the instructions from the CP leadership.

By the later stages of the war, workers militancy had started growing considerably, and the number of unofficial strikes began to rise dramatically. In the mining sector, the mine owners had used the emergency war conditions to bypass safety requirements, and reaped massive profits from gained production. At the same time, mine accidents and workers' injuries and deaths soared. The workers ignored the CP's directions and responded in their own way. By 1944, the mining industry accounted for two thirds of all working days lost due to strike action. Faced with such unrest, the government went on the offensive. Bevan (the trade union leader, now Minister of Labour) argued that the miners were inflicting more damage on Britain than the air raids. As one, the British media, government and even the CP and trade union leadership launched a propaganda campaign against the miners. A new Defence Regulation was introduced under which those instigating or inciting a work stoppage faced imprisonment. Fortunately, the Second World War ended before many workers began finding themselves behind bars.

## **New improved capitalism?**

The developed world's economic landscape went through a major change in the years immediately following the end of the war in 1945. Many world leaders blamed the 'boom and bust' of free market orthodoxy for the economic conditions which led to the war. Thus, the idea that the free market system was flawed and needed state direction to ensure its long-term stability gained dominance, and Keynesianism finally was to have its day. The foundations began to be laid of what was to become known as the consumer society.

At the forefront of the new state interventionist approach was the US government. At a meeting in Bretton Woods in 1944 the shape of the post-war economy was decided by the leading capitalist nations led by the United States. While mainland US had been undamaged by the war, it had become the powerhouse of the allied industries. Simultaneously, its production was used to inflict serious damage on the industrial infrastructure of Europe and Asia. In a few short years,

the US became the undisputed and dominant world economic power. By 1945, the US accounted for half the world's total production.

The US government moved quickly and decisively to intervene in the world's economies and so reinforce its newly acquired economic, political and military dominance. Under the Marshall Plan, US dollars were poured into Europe and Asia, mainly in the form of loans. The immediate effect was that, from Britain across Europe and Asia to Japan, dozens of shattered economies were lent cash with which to buy US goods to re-build their shattered economies. The net effect was that the US economy was given a further major boost, ensuring that the dollar became the worlds' undisputed trading and reserve currency.

Hand in hand with economic dominance came military dominance. Here, the newly emerged USSR became a perfect excuse for keeping the now-massive US military production machine, as the US sought to counter the threat of Soviet Communism to its new-found dominance. The result was the creation of NATO, an organisation that, from the start, was dominated by the US and whose aim was maintaining and furthering US power and influence. The immediate open hostility of the US to any apparent threat to its authority spawned the cold war. Far from making the world a safer place, the defeat of fascism had only resulted in hastening the rise of a new aggressive world superpower, the US. It's targeting of Soviet Communism led to the world being divided into two opposing camps.

Though the boundaries of these two camps were clearly defined and accepted by both sides, capitalism and 'communism' began to confront each other militarily, largely in the 'less developed' (third world) nations of the world, as they each sought to extend their influence. Since then, much of the less developed world has contained virtually permanent war zones, ensuring that development has been hindered militarily and physically, as well as economically.

## **Stalinist influences**

While the US was now the world economic giant, the war had also strengthened the position of the Russian Communist Party, and its various satellite parties within capitalist countries across the world. The Russian workers had paid the single biggest human price of the war, with some 20 million lives, and the Russian Communist leadership now enjoyed an enhanced reputation on their behalf (sic), for helping defeat Germany. Also, outside Russia, the Communist Party in many countries had been active in its resistance to fascism. These factors combined to make the 'communists' a powerful force, and social democracy was seen in the US as a buffer against the spread of communism.

The US used its influence in providing Marshall Plan finance to ensure that structures were put in place in Germany and the 'liberated' countries to promote social democracy and reformist trade unions, in order to counter the threat posed by communism. These trade unions were to be highly centralised, with little room for rank and file activity by the workers themselves. Through such unions, it was hoped that the state could control workers' aspirations, and the plan worked, especially in the early years in Germany and Japan, where the workers' movement had been smashed by fascism. The extent of the fear of communism was indicated in the fact that CP members were barred from being employed in the public sector for much of the post war period.

In Britain too, the free market system was discredited. However, Britain faced numerous problems, not least, an economy that had been run at full production during the war, and was in

desperate need of new investment. Nevertheless, it emerged from the war in a relatively strong position within Europe, at the same time as a Labour government swept to power. While this new administration talked about building a new socialist society, the reality was that Labour and Tories alike were now committed to making Britain 'great' again, through the new form of state-regulated capitalism.

The extent to which the new Labour government put the power of the state to work in British capitalism was considerable. Rather than dismantling the emergency wartime state controls, they kept them and used them to direct the economy. State planning was used to ensure investment in the domestic economy, for the first (and so far only) time in the history of British capitalism. Import controls were maintained to shelter British industry from overseas competition, and the nationalisation programme was massively expanded, to boost investment and force through industrial modernisation. In the first year of the new government, exports doubled, and by 1948, they had risen by 70%. Production also surged by 30% in three years and, by 1948, it seemed that state planning would overcome Britain's old problems of subordination of the domestic economy to world markets.

In 1948, Britain's historic economic decline looked to have halted, and the outlook was bright for competition with countries across Europe and Asia, still struggling to rebuild their shattered economies. However, the powerful advocates of free market ideas within Britain's elite had not gone away. Ironically, the influence of these old ideas was strongest in the newly nationalised Bank of England; the very same vehicle the Labour government thought it could use to regulate the economy. Both the Bank and the Treasury began to push for a return to free market policies. This pressure, with its origins in the all-powerful City, would not go away, and began to slowly gain ground through the 1960s and 1970s, until it came back to prominence with the rise of Thatcher.

## **New Labour, old fixations**

Even in the boom times of 1948, the free market advocates were powerful enough to end Britain's brief excursion into economic planning. In what became known as "the bonfire of controls", the Labour Government dismantled the wartime economic planning mechanisms. With Labour's retreat, market forces once again made the decisions on matters of growth and investment in Britain. This was in contrast to other European countries such as France, where economic planning structures were converted into a peacetime programme for modernisation and development under the Monet Plan.

Why did Labour give up central economic planning and give in to the City? At the centre, was their fixation with Britain's imperial past and retention of its status as a major player on the world stage. An unregulated City stock market with free flow of capital was important in this. At the same time, the new government sought to capitalise on its wartime alliance with the US and make Britain a junior partner in the ongoing US campaign to strengthen its already dominant position. The pound would become a junior reserve currency to the dollar. The economic policies that had proven so disastrous for Britain's pre-war domestic economy were back once again; this time from Labour.

Eager for some significance (albeit secondary to the US), the economy was not the only area where Labour looked to increase Britain's role in world affairs. As the US began its first major

post-war military campaign to maintain its sources of cheap raw materials from underdeveloped nations, it started a bloody conflict with communist insurgents in Korea. In dutiful support was Britain, playing out its new role as junior partner to US imperialism. This role quickly began to cost the British economy dearly, as British involvement in Korea saw military spending soar to 10% of total Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

The switch of resources from investment to military expenditure rapidly halted the recovery of Britain's industry. The opportunity to expand the economy at a time when others were rapidly modernising and rebuilding was lost. Military spending never dropped below 5% of GDP (far higher than Germany or Japan), while defence of the overvalued pound led to repeated deflation of the domestic economy. In other words, the City once again dominated the British economy.

## Post-war unionism

The late 1940s were also a crucial period for the other major factor that was to dominate post-war British capitalism, the labour movement. Under Labour, the union leaders were capitalising on the enhanced personal status they had acquired during the war. Firstly, the worldwide post-war economic boom (which affected Britain despite the government's economic policies) brought full employment. This created a need to use the unions to control a workforce empowered by the labour shortage. Add to this the close ties between the Labour Party and union leaders, and this ensured a prominent role for them within society.

Ever hungry for status, many trade union leaders now began to call for the unions to become partners in a new welfare capitalist system based on co-operation between the state unions and capitalism. Such confidence reflected their position of real power. The new Labour government of 1945 boasted five trade union Ministers, in Education, Health, Transport and Labour, and most significantly, Ernest Bevan became Foreign Secretary, and was to become Prime Minister Atlee's closest confidante. This situation reflected a major transformation of the union leaders' position, from being marginalised and despised only a few short years before. It was summed up by TUC leader Woodcock who said, shortly after the war;

*"When I rang up a government department in the thirties I was treated with the utmost suspicion. By the end of the war, we had the position that exists today, where I can telephone any of those officials and exchange the most extraordinary information".*

The union leaders had learned their lesson, and knew that they had to deliver on their unwritten promises if they were to keep their status. If a Labour government were to experience problems with labour unrest, this would reflect badly on the union leaders in and around government. So they went to great lengths to demonstrate that their new-found power held no threat to capitalism. To give just one example, under the auspices of the Marshall Plan, union leaders were shipped out to the US by the plane-load. There, the 'benefits' of 'modern' management techniques were demonstrated to them. Many returned advocating union co-operation in the introduction of 'scientific management', an idea that a few years previously had aroused bitter hostility within the ranks of the trade unions.

Of course, there was a price to be paid for this integration of the unions into government, and (of course) it was not paid by the union officials themselves. They were now being actively wined and dined by high society. The union leaders readily accepted a whole raft of measures introduced by the government aimed at keeping working class consumption down. These included the ex-

tension of the wartime Emergency Powers legislation, Order 1305, which made strikes illegal, and the continuation of rationing. The TUC also entered into an agreement with government to bring in pay restraint. The 'free market' was now to be removed from wage negotiations, as the traditional free collective bargaining system was ended. Now, in 'the national interest', wages were to be kept artificially low. That the union leaders accepted this at all is an indication of how much they cared about their members; that they accepted it so obviously because they wished to ensure continuance of their new-found respectability shows clearly where their priorities were – with themselves.

The mood of trade union leaders was summoned up by Citrine at the 1947 TUC conference, when he maintained that the unions "had passed from the era of propaganda to one of responsibility". He was later to be instrumental in setting up the CIA-funded International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. However, union leaders' boastings of heading a new responsible union movement were to prove somewhat premature. Once again, their members were not stupid, neither were they about to stand aside and let their union leaders sell them out. As early as 1948, discontent was growing.

There was growing disillusionment with the Labour Government. Many workers had genuinely believed that the new administration heralded the dawn of a socialised society. They were soon brought back down to earth, not least by the Labour government's readiness to use troops to break strikes, which were still illegal under Order 1305.

## Nationalised Failures

For many, it was the failure of Labour's nationalisation programme that became the single biggest source of embitterment with the new Labour government. Many trade unionists saw nationalisation as the key to replacing capitalism, as state ownership combined with socialist government to allow workers to gain control of their workplace. Although the nationalisation proposals did not amount to any sort of workers' control that would be acceptable to anarcho-syndicalists, trade union activists welcomed the general notion of some form of workers' control, and it drew in widespread support amongst the British working class. Although with hindsight it was hopelessly wishful thinking, many thought that nationalisation could herald the birth of socialism in Britain and a new socialist world.

In fact, of course, the Labour Government had no intention of replacing capitalism, and the nationalisation programme was designed simply to make capitalism more efficient. In the event, it failed even to achieve this. Labour never considered bringing the profitable parts of British capitalism under state control, but instead concentrated on the most run-down sectors of British industry, which the capitalist owners no longer wanted. While the railway and coal industries were still vital to the domestic economy, they were no longer profitable and had long been starved of investment. Massive restructuring and cash injections were needed, involving wholesale replacement of old equipment, relocation of plant, redundancies and redeployment. Not surprisingly, British capitalism did not feel threatened by Labour's nationalisation programme – the only opposition came over the steel industry, where there was still some profit to be made. As Manny Shinwell, Labour minister in charge of coal nationalisation noted;

*"...the coal owners were hardly less anxious than I to get out of the pits on the right terms".*



There was no secret in Labour's approach to nationalisation – only misty-eyed misapprehension on the part of the unions. Labour clearly stated the aim of nationalisation in its first policy statement on the issue entitled "Let Us Face The Future", where the intention of nationalisation was clearly stated;

*"...amalgamation under public ownership will bring great economies in operation and make it possible to modernise production methods".*

There was no reference to socialism, and it was made clear that there was no intention of introducing any form of workers' control. In fact, it explicitly argued against even parliamentary control, stating that the nationalised industries should operate in a "business way" free from "interference by amateurs". The trade union leadership was in full support of this drive to make capitalism more efficient. The joint TUC-Labour Party report "Interim Report on Post War Reconstruction" rejected even limited workers' participation. Though it called for workers in nationalised industries to be consulted, it also stated:

*"...the responsibility of actual management rests with full-time professional administrators...(while the management board were solely selected on the basis of)...their competence efficiently to administer the industry...(and any union officials placed upon the board, having demonstrated their competence, must)...surrender any position held in, or formal responsibility to, the trade union."*

In other words, the TUC leadership and Labour government agreed from the start that the main role of unions within nationalised industry would be the traditional one of representing workers within industry. If this was not enough, Labour's approach to nationalisation became abundantly clear when it nationalised the Bank of England in 1946. This was seen as the key measure through which Britain's capitalist economy could be regulated. When the National Union of Bank Employees argued for consultation rights, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, dismissed the idea. The notion that workers should have some input in the regulation of the economy was seen as something tantamount to a joke by the Labour leadership.

Nevertheless, when coal was nationalised in January 1947, many miners thought it was a first step towards a new socialised world, as well as alleviating the atrocious conditions in the pits. At the more militant pits, red flags were raised, and signs erected declaring workers control. Such expectations were to be cruelly disappointed.

The original coal nationalisation bill did not even contain provision for management to consult the workforce. It was only amended after the Tories expressed their astonishment that no consultation procedures existed – something even the coal owners had seen as desirable. Even after amendment, the NUM ruefully noted;

*"...that the majority controlling the industry would be drawn from the former mine owners and capitalist circles".*

The reality did not fully hit home until the mines were nationalised, when the miners were faced with the same managers they had faced under private ownership.

The nationalisation of the transport, steel and gas industries all followed a similar pattern. Trade union leaders did get themselves elected to the boards running the mines, but the workers had no input other than being consulted by management when they were introducing major changes. The lack of any control whatsoever caused uproar among rank and file trade unionists. In the immediate post-war years, union conferences were dominated by the issue of extending nationalisation across industry, with calls for workers to get equal representation at all levels.

The National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) was a typical example. As a speaker to the 1948 conference noted, the NUR paper, *The Railway Review* had seen “hundreds of yards of column space” taken up with the issue of nationalisation and demanding equal workers representation. A resolution arguing for 50% workers representation in nationalised industries was duly passed by 72 votes to 2. From post office workers to building workers, the argument for nationalisation and increased workers’ control was made.

The role of the British Communist Party during the nationalisation debacle also predictably betrays where their true allegiance lay, and it was certainly not with the British working class. As the Communist leadership in Russia controlled it from above, so the interests of British workers were subordinate to the defence of the Soviet Union. The CP policy on the best way of defending the USSR was to work to increase the CP’s influence within the Labour Party. The CP managed to get two MPs elected to Parliament after the war, which added to the numerous CP members in leading union positions. Until the Cold War changed the picture, these were used to give unconditional support for the Labour Party, including promoting their nationalisation proposals and, as the argument concerning nationalisation raged, the CP kept quiet, for fear of offending the Labour leadership.

Although far from an isolated case, Shinwell’s comments on the communist miners’ leader Arthur Horner’s role in coal nationalisation are revealing. He noted that the miners;

*“...did include many whose bitter experience precluded any feeling of sympathy for the owner and argued that the mines be taken over without compensation...(yet Horner)...in our many discussions never put forward the ideological precepts of his communist affiliations...(noting that Horner accepted that)...nationalisation of the mines was a Labour plan...(and that both he and Horner)...were unanimous in our aim to make it a success”.*

## **SWF**

It was left to a small group of syndicalists to put Labour’s nationalisation proposals into a revolutionary context. These had come together during the war to produce the paper “Direct Action”. After the war, they formed a small but vocal group, the Syndicalist Workers’ Federation (SWF). The SWF immediately began to develop and put across anarcho-syndicalist ideas. It was to survive up to the 1970s, when it merged to form the Direct Action Movement (DAM), forerunner of the Solidarity Federation.

The SWF began by attacking the Labour government and its nationalisation proposals. It also forcefully made the point that, even if nationalisation was extended to all industry, it could only result in state capitalism. Far from heralding workers’ control, this would allow a new “boss class” to emerge, whose power would result from control rather than ownership of industry. They argued workers within the nationalised industries would soon find their conditions and wages lagging behind the private sector. Instead of supporting nationalisation, they argued, we should organise on the same basis of class struggle, irrespective of whether the workplace was in state or private ownership. The aim of this struggle should not be state ownership;

*“...but common social ownership of the means of production under democratic workers’ control”.*

Unfortunately, the influence of syndicalism was very limited and was to remain so in immediate post-war Britain. Also, the SWF predictions proved depressingly true, as working conditions

in the nationalised industries were the same or worse than in the private sector. Workers faced the same managers as before, and quickly became disillusioned with nationalisation. Sadly, since the unions and the CP had so closely associated the idea of workers' control with nationalisation, for many workers, the hope for workers' control also died with it.

Ever since the rise of syndicalism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the idea of an alternative to capitalism based on workers' control had given day-to-day workplace militancy a wider, political perspective and a long-term aim. Hence, workers had long seen the short-term economic struggle as part of the long-term struggle for revolutionary change. Now, all this was lost. With the decline of the workers' control idea, the labour movement lost its broader political perspective. From now on, militant action was invariably only undertaken in order to achieve immediate gains, devoid of any wider political context. The result was that economic struggle became completely separated from political struggle. Workers and unions pushed for pay and conditions today, while it was left to political parties and party members to discuss politics.

This entirely artificial divide has held back the Labour movement ever since. In particular, it was to be devastating for workers when the post-war economic boom came to an end (see Unit 20).

## Postscript

As disillusionment with nationalisation grew, workers turned to the immediate struggle for improvements in pay and condition. At the same time, they adopted the tried and tested ideas and tactics developed by syndicalists within engineering during the First World War (see Unit 14). Once again, workers organised directly in the workplace through their immediate union representatives, the shop stewards, and increasingly used direct action, such as unofficial strikes. The major difference was that, having lost any hope of effective workers' control, there was no longer any long-term aim of overthrowing capitalism.

By 1949, the Korean War was leading to inflation in the world economy. Workers in Britain, who had been stuck with static living standards under the government's rationing and pay restraint measures, now felt them falling due to the effects of inflation. Unlike in the 1930s, they were not threatened by the fear of unemployment, and so set about organising against the austerity imposed on the working class by the Labour government. They began to take action for wages, in breach of the TUC-Labour pay restraint agreement and, by 1950, it became clear that the TUC leadership could no longer control the rank and file. Union leaders had little choice but to pull out of the agreement governing pay restraint and, consequently, workers' militancy resulted in the union leaders suffering a set back in their new-found respectability and power within capitalism. This set up a pattern to be repeated for the next thirty years; workplace militants and union leaders at loggerheads over pursuing their different agendas. Spurred on by their success over pay restraint, workers began to take more and more unofficial action, independent of the trade union leadership. By 1951, levels of unofficial action were such that the government was forced to accept that Order 1305 outlawing strikes could no longer be enforced. The legislation was withdrawn, and strikes became legal again.

As the 1940s drew to a close, the pattern was set that was to shape British capitalism for the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Both Labour and Tories rejected state planning and adopted Keynesian demand management to attempt to halt Britain's relative decline. This was to ultimately

fail, partly because Keynesianism failed, but also because successive British governments were obsessed with maintaining a leading world role, so they boosted the power of the City over the needs of the domestic economy. In response, Britain's industrialists attempted to squeeze workers' pay and conditions to compensate for Britain's manufacturing uncompetitiveness. For this reason, the working class increasingly turned to workplace militancy in an attempt to maintain pay and conditions, the result being a bitter conflict with both capitalism and the state.

This conflict continues to the present, although it led to a massive defeat for workers during the Thatcher years, which temporarily plunged workers' militancy into massive decline once again. In the next unit, we shall examine developments of the 1950s- 1970s, as the long post-war boom turned to worldwide recession, the inefficiency of British industry became increasingly exposed and Thatcherism was able to take advantage of the situation.

## Key points

- Two schools of capitalist thought developed, free market capitalism and social market capitalism.
- Britain flirted with social market capitalism through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century but always reverted to free market capitalism.
- During this period, union leaders abandoned any pretence of socialist aims and moved towards the viewpoint of a wholesale acceptance of capitalism.
- After WWII the US was the undisputed, and dominant, world economic power.
- Post-imperial Britain's desire for a new role in world affairs meant that the City came to dominate economic thinking.
- The unions sought a post war alliance with the state and capitalism in a new welfare capitalist system.

## Checklist

1. What was the effect of a return to the Gold Standard by Britain after WWI?
2. What was the attitude of the trade union leaders in the inter-war years?
3. What were the effects of Bretton Woods and the Marshall Plan?
4. How did union leaders see their position in post war Britain?
5. Why did nationalisation fail?

## Answer suggestions

1. *What was the effect of a return to the Gold Standard by Britain after WWI?*

The return to the Gold Standard saw the pound set at its pre-war and therefore overvalued. The result was the collapse of British exports while cheap imports flooded into the country.

2. *What was the attitude of the trade union leaders in the inter-war years?*

The trade union leadership sought to gain respectability and so turned against any form of militancy. They withdrew their meagre support of the unemployed and sought to marginalise the Communist Party.

3. *What were the effects of Bretton Woods and the Marshall Plan?*

With the Bretton Woods agreement and the implementation of the Marshall Plan the United States established its dominance of the world economy. It ensured that structures were established in Europe to counter communist influence. It also ensured the dominance of reformist trade unions.

4. *How did union leaders see their position in post war Britain?*

The union leaders called for a partnership between the unions, the state and capitalism in the new welfare capitalist system. They encouraged wage restraint while seeking to control militancy and increase production.

5. *Why did nationalisation fail?*

Nationalisation by the Labour Government was designed to make capitalism more efficient. They stopped short of nationalising the most profitable parts of the economy so as not to alienate British and American capitalists. Instead they concentrated on the most investment-starved, unprofitable and run-down sections of the economy.

## Suggested discussion points

- What are the differences between workers' control and nationalisation?
- How different today is the position of the Labour Party and TUC from this period?

## Further Reading

**The political economy of British capitalism. S. Aaronovitch, R. Smith and J. Gardiner. McGraw-Hill. ISBN 0070 841217. -LI-** A 'standard text' for left academic historians, this is in-depth, technical and detailed. Takes generally a Marxist perspective, failing dismally to draw out the true role of the working class. The proposed solutions to Britain's problems are also standard and weak — a left social democratic mix of import controls and state intervention in the City. Nevertheless, a good challenge and an ideal reference .

**Economic decline of modern Britain — The debate between left and right. D. Coates and J. Hillyard. Wheatsheaf Books, 1986. ISBN 0745 001076. -LI-** Good analysis of the reasons for Britain's decline. Tackles both left and right perspectives, but both fail to recognise the workers' role. Easier reading than Aaronovitch, but not so detailed.

**Tom Brown's Syndicalism. T. Brown. Phoenix Press. £3.95 ISBN 0948 984163. -AK-** Detailed vision of syndicalist strategy c.1940s, from one of syndicalism's clearest writers and orators of the period.

**British Syndicalism: Pages of Labour History. T. Brown. KSL. £1 ISBN 1873 605706.**  
-AK- Collection of Tom Brown's writings — cheap and accessible source of contemporary syndicalist ideas.

Notes: There are many (old) books about the workers'/union movement and the post-war British economy. Most are dry, academic or preaching Marxist, and very few give realistic weight to the influence of the workers' movement. Nevertheless, it is worth looking for such texts in libraries for general background information. The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts, which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester, M15 5HW), -BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

## Unit 20: Britain, 1950–1990 – Decline of social democracy

Unit 19 charted the inter-war years and Britain's short flirtation with state economic planning during and after World War II. During the 1950s and 1960s, this was replaced with Keynesian demand management, in an attempt to halt Britain's long term decline. In this Unit, we will investigate why this strategy failed. We shall also examine the post-war shop stewards' movement, which had its roots in the earlier syndicalist movement, and demonstrate how it was seriously weakened by having ditched critical syndicalist principles. Hence, the shop stewards' movement was unprepared for and dismally failed to resist the Thatcher onslaught from 1979 on.

### This Unit aims to

- Continue on from Unit 19, following the economic and political scene in Britain after the Second World War.
- Investigate the failure of Keynesian demand management.
- Examine the post-war shop stewards movement.
- Look at the decline of the Communist Party and the emergence
- of the 'new left' and rank and file movement.
- Chart the onslaught of Thatcherism on the working class.

### Terms and abbreviations

**Keynesian Economics:** An economic theory advocating government intervention, or demand side management of the economy, to achieve full employment and stable prices.

**Macro-economic:** The performance of the overall economy, inflation, unemployment, and industrial production.

**Micro-economic:** The behaviour of small economic units, such as that of individual consumers or households.

**Corporatism:** A form of social organisation in which the state and corporate groups make the key economic, political and social decisions jointly. Individuals have influence only through their membership of corporate bodies. These include trade unions, professions, business corporations, and political pressure groups.

**Corporate State:** A society governed by, and composed of, economic units of employers and unions in certain broad industries, all of which are subordinate to the state.

**NEDC:** National Economic Development Council. Known as ‘Neddy’, a forum for economic consultation between government, management, and trade unions.

**NEDO:** National Economic Development Office.

**TGWU:** Transport and General Workers’ Union.

**GMBW:** General, Municipal and Boilermakers Workers’ Union

**NUM:** National Union of Mineworkers

**ASLEF:** Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen, the principal union for railway drivers.

**OPEC:** Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries.

**New Left:** A reaction to the Stalinism of the Communist Party especially after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1954. It was soon to develop into a “socialist humanist” wing and a more Leninist variation.

**SWP:** Socialist Workers Party.

**SWF:** Syndicalist Workers’ Federation. Anarcho-syndicalist group formed in 1950.

**DAM:** Direct Action Movement. Anarcho-syndicalist group formed in 1979 later to form the basis of the Solidarity Federation.

## Introduction

The new Tory Government of 1951 simply continued the policies of the Labour government that had preceded it. It dismantled the last of the wartime controls and pursued regulatory strategies for controlling the British economy through Keynesian economic demand management. In essence, this was based on the idea that the government should intervene in the economy (by tax controls and capital investment, etc.) to regulate demand. The aim was to ensure that total consumption within the economy was kept in line with total production. Whenever consumption began to outstrip production, the government would seek to deflate the economy in order to reduce demand. Whenever it was over-production that was the problem, the plan would be to encourage spending in order to boost demand and consumption.

Inflation (rising prices and wages) and balance of payments deficits (more imports than exports) were seen as resulting from too much demand in the economy, while unemployment arose from too little demand. Therefore, in theory, good Keynesian demand management could lead to full employment by pulling various strings to ensure balance of payments equilibrium, stable prices and spending controls. In other words, the idea was that the government could create economic stability by lowering and raising taxes, decreasing and increasing public spending, raising and lowering interest rates and controlling credit, according to whatever certain key economic indicators suggested was needed. If necessary, the government could even resort to wage controls to limit demand, or lowering or raise the pound’s value to ensure exports did not fall below the level of imports.

In essence, demand management could be used to end capitalism’s tendency towards ‘boom and bust’, thus ensuring a stable environment for market forces to efficiently allocate resources and so create wealth within society. It is not hard to see the attraction of demand management amongst the 1950s British elite. Since free market policies had been so disastrous for Britain in the 1930s, their unpopularity now ruled them out, so demand management was the least worst option for an establishment that was still really wedded to free market philosophy. Though demand



management gave the government power to intervene at the macro-economic level, the job of manipulating supply and demand at the micro-economic level still rested with the free market. The state intervention that did occur was primarily based on fiscal and monetary policy decisions made by the Treasury and the Bank of England, which were still bastions of free market thinking within the British State.

Despite its apparently foolproof theory, demand management had numerous failings, which together created more of a “stop-go” economy than a smooth machine being ‘tweaked’ by government. In other words, it created precisely the instability that it was supposed to overcome. Partly, this was due to the way the stock market reacts to changes in fiscal and monetary measures (the herd instinct). Also, government often used their controls when it would most benefit the party in power, which was not always in the long-term interests of the economy. Typically, as unemployment rose or elections came near, the government would inject demand into the economy by cutting interest rates and taxes, and increasing government expenditure. In the resulting boom, consumption soon outstripped production, so imports were automatically sucked in to meet demand. This led to a balance of payments crisis, so the government (if it was all well-timed, now installed for their next term in office) would deflate the economy by cutting public spending, increasing taxes and raising interest rates. Thus, the economy would abruptly go into reverse, increasing unemployment, driving wages down and eventually forcing the government to boost the economy, starting the whole cycle off again.

The most significant failure of demand management was that it could not ensure adequate levels of investment – which had long been the biggest single weakness in the British economy (see Unit 19). With production control still with the private sector, there was no direct control over investment, so lack of investment continued to dog the economy, causing low productivity and loss of competitiveness. Hence, injecting demand into the economy caused rising consumer spending, but this could not be met by the unproductive British economy, so it led to an influx of cheaper imports, and subsequent balance of payments deficits.

The British political elite was still determined to maintain Britain as a world power, which meant continued high military spending and a high level of the pound, with the City’s interests being put firmly before those of the domestic economy. Demand management did nothing to alter this central problem. Indeed, the cost of maintaining a high pound since the Second World War has been heavy. It has meant constant high interest rates to hold speculative capital in London and to reassure a nervous financial community, at the cost of discouraging private manufacturing investment. It has cheapened imports, which has ensured high penetration of the domestic market with foreign goods. It has left the economy vulnerable to periodic flights from Sterling by nervous foreign holders of a patently overvalued currency, creating numerous sterling crises (often precipitated by balance of payment difficulties). Always the result has been less investment in the domestic economy.

British military spending since the Second World War has consistently been the second highest in the world (after the US). Again, the effect of this on the domestic economy has been devastating. Nowhere more so than in research and development (R&D), where up to 40% of all research scientists and engineers have been tied up in R&D programmes geared to military ends. The obvious contrast here is with the most technologically efficient and therefore most competitive countries since the war – Japan and Germany. Denied a large army and with low military expenditure, their research scientists were obliged to concentrate on civilian projects. Instead of being

diverted into wasteful military expenditure, researchers could concentrate on rapid technological development and expansion in the manufacturing sector.

With successive British governments starving the economy so they could maintain world status, it is not surprising that things steadily got worse for the British economy. While things looked good in 1950, as Britain enjoyed a relative advantage over its devastated competitors, by the end of the decade it was increasingly obvious that it was falling behind on every measure, including investment levels, productivity and growth. From being a high wage, high growth economy at the end of the Second World War, it was now well on the way to becoming a low waged, high cost economy, due primarily to low productivity caused by lack of investment.

## **Desperate Measures**

By the early 1960s, the state of the economy led both the Tories and Labour to temporarily abandon demand management policies and flirt once again with economic planning. Many of Britain's leading competitors (notably Germany, Japan and France) had some state control over domestic investment. In Japan, the 1950s saw government embark on a gigantic industry-financing programme through special development agencies, with measures to target specific industries with investment. In West Germany, the government maintained a wide ranging investment programme, as well as taking ownership stakes in some 3,000 enterprises.

However, it was France that drew most attention in Britain. Here, the state consulted with firms and unions to set targets for future levels of output in each industrial sector. The government then directed industrial policy and provided finance and other assistance to enable the targets to be met. Though the growth targets were rarely actually met, the system was successful in that it ensured high levels of investment for the domestic economy. In dire need of some cure for the ailing British economy, it was to the French model that the Tory government turned in the 1960s. It set up the National Economic Development Council (NEDC), a tripartite body made up of unions, the state and management, with the task of formulating a co-ordinated national economic strategy. The National Economic Development Office (NEDO) was to prepare reports on targets and implement the strategy.

This first move towards economic planning met considerable opposition from within the Tory Party, the Treasury and the capitalist media. The result was a quick U-turn, and the 1963 launch of the "dash for growth". This was simply a demand management strategy based on the idea that injecting high levels of demand into the economy for a sustained period would stimulate investment, raise productivity, and thus enable the expansion to become self-sustaining. No real answer was provided on how the government would deal with the immediate influx of imported goods, with its inevitable balance of payments crisis and consequent run on the pound. Inevitably, the policy was a complete failure, as, swamped with imports, a massive balance of payments deficit occurred, and capital ran scared from the faltering British economy. In the event, the Tories avoided having to deal with the crisis caused by its "dash for growth", by losing the election to Labour in 1964.

## **Labour from crisis to carnage**

The new Wilson government was committed to abandoning demand management through the introduction of a corporate system, again based on the French model. They resurrected both NEDC and NEDO and set up the Department of Economic Affairs, charged with formulating a National Economic Plan in conjunction with NEDC and NEDO. It was also designed to counter the influence of the Treasury. Further Economic Development Committees were established both within industries and regions in order to set targets for growth at the micro-level.

In the event, Labour's grand corporate economic plan under which the government, management and unions would come together to steer the economy came to nothing. The severe balance of payments crisis inherited from the Tories led to a crisis in which Labour was urged by its left wing to devalue the pound to make exports cheaper and imports dearer' and so overcome the crisis. However, this would threaten the pound's role as a reserve currency and undermine the City, so the government rejected it. Importantly, the US also opposed devaluation, as the US economy was also in steady decline, only just out-performing Britain's growth and productivity, so the US wanted sterling to remain as the last line of defence in support of the dollar.

Instead, the government introduced surcharges and deposit schemes on imports, as well as the usual deflationary policies to reduce demand. However, these were to no avail, and the crisis deepened until the pound was finally devalued in 1967. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, James Callaghan, resigned over his refusal to devalue the pound and was replaced by Roy Jenkins who immediately set about causing more havoc by further deflating the economy instead of attempting to take advantage of the lower pound to boost domestic production and exports. As a result, despite the ending of the balance of payments crisis, the Labour government entered the 1970 election with a depressed economy, rising unemployment, and inflationary pressure.

Even without the balance of payments crisis, Labour's move towards economic planning was flawed. The French system, which they sought to emulate, had within it considerable powers of state control over private firms in order to ensure investment levels. There was a consensus across the political spectrum that the state should have the power to intervene in the running of capitalism. This was not the case in free market Britain. Labour's plans did not include any control over individual firms on the grounds that this would prove unacceptable both to capitalism and the British elite. Without such controls, Labour's plans amounted to little more than government providing money to industry in the hope that they would use it wisely.

The dawn of the 1970s saw a new Conservative government take the reigns as the British economy slumped into deep crisis. The long post-war boom had sheltered the increasing uncompetitiveness of Britain's economy – but it was now well and truly coming to an end. With the world economy sliding towards recession, the British economy became increasingly exposed, as competition increased in the tightening world market.

## **Reformism vs. militancy**

Before examining the economic highlights of the 1970s, it is worth looking at developments in the British Labour movement in the 1950s and 1960s. There were three main options open to labour activists in defending the economic interests of British workers; Marxism-Stalinism, anarcho-syndicalism, or reformism.

The Marxist solution to Britain's economic failing was to argue for greater state control in order to plan the economy. The amount of state control argued for varied from party to party, from entire state economic control of production to selective control over the "commanding heights" of the economy, to an extension of the French- style corporate policies introduced by Labour in 1964. For the anarcho-syndicalists, the solution lay in the strength of the working class and its ability to organise in order to get rid of capitalism and the economy, and replace it with a system of production and consumption which was under direct workers' control. Prior to the Second World War, syndicalism had significantly shaped Britain's working class movement and, though after the war the anarcho-syndicalist movement remained small, some of the basic ideas developed within British syndicalism were to continue having a significant influence on post-war workers' militancy.

The road of reform and participation with capitalism was not really that of the labour activists, but of the union leaders, who took every possible opportunity to steer their organisations into deals with government. The union leaders, having being elevated into the decision making process during the war years, were anxious to maintain their influence in the post-war era (see Unit 19). They preached acceptance of the permanence of capitalism and the idea that the interests of union members were best served by the unions' ability to work within capitalism. Thus, union leaders increasingly viewed the ability to make gains not as dependent on collective strength, but upon the ability to negotiate. In other words, success depended on negotiation skills, including creating the 'right' environment for negotiations to take place – most important of which was an atmosphere of trust between union officials and management. Lord Citrine (ex-TUC General Secretary) described his role after the war;

*"I set about cultivating the acquaintance of the employers and government officials, and tried to play straight with them, and I found that they did the same with me. We new that ours was a continuing relationship and that if one snatched a temporary advantage by sharp practice, the other would get his own back at some later date."*

'Sharp practice' included strikes, and virtually every joint negotiating body contained a clause prohibiting strike action until the negotiation machinery was fully exhausted. Wildcat actions were vehemently opposed by union leaders for putting the negotiation process at risk and undermined good relations, and any workers who did take strike action outside the process faced condemnation from management and their own union. Union leaders were so keen on keeping good relations with bosses that they often ignored their own union rules and met informally with management to settle disputes. Nicholas (General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers' Union, TGWU) told the Royal Commission set up to investigate the unions in the 1960s;

*"I don't know how many times I have sat in the lounge of the Station Hotel in York and met my opposite number on the engineering employers side and reached a deal."*

Nor were these 'behind the scenes' deals confined to 'right wing' union leaders. Leading left wingers Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon met secretly with Ford management to end a 9 week strike 1970, and then imposed the agreement on the workforce over the heads of the established negotiating committee. However, it was the union leaders' willingness to do anything for a few crumbs from the tables of high society that most sickened the workers they were supposed to represent. When the Tories won power in 1951, the union leadership immediately reassured them that the change of government need not risk the good relations between the unions and the state. The TUC announced that;

*“...since the pre-war days, the range of consultation between both sides of industry has considerably increased, and the machinery of consultation has enormously improved. We expect of this government that they will maintain the full practice of consultation.”*

For their part, the Tories were happy to have good relations with the union leadership. The state interventionist wing was firmly in control, and they were keen to demonstrate that they were not an anti-trade union party. Rab Butler, new Chancellor of the Exchequer, quickly proposed a formal agreement with unions; through which union leaders were given a major role on the understanding that they would control pay. Having seen the agreement over pay reached with the Labour government collapse through rank and file opposition, union leaders signalled their unwillingness, and the Tories quickly dropped the idea, not wanting to risk the consensus.

The union leaders were equally anxious to please their new government. When, at the 1952 TUC Congress, a resolution went against the wishes of the leadership, demanding that a list be prepared of industries ready for fresh round of nationalisation, they acted to sabotage it, thinking that further nationalisation would encroach onto the more profitable sectors of capitalism and would be opposed outright by the Tories. A report prepared for the next congress listed only the water industry, which was mostly controlled by local authorities. A post-war pattern of industrial relations emerged, based on the social democratic idea of workers and capitalism coming together in the interests of society as a whole. As Tory leader Macmillan enthused, co-operation would;

*“...get rid of what had been one of Britain’s greatest hindrances, the idea of two sides of industry and the talk of us and them. I prefer the slogan of working together.”*

The Labour government of 1964 reiterated these sentiments, with Harold Wilson appealing to the ‘Dunkirk spirit’ and the ‘I’m Backing Britain’ campaign. Boss-worker differences were now apparently subordinate to the “national interest”.

The new corporatist vision meant prominence for union leaders. By the 1950s it became the norm for them to be elevated to the House of Lords or given knighthoods. A look at 1950s union leaders reveals such people as Sir Vincent Tewson, Sir William Lawther, Sir Thomas Williamson and Sir Lincoln Evens. The 1958 opening of the new TUC headquarters was accompanied by a fanfare of The Royal Horse Guards in the Queen’s presence. A special issue of postage stamps marked the TUC centenary and the Queen was guest of honour at the centenary ball. Railway Union leader Jimmy Thomas could boast the Prime Minister acting as a witness at his daughter’s wedding. By 1969, the Sunday Times assured its readers that Vic Feather, TUC General Secretary;

*“...is never out of place whether he is choosing wine and a cigar in a smart restaurant or making deals with employers and Ministers”.*

The combination of trappings of high office and an apparently permanent status within British capitalism ensured the heyday of British union leaders. In return, they dutifully set up countless negotiation committees. For example, by 1960, GMBW Union alone was represented on 145 permanent negotiation bodies across 16 industries, and, by the early 1960s, 70% of Britain’s workers had their wages and working conditions regulated by collective agreements negotiated through the unions. Union membership was increasingly organised by employers through closed shop agreements, and it steadily rose, reaching over 11 million by the late 1960s.

In reality, for all their apparent status, the power of union leaders remained largely illusionary. Since the British state refused to intervene directly in the domestic economy, investment levels remained with the private sector, and without any government economic planning; the union leaders could not justify any role for themselves. Capitalist managers made all the decisions, then, if they chose, they could refer to the unions for consultation. Union leaders were left to try

to get the best possible deal out of a situation they had no control over. Since Britain's economy was increasingly uncompetitive, this meant trying to get the best deal from companies faced with falling profits. It was impossible to get blood out of this stone and, by the 1960s, pay and conditions of British workers was falling behind those in Europe. While union leaders could complain bitterly about poor levels of investment in Britain's domestic economy, despite their newly elevated status, they were powerless to do anything about it.

## **Shop stewards' movement**

British union leaders thought that if they could persuade the government to adopt European style social market policies, they would further increase their power by being involved in the economic planning process. However, this was an illusion, not least because the workers – their members – would have stood in the way. The European model depended on a passive workforce and good industrial relations as well as state directed investment. The rise of fascism and the effects of the war had destroyed the workers' movement in most of Europe and Japan. After the war, the US moved in to quickly establish highly centralised social democratic unions, under extensive state control. Many experienced prolonged periods of industrial peace – Germany remaining virtually strike-free until the early 1960s.

Britain, neither occupied nor defeated, and with a syndicalist tradition of class struggle, direct action and hostility to state control, retained an influential militancy in the workers' movement. As the trade union leaders increasingly compromised and co-operated with capitalism, so the workers reacted by becoming more militant. So, by the early 1950s, the British workers began ignoring the calls of their union bosses to show restraint and workplace militancy began to reassert itself, based around the shop stewards' movement.

The shop stewards' movement that emerged in the 1950s was very similar to that which had emerged during the First World War (see Units 6 and 14). The idea that workers and management should work together in social partnership for the benefit of all was fundamentally rejected. Instead, they recognised that workers and management had nothing in common, but were opposed in a constant struggle over management, seeking to squeeze as much profits as possible out of the workforce, and the latter struggling to make the best of their conditions. The main tactic advocated in the workplace was confronting the boss class through direct action, most notably the unofficial or wildcat strike, which ignored both union authority and established negotiation procedures.

The shop stewards' movement also kept up many of the anti-state traditions of syndicalism, seeing state attempts to regulate industrial relations as little more than an attempt to undermine workers' power. Far from being a neutral arbitrator, the state was recognised as acting in the interest of capitalism against workers. Therefore, the shop stewards' movement was committed to free collective bargaining, where workers' strength and right to organise was dependent on collective strength rather than state regulation. In general, both the unions and the state's attempts to regulate union activities were bitterly resisted.

Not surprisingly, the shop stewards' movement was unpopular with British capitalism. Swiftly, the establishment, media and the state began to point to this as the reason for Britain's ailing economy. By the 1960s, tired of having its attempts to regulate the unions spoiled by militant

action, the Labour government instituted a Royal Commission to investigate the ‘British disease’ – a strike prone workforce.

British capitalism’s hatred of the shop stewards paled alongside that of their own union leaders. As the yes-men tried to cosily integrate themselves into British capitalism, they were constantly frustrated by their militant members, who ignored agreed procedures and resisted attempts to get them to accept limiting pay. The leaders knew they were only accepted by capitalism for the role they could play in bringing stability to the workplace, and this was precisely what they (unlike many of their European counterparts), could not deliver on, due to the strength of workplace militancy. Right up to the 1980s, it is not an exaggeration to say that there existed in Britain virtually two union organisations, one based in the workplace around shop stewards, and one based on union structures outside the workplace, in negotiation bodies and the auxiliary machinery of government.

Labour’s Royal Commission found that 93% of British strikes were unofficial, organised and controlled by the workers themselves. It was this that constantly foiled attempts by British capitalism to compensate for its backwardness by squeezing wages through pay restraint. In 1948–50, 1956–7, 1961, 1962–3, 1965–69, 1972–74, and 1975–9, time and again, various governments attempted to introduce some form of pay restraint with the union leaders’ tacit agreement, only to be defeated by the militant workforce.

## **Why shop stewards failed**

Paradoxically, while backward industry was a cause of the pressure on wages, the workers also held back attempts to modernise. New machinery meant redundancies, and was often bitterly resisted by workers. In one well-known example, the newsprint industry enjoyed strong workplace organisation, which prevented modernisation, forcing the owners to retain increasingly antiquated machinery. By 1970, workplace militancy had escalated so that a constant battle was being fought for industrial power.

Herein lies one of the primary weaknesses of the post-war shop stewards’ movement; the lack of a wider political perspective on an alternative to capitalism. After the nationalisation debacle (see Unit 19), workers became disillusioned with nationalisation. Unfortunately they associated this state control idea with workers’ control and its wider political aims, so they inadvertently ditched this crucial element of working class militancy – commitment to long-term political and economic control through direct democracy. In other words, they had no revolutionary perspective. Whereas syndicalism had always sought to widen the day-to-day struggle to the long-term aim, the post-war shop stewards’ movement, though it used some of the tactics and ideas of syndicalism, had lost the idea of conscious struggle for an alternative to capitalism. Hence, while syndicalism sought to gain increasing control of the workplace in preparation for a final conflict in which control of work would be taken from capitalists and the state, the shop stewards held no such aim.

The lack of revolutionary goals did not seem a problem in the long post-war boom, when continuously rising standards of living fed off spiralling profits. But when recession came in the 1970s, capitalism began to fail. The choice then was to either seek to replace capitalism or follow capitalist logic and accept redundancies and falling living standards until capitalism moves out of slump (assuming it does).

However, there are wider problems with lack of revolutionary political content – particularly in building solidarity both within and across workplaces and industries, and within and across communities. At its centre, anarcho-syndicalism seeks both national and international organisations based on common struggle and solidarity. The aim, both organisationally and politically, is to unite disparate workers’ struggles and organisations into one common revolutionary goal. The shop stewards’ organisations concentrated activity in the immediate workplace, where the aim of improving conditions could be best served. Links with workers in other industries or even within other sections in the same factory were, at best, tentative. With no national-level organisation or network to link workers across industries, they had to fall back on the union bureaucracy to direct and co-ordinate events beyond the immediate workplace. Inevitably, in such cases, trade unions appeared to ‘sell out’ as they negotiated through their leaders a compromise with management.

Even worse was the lack of links with the community. Given the changes taking place within industry, with massive restructuring and shifts away from mining and manufacturing to more specialised factory or office-based work, community was critical. In coal mining communities, most people worked in the same place, so community organisation had been inevitable. But with wide scale suburbanisation, commuting from a wider area to specialised workplaces and increased ‘mobility’ in the workforce, community-based organisation became essential – and it was almost entirely absent from the shop stewards’ movement.

With no common long-term aim, no wider political perspective, and no common umbrella organisation or principles, workers restricted their perspective to their immediate workplace or, at best, their industry or trade. The result was a fragmented, sectionalised movement that was extremely militant in furthering immediate aims, but viewed wider events and other workers with apathy or even antipathy. It was not uncommon for workers as consumers to condemn groups of workers taking action, or argue that the unions had become too powerful, only to then denounce their own management and back their anti-management attitudes with local action. The result was bitter disputes between workers that often bordered on farce.

It would be wrong to say that there was no class solidarity at all – wide support for the miners in both 1972 and 1974, and the wider mass mobilisation against Heath’s anti-trade union legislation shows it existed. However, there was no national level federated organisation to co-ordinate class struggle on a broad front and promote wider political revolutionary ideas and anti-capitalist education. In 1972, dockers seeking to extend the docks and harbour scheme to container terminals picketed container depots and began to turn away lorries. Lorry drivers – members of the same union – picketed the docks in retaliation. Five London dockers were then imprisoned under Heath’s anti-union legislation and, in response, the lorry drivers quickly called off their action and came out in support of the dockers. Such confused, counter-productive action would have been avoided if militant workers organised themselves nationally across industries.

## **The Communist Party**

The Communist Party played its own inimitable part in the failure of the post-war shop stewards’ movement. The British CP emerged from the war with 56,000 members (its highest ever), and immediately fell prey to ever-increasing reformism as it tried to extend its influence within the Labour Party. By 1958, it dropped the Soviet style approach in favour of a parliamentary so-



cialist model. Casting aside the Marxist-Leninist idea of becoming the working class vanguard, it argued that the Labour Party failed to bring about socialism because its non-socialist right wing accepted “the framework of the capitalist economy and state”. The CP strategy was to take over the Labour Party left and then purge the right, making it the political organisation of the working class. This would then secure state power through elections, and take over the economy. By 1966, CP General Secretary John Gollan argued that;

*“...historically, Marxists have always preferred the peaceful transition to socialism ...here in Britain... we see the possibility of a new type of parliament with a majority of socialists and communists carrying through the social measures for a socialist transition.”*

In other words, the British CP (along with most other European Communists) fell back on the reformism of the Second International, which had dominated Marxism prior to the Russian Revolution in 1917 (see Units 12 and 13). The only difference was it accepted the Labour Party was the mass organisation of the working class and so sought to influence it from within. Where left wing Labour candidates stood for election, CP candidates did not stand, and instead campaigned for the Labour Party, earning tributes from the Labour hierarchy in the process.

The CP’s switch from its pre-war anti-parliamentarianism, pro- industrial action strategy to post-war reformist electoralism was significant because of its ongoing influence within the union movement. Since it still sought to gain positions within the union hierarchy through which it could exert influence on the Labour Party, the CP now switched from organising in the workplace to organising within union structures. So, it changed sides in the increasingly two- sided union movement. To the extent it did still organise in the rank and file, this was primarily aimed at getting CP members and sympathisers elected on the union hierarchy. Instead of challenging the drift to reformism then, the CP was now strengthening it.

In itself, the CP’s strategy was apparently successful. It achieved growing influence in the top union hierarchy and by 1975, claimed 6 out of the 27 NUM Executive, 10 out of the 27 TGWU Executive, a majority on the ASLEF Executive, and representatives on virtually every other union executive across the country. But, isolated from the workplace, these CP members had to abide by the rules. The net result was that workers were as likely to be told by a CP union official to abide by procedures and return to work, as they were by the more reformist variety.

The strategy was also tied to the fortunes of Soviet Russia and the Labour Party, and its willingness to tolerate the parasitic relationship (which it wasn’t). By 1975, the CP was in terminal decline, as the USSR failed and Labour struggled to please both the City and its grass roots. However, the damage was done, and the CP had effectively helped to deflect a generation of working class militants away from the workplace into the dead end of parliamentary politics.

## **Failure of reformism**

Reformism was a fundamental flaw in a union movement that, by the 1970s, seemed invincible. As the 1970s recession hit, the Heath government began shifting back to the free market policies, which were soon to be taken much further by Thatcher. Central to these policies was crushing the unions. Hence, the Heath government attempted to introduce vicious anti-trade union laws, leading to their humiliating defeat as the miners brought down the government in 1974.

But behind the apparent strength lay profound weakness. As capitalism slumped and cuts and closures began to occur, instead of going on the offensive against capitalism, with no political

framework or wider organisation, many workers saw no option but to limit the job losses and cuts as far as possible, and wait for the capitalist economy to expand again. Instead of recession being seen as an opportunity to attack the failure of capitalism, they were forced onto the defensive. As millions of workers were thrown on the dole, unions who had claimed the credit for the boom times now began to crumple. They had tied their fortunes to capitalism. Now, Thatcher emerged, driven by free market ideas that saw no real role for unions, and took the opportunity of recession to immediately set about crushing the workplace militancy that Britain's elite had always hated.

The Syndicalist Workers' Federation (see Unit 19) could have played the role that the shop stewards' movement so badly needed. It had always attempted to link workplace militancy to a revolutionary perspective, and from 1950, it consistently argued for independent industry-wide unions to both co-ordinate day to day struggle and pursue the long term aim of replacing capitalism with a society based on direct democracy and workers' control of work. Moreover, it also called for workers to organise internationally, keeping alive the anarcho-syndicalist international (International Workers' Association) that, by the 1960s, was reduced to a handful of groups. In 1968, exhausted from years of struggle against the reformism of the CP and trade unions, the SWF collapsed – just at the time when the world's revolutionary movement began to emerge after the stagnation of Stalinism. Indeed, by the mid 1970s, the International Workers' Association sprang back to life and has been growing ever since (see Unit 21).

## **Failure of social democracy**

The 1970s slump should be seen for what it was – a failure of reformism and social democracy. Keynesian demand management and the limited state planning of the European social market economic model both failed to bring the promised stability to capitalism. Crucially, Keynesianism had been developed and adopted to avoid a repeat of the mass unemployment of the 1930s – but the 1970s slump looked all too familiar. Having failed to deliver, the state interventionist ideas that underpinned post-war social democracy were swept away. As profits collapsed, free market solutions re-emerged. Suddenly, state intervention was labelled as the cause of both unemployment and inflation, and the new right argued that wages should be allowed to fall until the point that capitalists would once again be prepared to invest and employ workers. The 1930s and what it led to (the Second World War) were forgotten, and workers once again were ruthlessly starved into taking starvation wages by a right-wing government acting on behalf of the same old capitalist elite. As British wages dropped and goods cheapened, the revitalised free market orthodoxy spread quickly from its British heartland and the US, overcoming state interventionism across Europe.

The state interventionists have since attempted to rewrite history. Social democrats such as New Labour now regularly argue that the world slump of the 1970s was due to oil prices rises imposed by OPEC (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries – basically a middle-east cartel) in 1974. They maintain that the oil crisis blew the world economy off-course, and in 'normal' conditions, state intervention can ensure long-term growth and stability. This attempt to turn the economic clock back is simply nonsense. The reality is that capitalism is historically prone to boom and bust, and the Second World War led to an extended but not unprecedented period of capitalist boom. By the 1960s it was no longer sustainable. Declining profitability and currency instability as the hegemony of the dollar come to an end, led to falling growth worldwide. The

inevitable collapse was made more spectacular by the oil-related events of 1973–4, but it was not caused by them. The idea that capitalism can be made stable through state intervention had been exposed as a myth, and it remains one.

In Britain, the slump was all the worse because of the relative weakness of British capitalism. The under-invested British economy simply could not compete with the higher performing economies in other countries. In 1973–6, UK industrial production fell by 8% and unemployment doubled, manufacturing profits collapsed and inflation climbed to 25%. The Labour government responded by abandoning Keynesian demand management for free market orthodoxy. Keynes would have had them boosting demand to cut unemployment, but they brought in deflationary policies in order to drive down inflation instead. Public spending was cut, wages restrained and the money supply cut. Prime Minister Callaghan noted that it was no longer possible to spend your way out of crisis, and waited for high unemployment to force down wages and stimulate the economy.

Against this background, the unions and militant workers alike floundered. The reality was that reformist politics no longer offered any solution, and following reformism was now all they knew. Worldwide, there was a dire need for a revolutionary alternative, but sadly it did not exist in any strength, having been worn down by years of Stalinism and reformism.

## **Thatcherism**

Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 on a radical programme based on control of the money supply and removing state regulation to let the free market flourish. In fact, Thatcher only embarked on the deflationary programme in order to smash organised labour. Between 1979–82, Britain lost a quarter of its manufacturing base. A worldwide slump was aggravated in Britain by a Thatcher government determined to rid the economy of workers' militancy, by using mass unemployment to smash workplace organisation.

With the mass unemployment tactic, there was no real need for the union leaders, so they were simply ignored by government and management alike. Union leaders, used to cucumber sandwiches at Number 10, and who viewed their power resting on their negotiating ability, suddenly found management refusing to negotiate. Out in the cold, they were reduced to demanding negotiation at any price, banging on the door pleading to be let back in. In virtually every dispute since, the main demand from union leaders is that management return to the negotiating table. All management has to do is agree to talks and the dispute is suspended or called off. The goal of union leaders is to return to the golden years of countless permanent negotiation bodies, where they had a safe and secure position within capitalism.

Thatcher had been a junior minister in the Conservative government brought down by the miners' strike of 1970–1, and had never forgotten it. She realised that if workers' militancy was to be defeated, the leadership was irrelevant — it was workplace organisation that had to be crushed. Using the full force of the state, the Tories set about picking off groups of workers one by one, exposing a key weakness. If the Thatcher onslaught was to be even partially resisted, it would require a united effort of a large section of the working class, and well co-ordinated movement. After years geared only to immediate gains, this was not going to happen. Solidarity just did not extend far enough outside the workplace, let alone across the working class. Instead, groups of workers were left to slug it out with little support, culminating in the year long miners'

strike of 1984–5, when the miners were left largely on their own to battle against the full might of the state.

## **Left wing resistance**

In the 1970s, with the CP moribund, some sections of the ‘new left’ did attempt to organise a national rank and file conference aimed at linking up activists within the workplace. These groups, many of which were formed under the direction of the International Socialists, now the Socialist Workers’ Party (SWP), produced a regular paper with a ranging 1,000–10,000 circulation. The “National Rank and File Movement” got off to a promising start, as over 500 activists attended the founding conference in 1973. Its best trait from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective was that it sought to organise across union divisions rather than within union structures. Sadly, however, it never broke free of the shackles imposed on it by the SWP, and became little more than a recruiting ground for the Party. As an SWP guru said at the time, the National Rank and File Movement formed “ a semi-permanent periphery of sympathisers who will in time be won over to our politics”.

In fact, the SWP struggled to control it. In the Leninist tradition, the SWP argued that the Party should form the political leadership of the working class. The problem was (as it is for all Marxist-Leninists) what approach to take towards organisations organised by themselves. With a standard basic Marxist-Leninist strategy that workers should form economic organisations (unions) under the leadership of the Party, they had no idea what to do about independent workers’ organisations.

So the SWP constantly worried that the National Rank and File Movement would begin to link the economic and the political, and begin to move towards anarcho-syndicalism. It constantly hammered home the view that the Rank and File Movement was no substitute for the Party and Rank and File newspapers were no substitute for the SWP newspaper, etc. The SWP worked to strictly limit their political content to calling for greater solidarity for workers in struggle, and criticising the Labour Party’s right wing. Consequently, Rank and File groups that were successfully SWP-controlled were limited to strike support functions, with little wider analysis or political content. Eventually, the SWP dropped the Rank and File Movement idea in favour of SWP workplace branches, which were controlled directly by the Party. A chance to organise across union lines linking up isolated workplace organisations had been lost.

## **Anarcho-syndicalists?**

The 1960s and 1970s were not a period during which anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists had much to congratulate themselves on. As the dogma of the Stalinist CP was swept away, however, anarchist ideas began to again fire the imagination. Anarchists were active in the struggle against the Vietnam war, and in organising direct action against nuclear weapons. In 1961, the Syndicalist Workers’ Federation (SWF) attempted to widen the struggle against the bomb by linking it to the wider struggle against militarism, by attempting to organise international strike action against nuclear weapons. But the SWF was tiny and, by the time anarchist ideas began to exert themselves, it was in terminal decline, collapsing in 1968.

Paradoxically, this was a year in which anarcho-syndicalism had so much to offer. The student and workers' protests in France caused a shock wave that inspired a new generation of revolutionaries, while the invasion of Czechoslovakia (now Czech Republic and Slovakia) by the USSR drove yet another nail in the coffin of a declining Communist Party. For the first time for decades, there was a gap for a radical political alternative to Marxism that anarcho-syndicalism could have provided.

Though anarchist ideas began to spread, influencing, amongst others, the emerging anti-war and ecological movements, anarchist ideas remained disjointed, rarely reaching beyond the level of protest. Some anarchist organisations did emerge, most notably the Anarchist Black Cross (ABC), which was set up to support the increasing number of prisoners arising from the return of radical protest. The ABC began publishing anarcho-syndicalist ideas through its magazine, *Black Flag*, which continues today.

In 1974, a small number of anarcho-syndicalists, tired of the lack of coherence within the wider anarchist movement, decided to re-launch the SWF and began to publish *Direct Action*. After several years of rapid development of its anarcho-syndicalist ideas and tactics, it merged into a new anarcho-syndicalist organisation, the *Direct Action Movement (DAM)* in 1979. It was the DAM that was to provide the launch pad for the *Solidarity Federation*.

Though during the 1970s Britain again had an anarcho-syndicalist presence, the re-launch of anarcho-syndicalism came too late to influence a workers' movement still foundering in reformism and struggling to counter the Thatcher onslaught. Although the theory of anarcho-syndicalism existed, the movement was too restricted in numbers, resources and tactics to have any meaningful influence on the dying shop stewards' movement. If things had been different, the core ideas of anarcho-syndicalism – organisation across workplaces and communities, direct action, direct democracy and rejection of party politics, bosses and union bureaucracies, could have been used by Britain's militant workers to great effect in the defence against Thatcher. Instead, we faced the defeat and virtual collapse of workplace militancy in Britain.

## **Postscript**

With the workers' movement defeated, the Thatcher government (as in the US) set about driving down wages and cutting benefits to force workers to accept a drop in living standards. This was to have a lasting effect, and these policies, which drove Thatcherism, persist to this day. Insecurity has now become the main feature of working class life, with survey after survey both in Britain and the US showing that the vast majority of people now live in permanent fear of losing their livelihood. On the back of this massive insecurity, employers have squeezed ever-increasing productivity to set against still-falling profits. Working class people are forced off benefits into taking jobs on poverty wages, to keep the competition going to drive down wages further.

Such has been the success of the Thatcher revolution that free market ideas, so discredited after the 1930s slump, are now hailed as the way to end world recession. State interventionist policies are portrayed as outdated and, in mainland Europe, the social market model is under constant pressure to follow the British/US model and deregulate Labour markets and cut social spending to drive down wages.

Massive global inequality is another tool currently used by global capitalist politicians to divide and rule the global working class. Increasingly pitched against each other and isolated, the

working class now lacks any organisational strength. Furthermore, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Marxist theories that underpinned much of the left since the war have now been thoroughly discredited.

Where next? The passing of Marxism and the failure of social democracy leave very few choices. Bypassing parliament and reformism is already a feature of modern workers' struggle, as the growing success of direct action across the anarchist-inspired sections of the environmental movement shows. Logically, the next step is to better co-ordinate and develop such initiatives into a unified revolutionary movement. This would mean the application of anarcho-syndicalist ideas. Indeed, over the past ten years anarcho-syndicalism has begun to go through a global-scale revival. In Unit 21, we shall examine the rebirth of anarcho-syndicalist ideas and the hope and new ways of organising that modern anarcho-syndicalism has to offer working class people struggling to come to terms with a rapidly changing world.

## Key points

- Successive British governments up to 1964 followed demand management policies based on Keynesian economic theory.
- There was an attempt after 1964 to introduce a planned economy through a version of corporatism.
- The election of the Thatcher government in 1979 saw a return to rampant free-market capitalism.
- Union leaders were committed throughout to reform, co-operation and participation with capitalism.
- A new shop stewards movement emerged in the 1950s.
- As the Communist Party moved toward reformism the 'new left' took its place.

## Checklist

1. What were the main failures of the policy of demand management?
2. In what way was Labour's move to corporatism flawed?
3. What was the attitude of the trade union leadership up to 1979?
4. Why did the shop stewards movement fail?
5. What was the attitude of the left?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What were the main failures of the policy of demand management?*

Demand management created a 'stop-go' economy. Boom and bust cycles occurred as governments used the controls to benefit themselves as elections approached. The results were a balance of payments crisis that led to deflationary policies, increasing unemployment, and a subsequent need for government to boost the economy again. Thus, inflation resulted and the cycle began again. These policies also failed to ensure adequate levels of investment.

### *2. In what way was Labour's move to corporatism flawed?*

The French corporate model, which the Labour Government tried to emulate, demanded a high level of state control; over private firms to ensure adequate investment. As this proved unacceptable to capitalism and the British elite, the government shied away from it. Instead, it provided money to industry in the apparently misguided hope that it would be used wisely.

### *3. What was the attitude of the trade union leadership up to 1979?*

The leaders of the trade unions went down the road of reform and participation with capitalism. They saw the ability to make gains dependent on their ability to negotiate, not on the collective strength of the workers. They embraced a corporatist vision, which would see them given a high status within capitalism, and saw their role as containing and minimising any militancy.

### *4. Why did the shop stewards movement fail?*

The shop stewards movement of the period lacked a common long-term aim. It had no wider political perspective to guide it after the end of the post-war boom. It never forged links with the community, as industry was restructured. There was no common umbrella organisation or principles, and workers did not generally extend their perspective beyond their own workplace.

### *5. What was the attitude of the left?*

The Communist Party moved towards reformism and sought to take over the Labour Party left. It switched from organising in the workplace to organising within union structures. As it declined other left wing groups attempted to set up a National Rank and File Movement. However, this was dominated by the SWP who sought to remain in control by limiting it to economic issues, leaving the wider political debate in the hands of the 'vanguard party' (itself).

## Suggested discussion points

- What is the future of workplace organisation in Britain?
- How can anarcho-syndicalism build resistance in Britain today?

## Further Reading

**Blaired Vision; Works Councils. Direct Action No. 1, 1996. ISSN 0261 8753. -SE-** Single article-sized run-down of trade unions and decline of social democracy in post-war Britain. Easy reading and (free from SelfEd) –not to be missed.

**Social democracy hits the rails. Direct Action No. 2, 1997. ISSN 0261 8753. -SE-** Follow-on from above, with a case study from a rail worker on works councils in the rail industry. Again, free from SelfEd.

**Workers' Control. K. Coates and T. Topham. MacGibbon and Kee Ltd, 1968. -LI-** Fascinating insight into the movement for workers' control in Britain. Consists of contemporary writings from trade unionists, Guild socialists and syndicalists. Unfortunately, by the time the authors were involved in the 1960s, 'workers' control' meant forming workers' councils and sitting as company directors... Nevertheless, unique.

**Revolutionaries in modern Britain. P. Shipley. Unwin Bros., 1976. ISBN 0370 11311x. -LI-** Gripping debate on the decline of the Communist Party and the rise of the 'new' left in the 1960s. In-depth analysis of the rise of the SWP and rebirth of the anarchist movement. A well-balanced effort with some excellent insights.

**The prawn cocktail party. C. Ramsey. Vision Paperbacks, 1998. -BS- -AK—LI-** Generally a 'socialist' perspective from a Labour Party member, an accessible account of British post-war politics. Subscribes to 'poor investment, city dominated' view of Britain and illustrates how far socialism has drifted from its original intentions. Solutions, such as unions and management joining forces against the City, reveals a lack of any class struggle perspective.

**Trade unions in Britain. K. Coates and T. Topham. -LI-** Fairly standard run-down of the post-war trade union movement up to the 1970s.

**I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels. A. Meltzer. AK Press. £12.95 ISBN 1873 176937. -AK-** Autobiography of this prominent British anarcho-syndicalist's activism from the 1930s to the 1990s.

**Winning the Class War. Direct Action Movement. £1 -SE- -AK-** Outline of the DAM's anarcho-syndicalist strategy of the 1980s.

**A Year of Our Lives. Dave Douglas. Hooligan. £3.50 ISBN 1869 012022 -AK-** Coverage of the coal strike of 1984–5 by a South Yorkshire mineworker and council communist. Ranges from welfare and community organisation to international solidarity and mass-pickets.

**Poll Tax Rebellion. Danny Burns. AK Press. £4.95 ISBN 1873 176503 — AK-** Photos, text and graphics on the activism which made the anti — poll tax movement successful. Gripping case study on the recent use of mass direct action.

**Out of the Frying Pan. Solidarity Federation. 1998. £1.50 -SE-** Analysis of works councils, highlighting their pitfalls in the light of proposals to introduce them in Britain. Also includes a case study of them in operation in France.

Notes: There are many (old) books about the workers'/union movement and the post-war British economy. Most are dry, academic or preaching Marxist, and very few give realistic weight to the influence of the workers' movement. Nevertheless, it is worth looking for such texts in libraries for general background information. The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester, M15 5HW), -BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).



## Unit 21: Global anarcho-syndicalism 1939–99

In Unit 13, we traced the history of international anarcho-syndicalist organisation, with the founding of the International Workers' Association (IWA) in Berlin in December 1922. The postscript to Unit 13 points out that, by the end of the Second World War, repression had wiped out much of the pre-war anarcho-syndicalist movement, leaving only a handful of much smaller organisations.

This Unit traces the more recent development of the IWA in the post-war era. In particular, we concentrate on the post-war CNT, and on the period since 1975, when new growth in the world anarcho-syndicalist movement has begun to occur again.

### This Unit aims to

- Trace the development of the IWA in the post-war era, following on from the period covered in Unit 13.
- Examine the re-emergence of the CNT in Spain.
- Look at the attempts to turn the CNT towards reformism.
- Analyse the reasons behind the formation of the CGT.

### Terms and abbreviations

**IWA:** International Workers' Association, the international anarcho-syndicalist movement, founded in 1922 (see Unit 13), note that the acronym is AIT in Spanish.

**CNT:** Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour). Anarcho-syndicalist union

**FAUD:** Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands, German anarcho-syndicalist union federation up to its suppression by the Nazis

**USI:** Unione Sindicale Italiana, Italian anarcho-syndicalist union federation.

**SAC:** Sveriges Arbtares Centralorganisation, Swedish revolutionary syndicalist union federation

**CC.OO:** Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras (Union confederation of Working Commissions) Workers' Commissions controlled by the communists

**COS:** Comité que coordina de las Organizaciones de Sindicato. The Co-ordinating Committee of Trade Union Organisations

**UGT:** Union General de Trabajadores (General Workers' Union). Reformist trade union controlled by the socialists

**CGT:** Confederación General del Trabajo. Broke away from the CNT over the issue of participa-

tion in workplace elections.

**PSOE:** Partido Socialista Obrero España. Spanish Socialist Party

## Introduction

The sixth IWA Congress was a major gathering held in 1936, a few months after the start of the Spanish Revolution. However, the world was a much-changed place by the time the seventh IWA Congress took place in 1951.

Even before the Spanish revolution and the outbreak of the Second World War, the IWA's sections had come under severe repression. The Italian (USI) and German (FAUD) sections were targeted by fascism in the 1920s and 1930s respectively. Unit 17 documents how the Spanish CNT was destroyed by a combination of Stalinist terror and Franco's murderous hatred of the Spanish working class. Its members were imprisoned and executed in their thousands. Anarcho-syndicalism, both in Europe and in Latin America, was put on the retreat – and then came the war.

The fascists in Europe, state capitalists in Russia and market capitalists in the US all saw anarcho-syndicalist organisations as a major threat to their power and interests. With Nazi occupation during the war in both eastern and western Europe, followed by Stalinist occupation in the east and American-sponsored economic reconstruction in the west, anarcho-syndicalist organisations were either smashed out of existence or reduced to small groups. This happened in one country after another, as destruction was wrought on vibrant and active revolutionary unions in places like France, Norway, the Netherlands, Poland and Bulgaria, to name a few.

In Italy, meanwhile, as the war finished, USI activists were returning, having spent two decades in exile. In fact, it was only in Sweden, which had been neutral throughout the war, that the revolutionary union (SAC) was able to continue functioning. After 1945 it was the IWA's one and only revolutionary union in Europe. It was here that the first steps towards rebuilding the IWA were taken. Before turning to these developments, however, it is worth taking a brief look at the IWA's activities during the war itself.

## The IWA 1939–45

Despite the persecution of anarcho-syndicalists both before and during the war, the IWA was not completely silenced. The General Secretariat, based in neutral Sweden, was able to issue a number of circulars. For instance, a statement issued in August 1944 announced the return to clandestinity of the Argentinian FORA, as a result of a military coup, and another in October denounced the persecution of the Polish anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists and their internment in Soviet concentration camps.

In December 1944, a further circular alerted workers internationally to the real intentions of the Americans and their allies;

*“The mission of the Allied troops is not only to destroy fascism but also to obstruct the struggles of the workers for their economic emancipation and freedom... When the war ends, the struggle of the working class must begin again to achieve new revolutionary conquests without concessions to the bourgeoisie, nor to capitalism.”*

This was borne out by the actions of the Allies in the ‘liberated’ countries, where the popular resistance movements were the first to be disarmed. Mindful of the events of 1917, the Allies were careful to protect the interests of the bourgeoisie, wherever they were. The IWA’s uncompromising revolutionary politics, opposed to concessions with capitalism, was to play an important role in both the 1950s as well as in more recent years. In May 1945, another IWA circular denounced Stalin’s promises to the Pope that the Soviet Union would not challenge the existing social order but, on the contrary, would oppose all revolutionary change in the world. This was confirmed when, a year later, another circular reported the repression of anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists in Bulgaria by the Stalinist puppet regime there.

Even before the Spanish Civil War, the IWA Congress had provided an anarcho-syndicalist analysis of the struggle against fascism, in which all alliances with the bourgeoisie and the communists were rejected. The subsequent years only went to prove how right this was, as capitalist democracies, communists and the Catholic Church all pursued the same objective – defeating the workers’ movement. By 1946, this had basically happened, and the IWA was in a serious state.

## **After the war**

Although some Sections had disappeared and others were scattered in exile, anarcho-syndicalism had not been extinguished. Little time was wasted, and moves to rebuild the International began almost right away in May 1946, when a conference (of which little written record remains) was held in Stockholm. With the ties between the world’s anarcho-syndicalist organisations renewed, the seventh IWA Congress took place in 1951. Despite being a much smaller organisation than prior to the war, there were still delegations from fourteen sections, including Argentina and Cuba. Also present, for the first time at an IWA Congress, was a British delegation from the Syndicalist Workers Federation (SWF – see Unit 19). The atmosphere was very much ‘re-launching the IWA’, and although the 1950s did see modest recovery, this was not to last and the International’s fortunes soon went into decline.

The seventh Congress was dominated by two distinct but related themes, which were to recur throughout the 1950s. One centred around the Spanish CNT, which had had an internal split for six years, both within its exile organisation and within its clandestine organisation inside Spain itself. The issue at stake was whether the CNT’s compromise with the other anti-fascist forces who had fought in the Civil War was now concluded or whether it should be maintained, including collaboration with the Republican institutions in exile, as long as the dictatorship remained.

Bearing in mind that the pre-war IWA had rejected any such compromise with the bourgeoisie and capitalism on one hand or the communists on the other (a position the International as a whole still supported), the CNT split required that the IWA choose which CNT delegation to recognise. Although the eighth IWA Congress in 1953 accepted that the collaborationist period was at an end and that the CNT had recovered its anarcho-syndicalist orthodoxy, thus establishing a fragile unity within the Spanish section, the arguments rumbled on for another decade within the CNT. However, by 1963, the CNT was united for the first time since the civil war, and was finally able to intensify its struggle against Franco’s dictatorship – a struggle in which it paid a bloody price.

This new atmosphere of agreement within the Spanish CNT did not herald a new lease of life for the IWA. By the 1960s, the International had begun to decline, due in large part to the

withdrawal of the large Swedish section, the SAC. This had happened as a culmination of the second major theme affecting the seventh (1951) IWA Congress — the growing reformism of SAC and its acceptance of Swedish capitalism's strategies for handling the economic crisis of the time. This was not the first instance of the reformist path intervening in the debates of anarcho-syndicalists. We have already seen in earlier units how such discussions played a part in the revolutionary workers movement in pre-First World War Britain, France and elsewhere. At the seventh Congress, SAC sought to amend the IWA's statutes to allow such collaboration with the state and also to enable it to stand in municipal elections. These attempts were rejected by the 1951 Congress and by the subsequent ones.

Thus, the 1950s and early 1960s was a time of much soul-searching. On one hand, the IWA was attempting to heal a rift within the Spanish CNT over collaboration with communist and bourgeois forces in the fight against Franco's dictatorship while, on the other hand, the SAC, aided by the Dutch section, was attempting to take the IWA towards collaboration with social democratic reformism.

## **The lure of reformism**

To understand why the SAC drifted away from the anarcho-syndicalist principle of non-collaboration with capitalism and the state, we have to look at how post-war Western Europe was organised (see also Units 19 and 20). With the US victory, the economies of those western countries formerly occupied by the Nazis, as well as Germany itself, were reconstructed, using massive amounts of US aid through the Marshall Plan. Part of this exercise was to ensure that the workers' movement was tamed through the imposition of labour relations systems based on 'social partnership' between reformist unions, capitalism and the state. As Western Europe recovered and economies began to prosper (including neutral Sweden's), many reformist unions across Western Europe began to see growing membership as workers saw apparent benefits of union co-operation with the state and management. The SAC wanted to be included in this and so drifted away from the IWA's anarcho-syndicalist principles.

SAC's principles had changed, but its attempt to drag the rest of the IWA along with it failed. The reaction of the majority of the other sections was uncompromising, and only the Dutch section supported SAC. While the IWA could have been described as a weak International, this did not justify or include compromising its principles. It was not about to be led into the reformist current that now had a firm grip on the workers' movement in an effort to increase membership.

The ninth IWA Congress duly rejected SAC's strategy in 1956. The Swedish section was sharply reminded that neither the 'possibilism' of Kropotkin in supporting the First World War, nor the treachery of the Second International (where social democracy had its roots) had brought any benefit to the workers' movement. On the contrary, concession and compromise had only helped to ease the rise of fascism and authoritarian communism.

The tenth Congress in Toulouse in 1958 once more rejected SAC's municipal activities and unemployment funds, both of which made it now bound to the Swedish state. With the IWA struggling to expand, there was some sympathy expressed towards SAC's difficulties in developing as a revolutionary union within Swedish society. However, the Congress firmly urged the SAC to clarify its position with regard to the IWA's principles and to anarcho-syndicalism in general. However, SAC was unable to do this, so the Congress had to accept that SAC was ex-

cluding itself from the International. The Swedish and Dutch delegations walked out, and the Congress reaffirmed its position that only organisations, which accept libertarian or anarchist communism and the principles of federation, could be admitted to the IWA.

The withdrawal of one of the founding sections of the IWA was a massive blow. The SAC had been the last functioning union within the IWA, and their exclusion brought it to its lowest ebb, where it remained during the 1960s and early 1970s. It was not until the late 1970s and 1980s that signs of real growth within the IWA appeared again.

## **IWA gets focused**

With Franco's death in 1975 and Spain's subsequent 'transition' towards a west-European style parliamentary democracy, the CNT was able to organise openly for the first time in four decades. This blossoming of anarcho-syndicalist activity in Spain played an important initial part in reversing the IWA's fortunes.

At the fifteenth IWA Congress in 1976, the International was still in dire straits, with only five sections in attendance, two of them operating in exile – the Spanish and Bulgarian sections. However, by 1980, the picture had changed, and the sixteenth Congress was held in a much more optimistic atmosphere. There was renewed interest in anarcho-syndicalism internationally and ten sections attended, including three new ones – from Germany, the US and Australia, and two that had recovered in the intervening years – the Italian and Norwegian sections. In Britain the SWF joined with other groups to form a new organisation, the Direct Action Movement (DAM), which took over as the British IWA section. This congress was also significant in that it was the first since 1936 in which the Spanish CNT was represented by a delegation from within Spain, rather than by the exile organisation.

The CNT had been officially legalised in May 1977, but began openly organising immediately after Franco's death. Slowly but purposefully, it stretched its organisation throughout Spain. By late 1976, the CNT was rapidly becoming a force to be reckoned with, as demonstrated by two key events they were involved in that year.

Firstly, there was the strike in October 1976 by 4,500 workers at a factory at Roca de Gavà, near Barcelona. Most of the workers were in the CC.OO, the Communist union, but the authority of the Francoist 'vertical union' still persisted at this time. The regional (Catalan) CNT mobilised all its solidarity and strength in support of the strikers, establishing a national solidarity movement and alerting the international workers' movement. This broke the isolation to which the CC.OO had condemned the strikers. The CNT called a general strike in solidarity in the immediate area, forcing the Communists to follow suit. This marked the first return to representation based on workplace assemblies after Franco. The second event took place on November 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>, which were days of action called by the COS, a joint union platform working for the establishment of a single union confederation. In the event, the whole Catalan CNT turned out in Barcelona, and the city was decked in red and black. The COS unions were nowhere to be seen. These events not only influenced the CNT throughout the rest of Spain, but also spelt the beginning of the end for the COS, as the socialist UGT confederation withdrew and it subsequently collapsed.

The CNT's growth and activity continued in 1977. In June, during the first legislative election campaign, the CNT occupied the Civil War-time premises of the Catalan CNT paper 'Solidaridad

Obrera', that was being used by the daily 'Solidaridad Nacional', in a bid to reclaim what had been taken by Franco. As news of the occupation spread, the Catalan CNT regional plenum, which was meeting at that precise time, was transferred to the occupied building. This, together with the appearance of the well-known veteran militant of the civil war, José Peirats, ensured that the CNT's action stole the front pages from the electioneering parties.

In 1977, the CNT held hundreds of public events across Spain. These included the public presentation at a press conference in Madrid of the CNT's first national committee, crowded public meetings at San Sebastian de los Reyes and Valencia, the "Jornadas Libertarias Internacionales de Barcelona", and celebrations of the legalisation of the CNT itself, to name a few. The result was a massive increase in the CNT's membership — in Catalonia, 6,000 members in October 1976 had become 140,000 by the end of 1977.

It wasn't only propaganda activities that helped the CNT's growth. Direct action, at the core of the CNT's anarcho-syndicalism, was also on the rampage. In Catalonia, in September 1977, a petrol station workers' strike broke out. The CNT was strong in this sector after hundreds of workers joined en masse. Right from the start of the strike, solidarity actions spread. On the second day, there were large demonstrations in Barcelona; by the third and fourth days, the solidarity actions had spread beyond Catalonia. On the fifth day, the Governor of Barcelona brought the bosses and workers' representatives together, urging them to sign an agreement. On the sixth day, the strike was over.

In October, the CNT publicly denounced the Moncloa Pact. This was a social and political pact, which was a kind of social partnership arrangement between the state, bosses and unions, typical of west European social democracy. Taking the rank and file of the UGT and CC.OO along with it, the CNT held a massive demonstration of more than 300,000 workers. Although all the other Spanish trade union confederations were still supporting the Pact, the Spanish ruling class were beginning to get seriously worried about the CNT's growing strength.

With such rapid growth of anarcho-syndicalism in Spain, it is little wonder that it should rub off internationally, resulting in renewed growth for the IWA. While some of this new growth was undoubtedly spurred on by direct influence of the CNT, as others saw what could be achieved with anarcho-syndicalist ideas, some was also a result of similar economic conditions occurring in various countries at the same time.

As global recession began to bite, many workers saw that there was little to be gained any more from social democracy, and began to turn to the more militant politics and methods of anarcho-syndicalism.

The growth of the IWA continued into the 1980s and most of the existing sections were able to consolidate their positions. There were new sections, such as those in Japan and Brazil. Also, the French and Italian sections began to function as genuine revolutionary unions, by having enough members in the same workplaces to start to call for and organise militant action. In addition, those smaller sections that were still functioning as propaganda organisations were able to debate and experiment with tactics and strategies aimed at one day taking similar mass action in the workplace.

## **The CNT under attack**

Unfortunately, though not surprisingly, the Spanish state did not idly sit by and allow the CNT to grow unchecked. On the contrary, moves were made, firstly to 'integrate' the CNT, to bring it into partnership with the state, and secondly, when this strategy failed, to provoke a split within the organisation.

In fact, well before the spectacular growth of the CNT, and early in the 'transition' period, the manoeuvres to deflect the CNT from its anarcho-syndicalist path were already underway. Martín Villa, Civil Governor of Barcelona and a former leading light of the old 'vertical unionism' of the dictatorship years, travelled to Brazil to arrange the return to Spain in early 1976 of Diego Abad de Santillán. It was hoped to use de Santillán's historical significance from the Civil War period to influence the orientation of the newly invigorated CNT.

The first activities of the ensuing conspiracy within the CNT centred on the taking over of the Catalan regional commission, set up in February 1976 to organise the first Catalan regional plenum. Despite the presence and arguments of 'loyal' anarcho-syndicalists, this provisional body took initiatives that contravened the CNT's statutes and principles, including a compromise with the UGT and other unions to create the 'Alianza Sindical'. This move was at the instigation of people close to Martín Villa, and the aim was to use the CNT to hold back the Communist CC.OO union confederation.

All the underhand manoeuvring hindered the work of the first regional plenum, but immediately there were reactions against the attempts to divert the CNT into the path of integration with the Spanish state. As the events of October-November 1976 at Roca de Gavà and Barcelona show, the CNT's membership was in no mood to be led in the direction desired by the puppets of social democracy in the Catalan regional commission. Thus, despite the inside job of the conspiracy, the CNT leaned unflinchingly towards anarcho-syndicalism, and the plans to take part in an anti-CC.OO front were quickly scuppered.

The state realised that trying to be devious and 'clever' wasn't going to work. So it resorted to what it knew best, and in early 1977 it unleashed a sustained wave of police repression against the CNT, coupled with a poisonous campaign in the press. Simultaneously, those who had infiltrated the CNT echoed the campaign, by denouncing the anarchism of those who would resist the state's attempts to control the organisation, in the clear hope that the 'ordinary' CNT member in particular, and the Spanish working class in general, would be put off by such 'extremism'. Vast numbers of people had only recently joined the CNT as part of its rapid growth – the hope was that these less 'hard line' members would obediently go along with the consolidation of the 'integrationists' power within the CNT, once these internal conspirators had taken over the key positions within the organisation.

## **A principled defence**

Despite the growing problems of internal conspiracy and state repression, the CNT's numbers and militancy grew rapidly, and by late 1977 it was capable of mobilising hundreds of thousands of workers, for example, against the Moncloa Pact. Also, its influence was spreading rapidly beyond workplace and trade union issues into the community, especially via the youth, cultural and arts scenes, with events like the 'Jornadas Libertarias'. For the powers-that-be, the CNT now

represented an even more serious threat to their plans for Spain's transition to bourgeois western democracy.

The state stepped up the repression, including the use of provocateurs, the most famous example of which was the government-inspired bomb at the Scala in Barcelona, at the end of a CNT demonstration against the Moncloa Pact. In the aftermath, many CNT activists were rounded up and thrown in jail, and the most vicious campaign yet to discredit the organisation was launched by the press, police, judiciary and political parties alike.

By this stage, the conspiracy within the CNT was beginning to realise the problem it faced. The CNT could not be taken over by simply dominating its structure through occupying 'key' positions. It continued to function, despite many of its main representative positions being in the control of the conspiracy. The agents of integration thus found themselves controlling an apparatus which lacked influence. Since they were so used to strictly hierarchical organisations, they hadn't grasped a basic tenet of anarcho-syndicalism. In the CNT, as in all anarcho-syndicalist organisations, it is the organisation itself, in other words, the assemblies of the various members, that frames the criteria for action and activity. It is these meetings of individual members, which make the decisions and make the committees of representatives carry them out, not the other way around.

As the penny dropped, the idea of the split was conceived. The conspirators came to the conclusion that a broken CNT would be better than an anarcho-syndicalist one. The conspirators changed tactics. They developed the idea of 'doubling the syndicates' as a means to gain more voting power for their collaborationist ideas. They also held meetings of selected members, and so established a parallel structure within the CNT. From this parallel structure, the idea of participating in the workplace and municipal elections was pushed. Thus inevitably, the run up to the CNT's fifth Congress in 1979 (the first since before the Civil War), was marked by a series of expulsions of delegates and members who had participated in and refused to denounce the parallel structure.

Fifty-two delegates denounced the fifth Congress as anti-democratic and tried to use the Spanish legal system to have the Congress annulled. However, not even a state system that was avowedly anti-CNT was able to agree to this, due to the sheer weight of evidence to the contrary. This ruling in effect also discredited the so-called 'Valencia Congress' (which had been held by thirty five of those delegates), as having nothing to do with the CNT.

## **The war of attrition**

However, the sad story of the CNT conspiracy didn't end with their successful defence against legal action by the conspirators. In 1983, after the sixth CNT Congress had once again rejected participation in workplace elections, twenty-six unions left the CNT, again because of participation in workplace elections, thus breaking the CNT agreements and statutes. The origins of this second split can be traced back to 1981-82, to collaboration between those agents of integration still active within the CNT and figures high up within the hierarchies of the Spanish Socialist Party, PSOE, and its allied union confederation, UGT.

The subsequent 'Reunification' Congress of these twenty-six unions with those represented at the Valencia Congress, therefore clearly had nothing to do with the CNT. By the same logic used to establish the legitimacy of the fifth Congress and the illegitimacy of the Valencia Congress,



it was and is clear that the 'Reunification' Congress was a meeting of two elements, both of which were separate from the CNT. However, this time, the court defied logic, and recognised the twenty-six unions as the CNT, thus 'validating' the 'Reunification' and leading to a long legal battle for the 'CNT' initials. This ran on into the early 1990s, when there was a final ruling in favour of the CNT-AIT, the 'real' anarcho-syndicalist CNT, leaving the phoney CNT to adopt the initials 'CGT'.

The outcome of over a decade of infiltration, manoeuvring and legal wrangling, added to oppression and attempts at manipulation from the state and the capitalist elite, was a 1990s CNT with a mere shadow of the influence and membership it was able to wield at the end of 1977. This was a major setback, not only for the CNT, but also for the anarcho-syndicalists it influenced throughout the world. However, it is nothing short of incredible that the CNT was still in existence by 1990, and a testament to the tenacity and solid principles of the CNT membership that it did. Indeed, it is the very principles and solid ideas at the core of anarcho-syndicalism, which have provided the same tenacity throughout the IWA, enabling it to survive the lean post-war decades, without being drawn in on the lure of reformism and social democracy.

## Postscript

With Marxism and social democracy now on the decline to oblivion, the shift to free market orthodoxy across the developed world is the key feature of the 1980s to the present. For some, this is a relatively new experience (e.g. China) and for others, like Britain, an all too clear reminder of the 1930s and before. Socialism has redefined and collaborated itself out of existence. The state approach to establishing a just world has failed miserably and completely. Now, it is a question of accepting the inevitability of ever-increasing war, environmental and social devastation and poverty under capitalism, or pursuing an anti-state strategy to replace capitalism, based on direct democracy, direct action, mutual aid and solidarity, workers' control of work, and communities' control of communities – in short, anarcho-syndicalism.

Given this choice, it is not surprising that the IWA in the 1990s began to grow steadily and purposefully. A further seven new sections affiliated to the IWA at the twentieth Congress in 1996, one of which is the Awareness League (the Nigerian section), making the IWA now represented on all five populated continents. Other new ground was also broken, with the expansion of the International into eastern Europe – new sections being welcomed from Russia and the Czech Republic, along with the reappearance of the IWA section in Bulgaria. In addition, the 1990s have seen the continued consolidation of the sections in western Europe and the Americas, while both continents have also seen new sections, such as in Portugal and Chile.

For the IWA of the 1990s, a major event (or series of events) was the fall of the Iron Curtain at the beginning of the decade. The various uprisings by east European workers were the final proof (as if any was still needed), of the total inability of authoritarian communism to free the working class. Undoubtedly, the future possibilities for the expansion of anarcho-syndicalism are even brighter now than was the case a decade ago.

Social democracy has now shed even the flimsiest excuse to justify itself as an alternative to global capitalism. Workers are increasingly facing the fact that social democratic trade unionism will not defend them. While opportunities for anarcho-syndicalism abound here, there is also the ever-present danger, when rushing to fill the void left behind by reformist unionism, of be-

ing drawn into the reformist path itself. Such pitfalls have already beset the French and Italian sections, which found themselves split in the mid-1990s over a number of related issues, including the question of participation in state-sponsored works council elections. The result was the effective expulsion from the IWA in 1996 of the part of the French Section, which was participating in such elections, and the withdrawal of the equivalent part of the Italian Section. With these actions, the International has shown itself to be determined to avoid the kind of 'growth at all cost' opportunism that can only result in the diluting of anarcho-syndicalism. With new sections on one hand, and expulsion and withdrawal on the other, the twentieth Congress can therefore be seen as a reflection of two important IWA trends -expansion, and the continued defence and development of anarcho-syndicalism.

## Key points

- Two distinct, but related, themes dominated the IWA after the war. One was the internal split in the Spanish CNT, both within its exile and its clandestine organisations. The second was the growing reformism of the SAC.
- The rapid growth of the CNT after the death of Franco in 1975 inspired a renewed international anarcho-syndicalist movement.
- The CNT came under sustained attack from the Spanish state.
- Attempts to infiltrate the CNT and turn it towards participation in workplace and municipal elections were thwarted.
- The reformists eventually formed their own union confederation, the CGT.

## Checklist

1. What were the reasons behind the withdrawal of the SAC from the IWA?
2. What were the major factors in the growth of the IWA in the 1970s?
3. After the re-emergence of the CNT how did the Spanish state react?
4. What was behind the formation of the CGT?

## Answer suggestions

*1. What were the reasons behind the withdrawal of the SAC from the IWA?*

The SAC had drifted to reformism advocating participation in workplace and municipal elections in an attempt to take advantage of the growth in union membership in post-war Europe. This approach was rejected by the IWA.

*2. What were the major factors in the growth of the IWA in the 1970s?*

The two main factors were: 1) The growth of the CNT after the death of Franco. 2) The onset of a global recession seeing workers growing disillusioned with social democratic methods.

3. *After the re-emergence of the CNT how did the Spanish state react?*

Firstly it tried to infiltrate the CNT in an attempt to integrate it with the Spanish state. When this failed it turned to direct repression together with a venomous campaign in the press and a condemnation of anarchism from within the CNT by the infiltrators.

4. *What was behind the formation of the CGT?*

After the failed attempts to turn the CNT towards reformism the conspirators developed a parallel structure and pushed the idea of participating in workplace and municipal elections. When this move was defeated twenty-six unions broke away to form a second “CNT”. After several years of legal wrangling this phoney CNT was forced to adopt the initials CGT.

## Suggested discussion points

- Is anarcho-syndicalism susceptible to reformism and if so, how can this susceptibility be minimised?
- How important is it to affiliate globally in membership-based anarcho-syndicalist organisations as opposed to confining our contacts to local, loose-knit structureless groups?

## Further Reading

**AIT, La Internacional Desconocida – una aproximación a la historia de la AIT actual: 1922–1986 (in Spanish).** -SE- Text of 2 lectures given by the IWA General Secretary, Fidel Gorón Canoyra, in Cologne, 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> November 1986, published by the IWA.

**Proceso Político a la CNT (in Spanish).** -SE- A recent history of the CNT 1976–1984, published by the CNT, and probably the only source of its kind, covering this critical period in modern CNT history.

**The Anarchist Resistance to Franco. A. Tellez and F. Torres. KSL. £1 -AK-** Pictures and brief biographical notes highlighting some of the CNT members involved in the desperate struggle against Franco – though rather esoteric, a rare source of English language material on this period in Spain.

**Spain 1962: The Third Wave of the Struggle Against Franco. O. Alberola and A. Gransac. KSL. £1 ISBN 1873 65501 -AK-** Another rare item from KSL, this time an extract, covering the events of the burst of clandestine CNT resistance against Franco in 1962. Essential.

**The IWA Today – a short account of the International Workers’ Association and its sections. C. Longmore. Published in 1985 by South London DAM. -AK- -SE-** In its day this was quite a controversial pamphlet, probably due to the fact that it makes some distinction between revolutionary syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism, describing some sections as one and the rest as the other. One of the few overviews of the modern IWA available in print in English.

**Anarcho-syndicalism in Puerto Real – From Shipyard Resistance to Direct Democracy and Community Control. Solidarity Federation/La Presa. 1995. £1 -SE- -AK-** Excellent and inspiring account of modern anarcho-syndicalism in action amongst the communities and shipyards of Puerto Real in southern Spain.

**Anarcho-syndicalism in Practice: Melbourne Tram Dispute and Lockout, January-February 1990. Jura Media. £1.95 -AK-** Another example of modern anarcho-syndicalism in action, this time in Australia. How tram workers gave up on their union bosses and took their own action. A definite must.

Notes: There are not many printed and readily available sources specifically central to the topic of this Unit. However, the SelfEd Collective will try to obtain material on IWA and its Sections to suit specific projects or interests of subscribers. In the first instance, write to SelfEd with your query. The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: — LI- try libraries (from local to university), — AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS — try good bookshops, -SE — ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).

# Unit 22: Roots of modern anarcho-syndicalism – freedom, oppression, rebellion

There remains much to discover of the misreported and underemphasised history of anarchism, libertarian socialism, and anarcho-syndicalism. Totalitarianism and oppression, the dominance of Marxism, and the prejudice of western academia towards a movement which has remained outside the control of the media leadership and experts, have ensured that this is the case. Now that anarcho-syndicalism is emerging as a force for change across the world, we are confident that a fuller history of anarcho-syndicalism will unfold, as more activists begin to trace the roots of the movement.

The first 21 Units of this 24 Unit course have investigated various major historical events in anarcho-syndicalist history. The aim of this and the following Unit is to summarise the main origins and motivations in the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism. In this exercise, we attempt to emphasise two things; firstly, the sheer extent of anarchist influence on revolutionary movements, and secondly, the lessons from these experiences which are still relevant for us to apply today and in the future. In so-doing, we will inevitably recap on some of the achievements that have been so deliberately brushed under the carpet of capitalist history.

## This Unit aims to

- Summarise the main origins and motivations in the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism.
- Recap on some of the achievements that have been brushed under the carpet of capitalist history.
- Emphasise the sheer extent of anarchist influence on revolutionary movements.
- Examine the lessons from these experiences that are still relevant for us to apply today and in the future.

## Terms and abbreviations

**Primitivist:** Someone who believes that civilisation has gone too far and we need to dismantle it and return to a simple way of life without modern technology.

**Blanquists:** adherents of the trend in the socialist movement of France headed by Louis Blanqui. The Blanquists believed that small revolutionary groups could overthrow capitalist rule and bring about Socialism.

## **Introduction**

There remains much to discover of the misreported and under- emphasised history of anarchism, libertarian socialism, and anarcho- syndicalism. Totalitarianism and oppression, the dominance of Marxism, and the prejudice of western academia towards a movement, which has remained outside the control of the media leadership and experts, have ensured that this is the case. Now that anarcho-syndicalism is emerging as a force for change across the world, a fuller history can unfold, as more activists begin to trace its roots. Above all else, anarchism stands for freedom. This term has been defined in all sorts of ways, so it needs precise qualification. Anarchist freedom is the freedom for everyone to pursue self- fulfilment and happiness, and all those things that contribute to their quality of life. Briefly, we are talking about the freedom for every human being to be able to develop his or her talents, capacities, knowledge and awareness to their fullest extent, allowing them therefore to maximise their life experience and life quality.

Many capitalist governments would claim they are for freedom and opportunity. However, while capitalism exists, this principle tool of modern-day oppression will ensure that such talk is just that – empty rhetoric. No-one can be free while they are constantly threatened with the sack or with withdrawal of the means to survive. Capitalism fails to deliver in a myriad of ways. Indeed, for the most part, it is the antithesis of freedom. Anarchism is therefore opposed to capitalism. But it doesn't end there – anarchism is a movement of struggle against all forms of oppression – the state, the church, patriotic fervour and sexism, to name a few. We could also extend such oppression to wider human relations; for example, environmental destruction is an oppressive act.

The problem with this definition of anarchist freedom is that it quickly becomes entwined with those forces that are opposed to it. So often anarchism is defined in terms of what it is against and opposed to. What it is for is often not well developed, beyond the notion that it aims to achieve ever-greater human freedom. The Spanish Civil War (see Units 15–18) provides an example of a movement in which this initial vision was developed in detail and put into practice extremely successfully in everyday reality. Given that this was possible over 60 years ago, we must surely now be able to define in the abstract what it is that 'achieving greater ever-human freedom' really means in some detail.

## **The essence of freedom**

Let us take as our starting point the fact that we have defined our 'freedom' in terms of the individual. Anarchism is, in essence, a celebration of individuality. In developing their talents and achieving their aspirations, each individual will be enriching society as a whole and so adding to humanity as a whole. Thus, there is a direct link between individual freedom and human progress.

So the starting point for anarchism is the individual, and the aim is to create the conditions that will best allow the development of each and every individual. However, individual development and quality of life can only happen within society, for every individual grows within society and is therefore shaped by it. To pursue this concept further, put simply, human beings are born into the world more-or-less anti- social, and they become more-or-less social as a result of their environment.

Indeed, the human species itself only took shape through operating successfully in social groups. Equipped with a brain that is capable of making complex judgements, early humans found they could make a better living and have a better life by practising mutual aid – helping each other out in their mutual interest. It was this adaptation that allowed the species to survive, and thrive, despite being physically inferior in many ways to other competing mammals. They may have initially sought safety in numbers, or other relatively simple mutual benefits. However, in the course of banding together in society, the ‘beast’ slowly gave way to a complex species, which discovered many and varied benefits from increased socialisation.

In society then, the human ‘beast’ was ‘humanised’, freed from the slavery of external nature and its own animal instincts. Through collective and social labour, humans were able to shape their environment to improve their life and ensure their physical survival. As an aside, it is only very recently that human-induced environmental change has come to threaten our future survival, and the reasons for this are not primarily socialisation, but capitalism. Through the process of collective labour a common humanity began to emerge. We felt, and began to practise, solidarity. Language, thought and will were developed, enabling conscious thought to take precedent over instinct.

Before society, then, individuality, to all intents and purposes, did not exist – there was only a daily struggle for survival. Society gave birth to individuality. Only then did human beings free themselves, enabling instinct to be subordinated to conscious thought, and in the process creating choice and free will. Through free will came personal expression and the concept of individuality. Science, from anthropology to archaeology, supports this logical progression in the growth of humanity. The only alternative idea is that human beings were placed on earth by some god or other fully formed, each with their own individuality – an idea for which there is no evidence and which flies in the face of all the evidence we do have about the early phase of human development.

The result is that, without a society based on collective labour, we would cease to function as human beings. Life would return to a ruthless struggle for survival. Only in society can we collectively ensure such basic needs as food, heat, shelter, health care, education and so on. Capitalism shuns collective effort and tries to project an image of humans as being selfish and naturally anti-social. As we have already seen, nothing could be further from the truth. Yet, even with this baggage, we still operate collectively today, caring for ourselves, families and friends through collective work and mutual aid and, for the most part, ensuring our basic needs are met within society.

Even if we could survive physically outside society, we would quickly become unrecognisable as human beings. Existing in isolation, individual human beings would drift away from what we know as humanity and become mentally unstable through lack of social interaction and the security and quality of life that it brings. It is only through the company of others in society that human beings maintain their humanity, and remain conscious of their common situation.

Society is both the provider of our basic and social needs, and the source of our individuality. It is the means by which we overcome our instincts and reach a better quality of life based on co-operation and solidarity. Through it, our selfish instincts become subordinated to social instincts (well, most of the time!), such as solidarity, compassion, empathy, humour, guilt, senses of personal responsibility and common decency, etc. Without the notion of collective solidarity, society would collapse and we would all be condemned to a solitary life that was, indeed, ‘nasty, brutish and short’. Since society is not just a means of ensuring our physical well being, but

also provides us with our individuality and emotional well being, so it follows that collective solidarity is the source of human liberation.

Another facet of society is its role in human development. Humans learn things and are conscious; instinct is therefore only of relative importance to our capacity for learning and awareness. Our individuality develops mainly through education and experience. Emotional and intellectual development simply will not happen to any extent without society. Babies are born with the capacity to feel, to will, to think and speak, but these are rudimentary faculties without content. The content is provided by society. Impressions, facts and events, blend into patterns of thought, that rightly or wrongly, are transmitted from one individual to another. These are modified, expanded, and mutually complemented and integrated by individuals and groups in society into a complex system of social information exchange, which culminates in a common level of consciousness; the collective thoughts of society.

As children develop, they receive, interpret and become part of society through their interaction with people and their individual and collective thoughts. In a collective society, the child can gain access to and use the accumulated knowledge based on the experience of previous generations, and build on it during their life – through the process of individual development. In other words, where education and social interaction is freely available, children can grow up to find self-fulfilment and personal development. In the process, they will further enrich the collective thoughts of society and the quality of society itself. Thus, under these conditions, society and the individual continue to be mutually beneficial to one another. Since anarchism is a celebration of human individuality, the nature of the society on which it depends is critical. Since society is the source of our individual liberation, the aim of anarchism must be to strive for a truly free society as the means of achieving the fullest possible development of human individuality, which is an infinite but well-defined social goal. We strive for a free society, for only then can each individual have access to its full riches as the means of making best use of their natural talents. And only then can they maximise their contribution to the continued improvement in the quality of society.

## **Oppression defined**

Oppression – one individual exercising control over another – is the antithesis of freedom. Development of the oppressed individual is inevitably restricted, because they lack freedom. An extreme example of oppression is slavery, where one human being is owned by another, and denied any rights of free expression at all. Condemned to a lifetime of commands, with no will of their own, it is as if the slave does not exist as a conscious being – only as a commodity. He or she becomes the mere extension of the master's will. This ultimate denial of the slave's individuality indicates how removal of freedom reduces human beings' individuality, which is the basis of our humanity. It 'dehumanises' us.

In milder forms, oppression dehumanises us more mildly. Under the wage system we sell ourselves to capitalism for a set period in return for the means to survive. This can be dressed up and concealed but the basic fact remains the same. We may be given certain rights that the master may stick to, but the basic arrangement remains the same. While at work, we are there to do the master's bidding. We become an extension of his (sic) will. This arrangement negates free-



dom and, as such, prevents the development of our individuality. However, this is not directly a problem for capitalism, for its aims have nothing to do with individuality.

Under capitalism, the aim is to create a market and supply more products to it. The (flawed) idea is that, along the way, people will get 'utility' or happiness out of these goods. More business is critical to capitalism – freedom, individuality and being human is not. In fact, the idea of a society of individuals, each striving for happiness and fulfilment to the benefit of society as a whole, directly conflicts with capitalism, which would prefer a society of wage slaves geared to its 'needs'. The needs may change as capitalist technology changes but the aim remains the same. Under capitalism, education through society is not a means of liberation but primarily a means of enslavement, geared to continuation and intensification of a system of wage slavery.

For anarchism, oppression in all forms and shades is tantamount to slavery. It limits free will and free expression, and stunts individual development. In every case when people actually go about oppressing others the control mechanism involves fear. Often, the fear is obvious, such as the prospect of losing access to housing, health and food, in a world where these are controlled so closely that in most cases only a wage can ensure any sort of bearable life. Whatever the case, the effect is the same – oppression restricts life through fear.

Freedom from fear is an important human goal – and a motivation at the core of anarchism. The inescapable logic is that all oppression is based on fear and removal of freedom, which restricts our humanity, therefore anarchism opposes all forms of oppression. The aim of anarchism is a situation where no section of society or individual in it has power over another.

The notions of freedom and oppression are also relative and continually changing. If I am hungry, the struggle for freedom may not go beyond the need to be fed. However, once hunger is overcome, the desire for greater freedom increases. The notion of freedom is also intrinsically linked to human development. Advances in health care can and do allow many societies to be free from various illnesses and diseases. To deny access to such advances is a denial of freedom. As the sum of human knowledge and experience develops, the notion of freedom widens, and so does the struggle to attain it. Anarchism is a constantly evolving movement. It is not seeking some 'final', static utopia. Instead, it aims towards a dynamic, ever-changing social system, geared towards searching for more worthwhile human development and therefore ever-greater freedom.

The challenge for capitalists, on the other hand, is a society which is dynamic in the sense that it creates and consumes more products, and that it therefore requires different skills and arrangements to make these products. However, it is static in the basic arrangement of one group of human beings having control of the means of production. Even if there are occasional personnel changes, the Class structure is the same. It is also static in the sense that there must and will always be exploitation and oppression at the centre of any capitalist system.

Having control over the workplace and wages enables one group in society to force another group to work for them on their terms. In other words, capitalism is not primarily about humanity or quality of life, or social development, but about one section of society exploiting wealth from another in the form of profit. The capitalist means of production, far from allowing human beings to liberate themselves, becomes the means by which people enslave and exploit each other. It stands to reason that, since anarchism is a movement against oppression, it must oppose capitalism, which is based on exploitation and inequality. Here, it is worth briefly differentiating between economic, social and political forms of this exploitation and inequality.

Capitalism is primarily concerned with creating economic inequality. It is this, which 'drives' the system, although it is clearly bound closely with social and political inequality. Nevertheless,

it is important to note that not all oppression stems from economic inequality. It is possible to have a society under which there is economic equality but oppression based on non-economic power, state communism. It is not just 'capitalism' that anarchism opposes. It seeks an end to all human relations based on power and fear. In its place, it seeks a society where human beings can come together in freedom on equal terms in order to confirm and extend their common humanity as the means of extending themselves as individuals.

'On equal terms' does not imply 'sameness'. Anarchism does not seek a society that is equal by virtue of everybody being the same. This would be the regimented society of state communism, a society of slavery to the state. Anarchism seeks a society of rich diversity and slavery to no-one, where everyone can pursue their talents in the way that they think will best enhance their quality of life, without damaging or removing the same rights of others. Anarchism does not seek to measure or regulate talent or endeavour. Equality of action or behaviour does not therefore even apply. How can you measure the talents of those in society who take pleasure in pure mathematics against those who take pleasure in working the land? People are diverse and anarchism seeks to celebrate that diversity, arguing that all human endeavour aimed at expanding and developing talent is of equal value to society as a whole. Diversity will then be inevitable and assured – society will be as diverse as people wanted it to be – it will reflect the diversity of their own free activity.

## Origins of rebellion

It is the desire for ever-greater freedom which anarchism sees as the driving force behind human development. Through accumulated experience of many thousands of years of society, we have developed a deep sense of our individuality, and we continuously seek ways of expressing it. Faced with any form of oppression, which by its very nature restricts individuality; human beings will react and oppose this restriction.

This is no mere abstract idea. Everyone, child or adult, irrespective of cultural background or belief, must recall the feeling of bitter reaction within themselves when ordered to do something against their will by someone else. Even when this order is dressed up in social niceties, the reaction persists, even if it is not as sharp. As time goes by, we grow accustomed to this treatment, we become conditioned to it, and the reaction – the spirit of rebellion – dims. Nevertheless it always remains ready to be re-ignited.

The deep resentment towards being ordered around is ever-present. Indeed, referring back to the differences between economic, social and political exploitation, the day-to-day friction at work is often centred more on the basic relationship of 'order giver' and 'order taker' rather than economic matters such as wage differences or 'extraction of profit'. Being bossed around causes bitter reaction in most workplaces.

The friction between order-giver and order-taker – oppressor and oppressed – is a principle source of rebellion. Much of the time, due to conditioning, we accept the relationship, and our spirit of rebellion is reduced to little more than a belief that things can only get better (sic), or that the situation is 'not right'. What is left is a feeling of unease, that the alternatives could be worse like they say; that the system is wrong but we have to put up with it. From time to time, open resentment and anger may well up between the oppressed and the oppressor, manifested in "us and them" hatred. The capitalists have come to understand this and, as a result, whole legions of

“human resource managers” have arrived, designed to break down the barriers between worker and management and develop ‘team working’. This particular development is deeply patronising. They seriously expect us to accept that helping ‘them’ manage ‘us’ will make us feel better, that it will make us converts to capitalism; eager to help them sell more and make more profits (for them).

Relationships between oppressor and oppressed are often highly complex as there is always a lot at stake for both sides — otherwise, why would the uneasy and unequal arrangement continue? Open rebellion by the oppressed is to be avoided at all costs by the oppressors — they must offer enough to avoid this eventuality. Nowhere are oppressive relationships more complex than those based on affection, love or otherwise around the family. The long historical battle for equality by women has centred the oppression that exists between men and women within personal relationships.

Wherever there is oppression, there are distorted human relations. No army of human resource management workers, however large (or polite) will alter that fact. For the most part, the distortion results in little more than a sense of unhappiness or lack of fulfilment. In every case, the reason is that, within ourselves as human beings, we are left with the feeling that the reduction of freedom which oppression brings is simply ‘wrong’.

Where there is oppression, at some point, those who are oppressed will rebel. History is packed full of examples. Inevitably, the overwhelming desire for free expression will cause human beings to rebel against whatever gets in the way of it. And this is not surprising. The slave, denied the right of free expression, is reduced to an object existing only to do his or her master’s bidding. To regain any humanity, the slave must rebel. To do otherwise would be to deny his or her own humanity.

There is always a degree of inertia acting against the initial instinct for rebellion. For example, in rebelling against slavery, the slave must deny the society on which slavery is based. Since there are always things in society, which allow survival and some sort of life, even in slavery, the act of rebellion involves overcoming the ‘second thoughts’ of having something to lose and realising the importance of what must be regained. The only reason a society could have slaves is if they accept themselves as being less than human. This notion is enough to justify rebellion against slavery and the society upon which slavery is based.

Another potential stop on the instinct to rebel is the idea that you will be alone, pitched against greater forces in society. It is difficult to rebel in isolation. However, in reality, generations of social instincts passed down from generation to generation will invariably ensure that rebellion breeds further rebellion from the like-minded oppressed everywhere. Even in slavery, human beings will come together to express their common humanity in order to overcome their oppression. In doing so, they will reject the dominant culture that cast them as inhuman, and recreate their own culture. The very essence of that culture will be their enslavement, from which will grow the idea of a better world, free from slavery. The seeds of the new society develop within the old.

For anarchism, rebellion against repression is a major driving force of history. People come together in collective struggle against their oppression. This struggle may take different forms and vary in intensity, depending on numerous factors. But at some point, the struggle against oppression and the society upon which that oppression is based will reach the point where the means of maintaining the oppressed will no longer be able to restrain the struggle against oppression, and the older order will be overthrown by so-called revolutionary change. As such, revolutions are

only a special stage in the evolutionary process. They happen when so much authority restricts social aspirations that the old shell of society is shattered by violent means.

A revolution does not automatically bring an end to repression in all its forms, nor does it mean the creation of a utopian society. No revolution has achieved either of these aims, nor is it likely to. For anarchism, revolutions are merely an inevitable part of a longer and wider struggle for humanity and freedom. The 'end' of human history could only come about when oppression in all its forms ends. That is a society based on total freedom. Since achieving freedom creates the desire for more freedom, history, in this sense, will never end.

## Aiming high

The key aims of anarchism discussed so far can be summarised:

- Ever-greater mutual freedom as the key to ever-greater individual development:
- Equal access to the things created by and within society for individual development:
- An end to oppression, domination and authority.

A free society based on anarchism will be self-governing, where each person has equal say in the running of things, as well as equal access to the benefits which that society has to offer. Authority will not exist as an external force – instead, power will come from within each individual equally and, as such, will be accepted by all those participating within society. Meanwhile, faced with oppression, rebellion against external or imposed authority will always be the driving force, propelling humanity towards this 'perfect' society. In the words of one articulate anarcho-syndicalist:

*“Anarchism is no patent solution for all human problems, no utopia of a perfect social order... since on principle it rejects all absolute schemes and concepts. It does not believe in any absolute truth or in some definite goal for human development, but in an unlimited perfectibility of social arrangements and living conditions, which are always straining for higher forms of expression, and to which for this reason one can assign no definite terminus nor set a fixed goal...Anarchism recognises only the relative significance of ideas, institutions and social forms. It is therefore, not a fixed, self-enclosed social system, but rather a definite trend in the human development of humankind, which strives for the unhindered unfolding of all individual and social forces in life. Even freedom is only relative, not an absolute concept, since it tends constantly to become broader and affect ever wider circles in more manifold ways. For anarchism, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all powers, capacities and talents which nature has endowed him/her and turn them into social account.”*

## States & social contracts

It is tempting to stand back at this point and pronounce how simple and logical anarchism is, and how it merely articulates humanity's long struggle for freedom. But, while the simplest ideas may be the most effective, they may be the most difficult to enact, articulate or practise. Furthermore, anarchism differs markedly from other social systems advocated by political groups

and movements, in that they invariably argue for the need of some form of outside authority, like the state. Dictatorship, Marxism, Trotskyism, all forms of liberalism and social democracy, however 'representative', have a common desire –the strong arm of the state, within which they will hold ultimate power. Advocating the state tells us a lot about someone's view as to the nature of humanity.

To begin with, while anarchism would have it that society predates individuality, those who favour the state argue the other way around –that individuality pre-dates society. In other words, human beings evolved as individuals and then decided to come together to form society. Therefore, it is not the nature of society that is of prime importance but the nature of human beings as individuals. For the lovers of the state, individuality is all and society counts for nothing.

From the statist perspective, human beings are by nature anti- social. They come into being as free individuals, 'fully formed' and accountable to no-one but themselves. Isolated in their absolute, individual liberty, they follow one law – their own natural egotism. Relations with others are conducted and driven primarily by self- interest, and are dictated by relative strength and weakness, and ability to profit from each other. Society, for those who argue for the state, is nothing more than a collection of selfish individuals.

Far from coming together as equal human beings, taking pleasure in our common humanity, statist would rather see humans as opposing forces seeking to determine strength and weakness as the prerequisite to winning or losing the next battle in the endless war of ego survival. Adopting this perspective throws a very different light on the reason for society happening in the first place. Without it, humanity faced mutual destruction.

So, those who advocate the state believe that humanity is simply a form of social contract, under which each decides to surrender some of their freedom to ensure the rest. At its most basic, this contract runs along the lines of 'I surrender my freedom to kill you for immediate gain, if you surrender your right to kill me'. At this point, it is argued, the state was born, for this contract had to be policed. In such a selfish contract of brutal individuals, without trust or solidarity, an outside authority was needed. The state therefore grew out of the need to formulate the relation between human beings into laws and ensure that these laws are enforced – by brute force and violence if need be.

Importantly, the statist's social contract is not expected to change the essentially fixed nature of humanity, which is still driven by pure self-interest. It simply sets limits on how far the individual can go in pursuit of their self-interest. Without state authority, the assumption is that the contract would break down, and human beings would immediately revert to their 'natural' state of brutality, selfishness, competition and mutual destruction. Hence the view of society as merely a collection of individuals whose barbarity is controlled and limited by the state, ready to turn on each other as soon as this external policing force is removed.

From this perspective, the state is the only possible source of human freedom (sic) – the alternative being immediate, inevitable descent into 'barbarity'. The idea that it is the only bringer of freedom would be laughable if it were not so devastatingly far from reality. Historically, the state has proved to be an intense butcherer and enslaver of humanity, as the horror of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia demonstrates. As to its capability or willingness to deliver human freedom, look no further than your own state!

Clearly, the false notion of the state as liberator is nevertheless a powerful one, so before rejecting it out of hand, let us apply some further rational consideration to this idea that it is the only thing standing between us and barbarity. The question arises; if human beings by nature are

‘evil, barbarous, and driven by self-interest’ what prevents those in charge of running the state from using its powers in the pursuit of self-interest? After all, the state is made up of human beings just as society is. If human beings are naturally hell-bent on pursuing self-interest, what is to prevent those who run the show from using the power the arrangement presents them with to feather their own nests? According to statist theory, in fact, they could not help themselves from doing this — it is inevitable, since they have no policing mechanism governing them. Who watches the watchers, polices the police, punishes the punishers, regulates the regulators? Any suggestion that these rulers can act in society’s interest would immediately throw statist theory out of the window, since it would open up the possibility that all of us could act in society’s interest — therefore we would not need the brutal father-figure state dishing out threats and punishment to keep us from killing each other.

In the past, absolute monarchy was ordained by God and was therefore ‘above’ humanity. In these more ‘democratic’ times, we are supposed to freely elect our leaders. The social democrat of today will argue that well-educated, self-aware, responsible citizens of the modern state will have the foresight to elect only the most intelligent, the public spirited, and the most selfless of leaders to run the state on their behalf. At best, this is an odd perspective; but anyway, let us pursue it some more. The idea is that these citizens, knowing that if they are left to their own devices, they will destroy each other, can be reliably trusted to choose someone to rule over them in order to maintain order. In choosing, they would seek to elect people of quality and worthiness. For this to work the people electing the politicians must therefore have a sense of justice, they must know the difference between acting in self-interest and in the public/social interest. To accurately select these people, they must know about ‘human nature’ and they must know that it is possible to act in the social interest and what this entails. In short, they must be capable of running society themselves.

At this point, we are no nearer to knowing why, in an inherently evil, selfish human race, a minority has apparently emerged that have overcome their barbarous nature and gained a sense of social awareness that allows them to be trusted with ensuring public order and running the state. If a minority can overcome their evil nature, why not the majority? Why not a self-governing society under which society is organised and run by the people themselves? There is no question among statisticians that some people cannot gain and exercise social justice. For dictatorships, it is one demagogue with a small clique, whereas for social democrats it is a slightly wider section of society. In most modern parliamentary ‘democracies’, people are elected in and out every few years. Presumably, the theory behind this is that, upon election, the leader assumes a special ‘social awareness’, which allows them to overcome their innate self-interest, to rule for the public good. When they lose office, presumably they immediately return to the position of barbarous human, needing a state to look over and regulate them again. Otherwise, these people would not need the new leaders.

The reality could not be further from the truth — as is patently clear to all of us who have spent a lifetime being ruled, except, it would seem, adamant statisticians. People tend to be humble, social and public-spirited. Not everyone, and not all the time, since the state system teaches us that we are otherwise, so we sometimes tend to act otherwise.

However, upon election to office, the ‘rush to the head’ takes effect, and a systematic flaw in the state idea opens up. Anyone who is granted great power and is told they have the right (and even duty) to govern over others comes under great pressure to conform to the statist ‘theory’. The same theory, which tells us we are all barbarians, and we will act in our own self-interest

unless we have the state above us. They suddenly find themselves with no state above them — they are the governors and no-one else is there to keep them in check.

There is no suggestion here that, in reality, leaders go through a transformation on entering office, but there is no doubt that ‘power corrupts’ — any measure of the percentage of corrupt politicians to the incidence of corruption in the population would support this. The fact is that a set of ideas, however flawed, when spread throughout society, will tend to be taken on by the society. Statism is fundamentally flawed, and as such it is statism itself that corrupts us — and, particularly, our leaders. This begs the question; if the state is so corrupting and is the source of our social barbarity rather than our liberation, why did it appear in the first place? Surely, there must have been a ‘problem’ with pre-state humanity which led to the growth of the state as a potential solution, however flawed it may be?

The answer to the origins of the state is, alas, depressingly simple, almost depressing enough to prompt a ‘how did we fall for that?’! Of course, it is not the nature of humanity, which ensures the need for the state, but the division within society. In order to maintain inequality in society, those who rule and benefit from inequality need a means of maintaining authority. They do this with the rather limited range of devices of the state, from external threats to threats from within society. This has always been the main function of the state and was the reason for its development.

The state is relatively recent phenomenon; it grew out of the need of a newly arisen possessing class for a political instrument of power. This was found to be necessary to maintain their economic and social privilege over their own people and to impose their will from above/outside society. Thus, the state was originally, literally planned and conceived as an organ of political power of the privileged caste, for the forced subjugation and oppression of the non-possessing classes. It has remained with precisely the same function ever since, albeit with numerous frills, devices, adjustments and attachments at various points.

The entire rationale of the existence of the state is to maintain inequality. It could not exist unless it had antagonisms with other states. Equally, it could not exist unless there were antagonisms within states. These antagonisms are regularly contrived and created by statisticians in order to justify the state and their position within it. This is the core of the set of devices called state politics. The state is a means of control. But, far from being there to protect humanity against its inherent barbarity, its function is actually to control and destroy any threat to the interests of the ruling elite. By its inherent structure, the state can perform only two main functions, protecting old privileges and creating new ones.

Undoubtedly, the statist would also claim, with some due cause, that the state seeks to maintain order for everyone in society, that it educates, and ensures good health for, its citizens. However, all such devices are only part of achieving the primary interest — that of the ruling class. Health, education and housing were ‘provided’ to ensure an adequate workforce for capitalism, adequate supplies of cannon fodder to fight wars, etc.

There is only one situation where the state may appear to act in the interest of those it rules, and this is when the ‘common people’ pose such a threat to the state that it is forced to make concessions. However, even then it is still acting primarily in the ruling class interest — after all, it is sometimes better to give a little and maintain the basic advantage than to resist and risk losing everything. The social role of the state at any given time is therefore dependent upon what state politicians deem the ruling class must give away to maintain the status quo. Indeed, the expertise

of state politicians is primarily about how good they are at judging the ‘public mood’ – in other words, what they think they can get away with.

To summarise, the state, far from being the liberator of humanity, is the main source of our enslavement. It is founded on authority, through the idea that we are incapable of governing ourselves, so we constantly need to submit to a higher authority to protect ourselves from each other. It is predicated on the idea that we must give up our freedom in order to be sure we will not be killed by each other.

As long as the state exists, there will be a major division within society – between the ruling class and the rest. Even if those elected to administer the state start out with the best of intentions, e.g. to work towards an egalitarian society, the function of the state does not change – the maintenance of ruler and ruled. We still have a society in which one set of human beings has power over another. Furthermore, any new well-meaning political oligarchy, cut off from and put in power over society, can only become corrupted, leading to the emergence of a new elite. This might well continue to talk the language of egalitarianism, but it must increasingly use the power of the state to ensure its long-term survival, classic examples being every Marxist-inspired government to date. The state is a self-fulfilling false prophecy.

Hardly surprisingly, anarchism totally rejects the need for the state in all its forms. The only alternative is a self-organised society, democratically controlled from the bottom up. A free society based on equality and run by the people as a whole for the benefit of people as a whole is the only non-statist form of society. The only other option would be to advocate getting rid of society itself through some ‘primitivist’ means. Since it is held that humanity is a result of society, this advocates the denial/end of humanity, which means we would have to ditch any possibility of social development and individuality.

Anarchism is far more than just another political doctrine. It is the only plausible movement of thought which advocates no state, and it is therefore the only set of ideas that has the potential to bring about a society free of the state. In the words of one anarchist:

*“I am a fanatic lover of liberty, considering it as the unique condition under which intelligence, dignity and human happiness can develop and grow; not the purely formal liberty conceded, measured out and regulated by the state, an eternal lie which, in reality, represents nothing more than the privilege of some, founded on the slavery of the rest; not the individualistic, egoistic, shabby and fictitious liberty extolled (by the) schools of bourgeois liberals, which considers the would-be rights of man, represented by the state, which limits the*

*rights of each – an idea that leads inevitably to the reduction of the rights of each to zero. No, I mean the only kind of liberty that is worthy of the name, liberty that consists in the full development of all the material and moral powers that are latent in each person.”*

## **Anarcho-syndicalism**

So far in this Unit we have been discussing anarchism. However, it is worth making some brief comments on the differences between the terms ‘anarchism’ and ‘anarcho-syndicalism’. The term ‘anarchism’ describes a historical trend that has placed emphasis on freedom and the need for a self-organised society. As such, anarchism is a part of the total struggle against oppression. Not surprisingly, anarchist ideas can be found at various points in history. However, it was only with the arrival of the ideas of socialism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (see Block 1) that a group of anarchists



formed themselves into a clearly defined movement, by beginning to form ideas about tactics and strategy for bringing about a society based on anarchism. This set of ideas later became known as revolutionary syndicalism, and then anarcho-syndicalism.

Therefore, while anarchism grew out of opposition to the state and capitalism, anarcho-syndicalism has its origins in the libertarian socialist movement, which itself grew out of opposition to Marxism. Within the First International (see Unit 3), the advocates of this libertarian opposition referred to themselves variously as socialists and anarchists, though the former term was far more commonly used. This point is worth stressing for two reasons. First, it emphasises that while it is built on the opposition to the state and capitalism that anarchism brings, anarcho-syndicalism is a development of this basic trend in that it is also principally socialist. In other words, it recognises that the means of production must be run by the community for the benefit of the community before a free society can be established. Secondly, the fact that anarcho-syndicalism grew out of the division between libertarian socialism and state socialism indicates how crucially important this distinction is to anarcho-syndicalists. At its core, anarcho-syndicalism is a retort to Marxism and other forms of state socialism. It was through this division of the First International that anarcho-syndicalism emerged as a clearly defined movement.

Since anarcho-syndicalism originated as an alternative, non-statist means for bringing about a libertarian socialist society, it was forced to develop rapidly, both theoretically and tactically. Its development can be seen within the debates that took place in the First International and in subsequent events. Consequently, anarcho-syndicalists quickly recognised that they needed both tactics and strategy in addition to the notions, aims and ideas they had inherited from anarchism and libertarian socialism. Equally, these tactics and strategy had to be flexible in that they must respond to changing circumstances and be prepared to experiment with new ways of advancing the libertarian society. On the other hand, they needed to adhere to principles as well as aims, in order to avoid falling into the trap of allowing statism to enter the movement and damage it, as Marxism had done in the First International. For anarcho-syndicalists the ends do not justify the means, the 'means' and the 'ends' have to be organically linked.

One of the key tactics which developed within the proto-anarcho-syndicalist movement was the general strike, which was conceived as a means of bringing capitalism to an end by attacking it economically, thus undermining the power generated by profit (see Units 4–6). This did not mean taking on 'economic' struggles and leaving out 'political' or 'social' struggles — anarcho-syndicalists have always stressed that to mirror these false divisions generated by the state and capitalism in our organisations would be a fundamental error. Anarcho-syndicalist organisations must be part of an integrated social, political and economic movement. As an illustration of this, we need look no further than Spain (see Units 15–18). Without workers, the Spanish movement would have got nowhere; without political ideas it would have got nowhere; without social struggles it would have got nowhere; and without the ideals gleaned from anarchism and socialism, it would have had no purpose.

## **Why Marxism failed**

The split within the socialist movement in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century had a major impact on the course of revolutionary history. It exposed the unbridgeable chasm that exists between

those who advocate libertarian revolt based on self-management and mutual aid, and those who favour capturing state power. The latter camp was dominated by Marxists, who claimed to have discovered the laws that determine history through scientific study, and sought to gain state power to apply these laws to society as a means of bringing about socialism. Marxism, then, was not so much a movement of struggle against oppression, as a scientific theory through which socialism could allegedly be achieved, hence the term 'scientific socialism'.

For Marxists, the key to historical development was the economy, and more specifically, the mode of production. The economy was seen as the determinant of the nature of society. Thus, as the economy changed, so would the society upon which it was based. With the economy at the centre of Marx's view of the human world, natural science, philosophy, ethics, culture, democratic institutions, etc. were all seen as peripheral. These paraphernalia were mere reflections of the economy, and simply provided the ideological superstructure of the economy. In basic terms, then, Marx's thesis was that you only had to engineer a change in the mode of production, and change in the whole of society would follow.

The first crucial error of judgement was that it didn't seem to matter to Marx or his followers how change was to be brought about – process was secondary to outcome. Marx argued simply that socialism could come about by workers taking control of the state. Once in charge, they could bring an end to capitalist relations and bring about a society based on economic equality, where human beings could not exploit each other for economic gain. In line with Marxist historical theory, once capitalist relations ended, a new society built on the new economic order would emerge, based on social, political and economic equality, that is, after the small matter of a 'transitory period'.

The Marxists' chosen vehicle for gaining state power was the political party. Immediately on gaining power, the leaders of the party, which would be those most versed in the understanding of scientific socialism, would form a socialist government. It would be this body that would take over the running of society and end capitalism. With economic equality achieved, and social and political equality having automatically followed, the socialist leadership would then leave the stage of history, their historic task being completed. Thereafter, the state would 'wither away' and the self-governing communist utopia would be born, heralding, presumably, the end of human struggle and development.

The libertarian socialist wing of the First International was not slow to point out the major flaws within the Marxists position. In politier moments, they pointed out that the state and society are not merely reflections of economic relations. Leaders form a class of themselves. Just because the modern state had emerged based on economic relations to promote the interests of capitalism, this did not mean that a future state authority existing above society, based on the principle of ruler and ruled, would act any differently from those in the past. In more bitter moments, they lashed out at the idea of using the state to gain revolutionary power, arguing that even if 'economic equality' could be achieved by this means, the presence of the state automatically means the presence of oppression. They predicted with accuracy and foresight that the socialist party leaders would form a new elite, existing above society and, far from freeing it, they would further enslave it. The only way, they argued, was to attack both state power and capitalism, and build a movement that would help bring about a new form of society based on self-management. Well over 100 years later, it is unnecessary to labour the point – history, not least that of the Soviet Union and China, speaks for itself.

The division between Marxism and anarchism provides two totally different perspectives on how movements emerge. To the scientific socialist Marxists, theory was all-important, and this was deemed enough to create movements and form the basis of a revolution. However, libertarian socialists, and now anarcho-syndicalists, argued that social movements do not spring from theory, but from life. Movements develop in opposition to oppression, driven by the desire for freedom. As these movements develop, the idea of a better world develops. It is only then that relevant and useful development of theory about how to bring about the required change to end oppression emerges. Ideas and theories spring from practical reality. They emerge from within the struggle, giving it purpose and conscious direction.

History, once again, speaks in the anarcho-syndicalists' favour. The labour movement did not appear as the result of the theories of socialism, but because of the conditions created by capitalism and, more specifically, it emerged in opposition to capitalism's oppression. As people came together in struggle, the idea of socialism took shape, as a form of society, which could replace capitalism, based on equality and freedom. 'Socialism' was and is therefore an integral part of the labour movement. Theory cannot be separated off from it, or studied and developed in isolation from experience. Importantly, neither can practice continue to be successful without theory and tactics being developed out of experience. Both are essential and both are interactive – their development involves an ongoing process of struggle – experience – ideas – tactics – theory – revision of struggle – new experience – new ideas – new tactics – re-examination of theory – more struggle and experience, and so on.

Theory forms a living part of a movement, based on the practice of life. Both develop as part of the same movement involving the same people, constantly evolving as they develop. Marxism, at the outset, effectively separated theory from practice. As a result, 'correctness' of theory became of prime importance. The subsequent elevation of Marx to the status of a communist guru only served to strengthen the unquestioning 'rightness' and primacy of Marx's words. Fundamental errors within his theory were therefore acted out as if they were not there – all that mattered was 'going by the book'.

It is not surprising, given the Marxists' approach, that the vehicle chosen to bring the theory to fruition was not the workers' organisations, immersed in everyday struggle and experience, but the political party. The political party could operate with a small leadership, offering unquestioning adherence to theory, and was unsullied by the complications of learning from experience. Though Marx did argue for the building of a mass workers' party rather than a small elitist Leninist vanguard party, the theoretical mistake he made was choosing the party at all. This party was to win power through the ballot box where possible and seize power where necessary. However, with his economic-dominated mind Marx failed to predict that, once in power, the elitism inherent in Marxism would emerge, for it was only the leadership of the party who were capable of taking control of society.

The whole point of Marx's 'transitional period' was that the state, led by the most 'advanced' workers, would take control until the workers were 'capable' of running society themselves. This illustrates another fundamental weakness – at its heart, Marxism lacked faith in the working class. Stating that, in the aftermath of a revolution, the mass of the population would be unable to run a new society was not only patronising and wrong, it betrays all too clearly where Marx saw himself and his party leaders – and it was not as part of the ignorant masses. Marxist theory and the Marxist state would be needed because the workers were incapable of running their own affairs.

The question arises as to why, with such insulting undertones, Marxism was to eventually find such strong resonance within the working class, as it undoubtedly did. One of the key attractions of Marxism was that it offered an apparently different and better 'end' to history, but in the here and now, it mimicked many of the capitalist class' attitudes and institutions. As with any oppressed group, a major source of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century working class' oppression lay in a failing of confidence. No oppressor can maintain their position of power through pure physical force alone. Every society exists on the basis of co-operation in daily relations between human beings, despite what market theory may predict and, if it did not, society would collapse. The ruling elite cannot stand behind each and every individual and compel them to co-operate. Such is the social nature of human beings that even in the most oppressive of societies, human beings on a daily basis will co-operate and interact with each other.

Societies based on inequality must have a belief system that reflects the brute force of the state. In many capitalist societies, this takes the form of religious values, which argue that God preordains the nature of society, in other words, that humanity must comply with a higher authority (or else). At their heart, such belief systems rest on a lack of confidence – you need someone to tell you what to do. If you are told this enough times and if you live in a society, which constantly reinforces such beliefs, you do tend to end up lacking confidence. In other words, one of the keys to running an oppressive society is engendering and maintaining a total lack of confidence by the oppressed in themselves. The working class have always been taught from birth that they are inferior, less intelligent, incapable of running their own affairs and, without some outside authority, society would degenerate into barbarity. Working class deference to a higher authority, based on this lack of self-worth was, and remains, a barrier to effective struggle. However, it is easy to see how the Marxist idea of a new authority taking over, this time a socialist one with the workers' interests at heart, appealed to those in the deferential and downtrodden working class who had the least confidence in themselves.

In one major tactic, Marxism undermined the entire section of the socialist movement that it attracted. It swept away a central plank of the emerging libertarian socialist movement – that the act of freeing the workers must be the task of the workers themselves. In place of self-reliance and self-organisation, Marxism had the workers' state, a new power outside society and separate from the workers' own organisations, imposing its authority, apparently in the interest of those very same workers, on whose behalf it ruled. The working class could therefore sit back and let the Marxist party do the intellectual work of planning and taking over the state machinery from the capitalists. All they had to do was to put their cross on a piece of paper and the task of building a new world would begin. The fact that workers' organisations would immediately become passive or inactive was not foreseen – neither was the resultant injection of reformism into the socialist movement. The unions, which the libertarian socialists saw as being critical to building a new socialist culture, were, under Marxist theory, reduced to concentrating on making immediate gains. They were purely economic in nature, and subservient to the political parties, who had the real task – to transform society. The unions were emptied of their political content, and the workers became passive bystanders in the struggle for the new society.

Under the influence of Marxism, the early unions became transformed, eventually becoming the sad, subservient and hopelessly reformist shells we know today. This undermining process was no Marxist mistake. The unions were not part of Marx's strategy – in fact, they often contradicted his theory, which was not allowed. Marxists generally viewed unions as lacking revolutionary potential and even as a distraction to the main struggle of gaining political power.

In times when the unions appeared to contradict this, and their activities not fit with Marxist theory, the Marxist party leadership felt undermined by the power of these confident workers' organisations. Later, when they had the chance, they turned the power of the state on them with brutal consequences (see Units 11 and 12).

The Marxists evidently totally misunderstood the nature of the radical union movements that were forming in opposition to capitalism around the turn of the century (see Units 4–6). This is not surprising – they were in small, clique-ridden political parties, concerned with theory, and rarely involved in any of these organisations or their struggles. The reality was that capitalism had reduced working conditions to the unbearable – numerous contemporary writers described the horrendous conditions that workers had to live and work in. To retain any semblance of humanity, they had to do something. Forming unions was their response, and they became the means by which they were able to begin to regain their lost humanity. As one anarchist wrote, the unions;

*“...gave a footing once more to the uprooted masses which the pressure of economic conditions had driven into the great industrial centres. It revived their social sense. The class struggle against the exploiters awakened the solidarity of the workers and gave a new meaning to their lives.”*

## **Aims, means, principles**

The early unions went far beyond being merely the means of improving workers' conditions that the Marxists viewed them as. They arose from the situation people found themselves in, and they demonstrated that people are capable of organising themselves despite their oppression and the apparent odds stacked against them. Most importantly, the people involved knew from their experience that these unions could and should not be based upon the economic struggle alone. Many of the early unions therefore developed as a part of daily life for the working class as a whole – in much the same basic way in which anarcho-syndicalists of today would see as a useful way to organise. They had the political and social breadth required to allow a new culture to develop, based on human solidarity, which would in turn form the basis of the new society.

The idea that the working class, living and working in desperate conditions, would set up unions to achieve immediate gains only is a mockery. They sought a complete social transformation. Rapidly, as the vision for the change they wanted took shape, it became known as socialism. From the depths of their own experience and the organisations that sprang from it, the ideas that were to form the basis of the new world were formulated.

For proof of the nature and intention of the early unions, we need look no further than the First International (see Unit 3). Having originally set out to ensure practical solidarity amongst workers throughout the world, by 1869, it had turned its attention to aims and principles. A report was presented to that year's congress, stating clearly that the unions were to be regarded as the social cells of a coming “socialist order” and it was therefore the task of the International to assist them in this role. The report formed the basis of a motion calling for the setting up of local community-based workers' associations as part of the plan to replace the wage system with “federations of free producers”. During the debate, the mover of the motion argued that the “councils of the trade and industrial organisations will take the place of the present government, and this representation of labour will do away, once and for ever, with the governments of the past”. This was an important developmental stage in what was later to emerge as the anarcho-

syndicalist movement, and it clearly came directly from the workers and their organisations. Far from being merely methods of gaining better pay and conditions, these early unions were seen as the means by which the working class could develop the structures, skills and confidence that were to form the basis of the new socialist society. As Bakunin, a prominent anarchist of the era, wrote at the time:

“All this practical and vital study of the social science by the workers themselves in their trade union and their chambers will, and already has, engendered in them the unanimous, well considered, theoretically and practically demonstrable conviction that the serious, final, complete liberation of the workers is possible only upon one condition, that all the appropriation of capital, that is raw material and all the tools of labour, including land, is made by the whole body of the workers themselves. The organisation of the trade sections, their federations in the international, and their representation by chambers of labour not only create a great academy, in which the workers of the international, combining theory and practice, can and must study economic science, they also bear in themselves the living germs of the new order, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the idea but also the facts of the future society.”

In short, the unions were creating not just the idea of a future society, but the new society itself, within the shell of the old. In the early meetings of the International, there is little tolerance of the state and, in fact, very little mention of state socialism. The workers, in their local communities, were developing the ideas and relationships that would become those of the new society. Not surprisingly, the state, which had done so much to oppress them, did not feature in these plans, except as an obstacle to be got rid of. Nor is there much talk of merely seeking economic liberation. The need was not just for things, but also for freedom. This naturally meant not just an end to economic exploitation, but also an end to the rule of one human being over another.

## Postscript

In this Unit we have examined the early stages of development of the movement for a society without capitalism and the state. The main motivation for this movement was oppression, and the main direction of it was towards mutual freedom. For the 19th Century anarchists and libertarian socialists, the development of theory came out of experience in struggle, and it was continually driven by the desire to end oppression, authority, and domination.

In contrast, the Marxists and other reformist state socialists had little experience of direct struggle and so had little understanding as to the nature of the emerging radical unions. The French Blanquists, a major state socialist group, saw the trade unions as merely a reform movement. Instead, they advocated a socialist dictatorship. Meanwhile, Marx and his allies within Germany strove in vain to gain real influence within a First International composed of anarchists and unions who were learning by application and practice of direct action.

Marx's theoretical, economics-centred approach is fundamentally flawed, not least in its lack of faith in the working class, which necessitated the retention of a party, leadership and state – the very things which were the cause of so much of the oppression and misery. Although some of the biggest holes in Marxist theory were apparent to contemporaries, the clique around Marx and the primacy of his theory ensured that such 'details' were ignored by many of those involved. Tragically, the fundamental lack of confidence within the working class meant Marxism gained ground, culminating in events like the Russian Revolution of 1917. In Unit 23, we will

continue tracing the development of modern anarcho-syndicalism, culminating, in Unit 24, with a summary of anarcho-syndicalism today.

## Key points

- The key idea of anarchism is freedom.
- The driving force behind human development is seen as the desire to be free.
- A major driving force of history is rebellion against repression.
- The state, in whatever form, is the antithesis of freedom.
- Anarcho-syndicalism developed the ideas of anarchism and the socialism that grew from the workers' movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.
- Anarcho-syndicalism maintains that the aims and the means should be organically linked.
- Anarcho-syndicalism stands in opposition to the authoritarian socialism of Marxism.

## Checklist

1. What is the main aim of anarchism?
2. Do anarchists want everyone to be the same?
3. Why are anarchists anti-statists as well as anti-capitalist?
4. How did anarcho-syndicalism originate?
5. What is the major reason for the failure of Marxism?
6. How are the ends and means linked for anarcho-syndicalists?

## Answer suggestions

### *1. What is the main aim of anarchism?*

The main aim of anarchism is to achieve a free and equal society where every individual can pursue self-fulfilment and happiness by developing their talents, capacities, knowledge and awareness to the fullest.

### *2. Do anarchists want everyone to be the same?*

Anarchism does not seek a society that is equal by virtue of everybody being the same. Instead it seeks a society of rich diversity and slavery to no-one, where everyone can pursue their talents in the way that they think will best enhance their quality of life, without damaging or removing the same rights of others. Anarchism does not seek to measure or regulate talent or endeavour. Individuals are diverse and anarchism seeks to celebrate that diversity, arguing that all human endeavour aimed at expanding and developing talent is of equal value to society as a whole.

Diversity will then be inevitable and assured — society will be as diverse as people wanted it to be — it will reflect the diversity of their own free activity.

*3. Why are anarchists anti-statists as well as anti-capitalist?*

Anarchists oppose capitalism as it is based on exploitation and inequality. At the same time anarchists have always opposed the state, in whatever form it takes, as it is seen as the main source of enslavement.

*4. How did anarcho-syndicalism originate?*

Anarcho-syndicalism took the basic notion of freedom from anarchism and integrated it with the ideas of socialism that grew from the workers' movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

*5. What is the major reason for the failure of Marxism?*

Marxist theory is based on the primacy of economic oppression and fails to have any coherent critique of power itself. It sees itself as scientific theory that has discovered the laws that determine historical change. It argues that economic exploitation needs to be ended first before other forms of oppression can cease. To do this a political party would need to seize state power in the name of the working class.

*6. How are the ends and means linked for anarcho-syndicalists?*

For anarcho-syndicalists the creation of a free and equal society means acting and organising along the same lines as those envisaged in the future society. The ends and the means need to be linked. The new society needs to be created in the shell of the old by creating organic structures that will carry through the transformation.

## **Suggested discussion points**

- Is it modern technology or the control of technology that causes inequality and oppression?
- Is there such a thing as a servile state?

## **Further Reading**

This Unit draws on ideas introduced in Units 1–21, so these are a starting point for tracing the origins of anarcho-syndicalism. To find out more, you can always contact us at SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW (da@directa.force9.co.uk). Alternatively, try the Internet; the Direct Action website is one starting point for links to SF and other organisations and their ideas (www.directa.force9.co.uk), or libraries and second-hand bookshops. To mail order further reading, try the AK catalogue, from AK Distribution, PO Box 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd).



# Unit 23: Roots of modern anarcho-syndicalism – morality, culture, tactics

Anarcho-syndicalism has a rich history, and one which has been repeatedly misreported and underemphasised by the academics and media of the establishment. As a counter attack, this Unit continues the process of uncovering the real story. It follows on from Unit 22, tracing the origins, motivations and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

While much of the historical context of this Unit is drawn from earlier ones, the intention here is to summarise the roots of anarcho-syndicalism. It aims to illustrate when and how anarcho-syndicalism developed and incorporated cohesive ideas, principles and tactics, many of which still remain as relevant today as when they were first mooted. The result is a concise rundown of key elements, the idea being to form a historical backdrop to the next and final Unit in the course, which will outline the main ideas that constitute anarcho-syndicalism in Britain today.

## This Unit aims to

- Follow on from Unit 22, tracing the origins, motivations and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.
- Summarise the character of anarcho-syndicalism.
- Illustrate when and how anarcho-syndicalism developed and incorporated cohesive ideas, principles and tactics.

## Introduction

As discussed in Unit 22, the libertarian socialists within and around the First International (Unit 3) developed a crucial contribution to socialism; the idea of what freedom means to libertarians. Against the authoritarianism of the Marxists, they posed the thesis that freedom must infuse every aspect of socialised thinking, or socialism will fail. Since compulsion and authority were recognised as being at the root of the problem, the libertarian socialists saw freedom from these as critical. For this reason, the stark choice was exposed; authority, that would stifle activity and initiative, or freedom, the great liberating force that would inspire people and drive the movement forward towards the new socialist society. The following quote from one anarcho-syndicalist writer illustrates the importance of freedom to libertarian socialism:

*“Power operates only destructively, bent always on forcing every manifestation of life into the straightjacket of law. Its intellectual form of expression is dead dogma, its physical form, brute force. And this unintelligence of its objectives sets its stamp on its supporters also rendering them stupid and*

*brutal, even when they are originally endowed with the best of talents. One who is constantly striving to force everything into the mechanical order at last becomes a machine himself and loses all human feeling. Only freedom can inspire and bring about social change and intellectual transformations. Dreary compulsion has at its command only lifeless drill, which smothers any vital initiative at its birth and can bring forth only subjects, not free men. Freedom is the very essence of life, the impelling force in all intellectual and social developments, the creator of every new outlook for the future of mankind. The liberation of man from economic exploitation and from intellectual and political oppression... is the first prerequisite for the evolution of a higher social culture and a new humanity.”*

An example of the importance of this notion of freedom at the time is found in the Marxists' attitudes towards the peasantry. They determined that the peasantry were condemned by the laws of history to be reactionary, only seeking to own and cultivate their own small patch of land. Hence, they decided, the new workers' state would have to forcibly collectivise the land. The libertarian socialists bitterly disagreed with all this, arguing that irrespective of whether they were 'reactionary' or not, collectivisation could only work if it was voluntary — free. They were confident in both the peasants and their ideas. In other words, they predicted that when the benefits of collectivisation were demonstrated in practice, the peasantry as a whole would move towards collectivisation freely and voluntarily.

The merits of the two ideas, which we could call 'freedom through authority' and 'freedom through experience' were duly tested in practice. In Russia, where the Marxists seized power, the land was forcibly collectivised, leading to a reign of terror being unleashed on the peasantry as they resisted the process. The net result was mass- oppression, famine and a disastrous split between the industrial working class and the peasantry. In Spain, the anarcho-syndicalists collectivised their land voluntarily. In many areas, this meant initially that some land was collectively owned, and some remained in private, peasant hands. However, the voluntary collectives invariably experienced vast increases in harvests. So much so that, even during the three-year civil war, food shortages were prevented, despite international blockades preventing food imports and war ravaging agricultural lands around strategic areas. Moreover, as the benefits of collectivisation were demonstrated, more and more of the peasantry did indeed join the collectives as anticipated.

The notion of freedom (see also Unit 22) is fundamental to the libertarian movement, because it is the only means of sustaining a future society that is worth fighting for. Even back in the time of the First International, the libertarian socialist recognised the potential for any society to become oppressive. At risk of stating the obvious, just because anarchism holds that humanity was created in society and is therefore dependent on it does not mean society is intrinsically good. Society can be both good and bad depending on what form it takes. Hence, the early libertarians saw that society could potentially be far more oppressive than the state. After all, the state's authority is from outside society, so when it imposes oppressive laws they can easily be recognised as such, and rebellion duly organised. However, repression from within society is far harder to locate and overcome, since much of our individuality is merely a reflection of society. If people within society raise their children to believe that women are inferior, then the struggle against such oppression is more difficult than that against the external state law. In such cases, it is not just the oppressor who internalises these ideas of society who must be addressed; the oppressed woman must overcome what has been instilled from birth, to gain the confidence to resist the oppression around her. This is not the direct oppression of the state or the economy, or the bosses, but that of her 'nearest and dearest'.

Freedom was and is therefore a constant watchword that governs all considerations of struggle for a future society. Oppression, wherever it occurs, is opposed by freedom. There is no 'final' position of 'absolute freedom', just as there is no end to the constant threat of oppression in any society. The future, post- capitalist society will not be some final utopia. The continual development of ever-greater freedom (for freedom breeds the possibility of more freedom) provides the driving force towards future humanity, and this is an endless process. Freedom is therefore the new morality – and provides the new ethic that will underpin the future society.

The main political device which will allow freedom to flourish is direct democracy, that is, a society within which everyone has the right to contribute directly to how society functions, on equal terms. The only way in which this 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' society can work is by individual units, people, households, streets, hamlets, etc., coming together to organise those parts of society which require organisation, or put another way:

*“The task must be the freeing of labour from all the fetters which economic exploitation has fastened on it, of freeing society from all the institutions and procedure of political power, and of opening the way to an alliance of free groups of men and women based on co- operative labour and planned administration of things in the interest of the community in a society.”*

## **Managing things, not people**

So, how might a future direct democratic society work, and what would it look like? The 19<sup>th</sup> Century libertarian socialists developed a sophisticated vision of this, which, perhaps surprisingly, remains largely relevant today. Their starting point was that it would not look like a monolithic decision making structure, encompassing the whole of human life. It would not be some all-embracing state-like system where decisions about all aspects of human life are made by some centralised administration.

In short, for both libertarian socialism and modern anarcho- syndicalism, the goal is the management of things, not people. Things are the products and services we make/provide because we decide we need them. Things are made/provided by industry or if you like, work. Both these terms are used in their widest sense, including, for example, all food production, building, child and health care, education, as well as the products we more normally associate with industry and work. All the things we need will need to be managed, leaving people to manage themselves.

Without government of any kind, how would things be produced and who would decide how much, at what quality, and so on, each particular product or service is produced? In short, government would be replaced by 'industrial' organisation. People will come together freely within the production process to plan, make and otherwise ensure their needs are met. What goes on in the self-managed co- operative workplace must be determined by those within it.

Outside the workplace and production process the government institutions would no longer exist. At present, the state only meddles in non-productive affairs in order to control our motivations and desires, which curbs our freedom. In a future society, outside the production process, people would naturally and freely come together on the basis of their common interests to pursue their own desires and needs. These groups will be self-organised, voluntary and entirely self-regulated.

The organisation of society will therefore be limited exclusively to the needs of production and consumption. All political institutions will have disappeared. After all if everyone has access

to all decision- making there would be no need for political parties. Society and the life of those within it would therefore have two components – self- managed, federated production/provision for needs, and the rest, made up of a patchwork of interlocking self-interest groups, all self-regulating, overlapping and interacting as their interests coincide.

This vision is basically that of the early libertarian socialists who's primary aim was to end exploitation and oppression by bringing the production process under democratic control, as the first stage in creating a society based on freedom. Direct democratic control of production, or 'workers' control', being the key. The working class themselves would take over the means of production.

The starting point for the democratically controlled economy must be the immediate workplace and local community – the micro level. The place where people live is the place where decisions about basic local needs such as health, housing, transport, education, environment, food, can best be made, by the people making decisions about themselves for themselves. Again, this was realised by the early libertarian socialists, and it provided another stark difference with the Marxists and other state socialists, for whom the future economy would begin and end at the top, through centralised planning.

Though the idea of 'bottom up' or 'grass roots' organisation was not new, even in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it has obviously been misused, abused and subverted by capitalism and the state. Team-working type initiatives in the modern workplace are an example of the pretence at 'bottom up organisation without any of the reality. Direct democracy can only work in the absence of ultimate authority. There is no point in saying 'you can do what you like, and organise yourselves, as long as...'

This is not to say that consumers would not play a role in determining what is produced in a direct democratic production system. Firstly, the point should be made that the producers/ consumers split is largely a red herring as far as a direct democratic society is concerned –everyone both produces and consumes, so the split is rather arbitrary. Secondly, while direct democratic workplaces must be subject to no authority, this does prevent people in the immediate locality from coming together as producers and consumers of places for learning, houses, transport, etc., and hammering out their immediate needs. The people present who participate in particular workplaces would naturally then take these needs back to their workplaces and input them into the direct democratic process there. That is not to say that there will not be conflict, on the contrary, there is often conflict between different producers and consumers, just as there are conflicts between people. For instance, it may suit the transport consumer to have trains starting on their local line early in the morning, but this may not suit the interests of the rail workers involved who may prefer a lie-in. Despite any amount of temptation, no force can be used to get rail workers out of bed. In other words, each economic activity must thus come under direct control of the people themselves.

As economic activities and interests overlap, so would the democratic process. Thus, transport would be organised in the immediate locality, then, through the industrial federation, to city, to regionally, to globally. Likewise, transport would interact with other economic sectors, so regional and global level economic bodies would be needed to co-ordinate the needs and desires of the federations. In a modern industrial society with complex and varied needs, there would be considerable need for such co-ordinating bodies. However, to stress the point, there is no danger that these could become powerful, over-numerous or burdensome. They would naturally be formed as needed, directed from below by the federations involved, and disbanded as they

were no longer needed. Their role would be simply to carry out co-ordination tasks to assist the efficient integration of the economy.

So, in localities, people would meet as consumers and producers to discuss needs. They would then elect delegates to express their wishes and needs to the city, and then regional, and then global federations. These delegates would be directly accountable — they would be participating on behalf of their local federation and could be recalled and replaced by their federation at any time. They would also get no special privileges for being delegates, and they would be changed regularly as a matter of course. The job of delegate would be viewed as a part time duty to be taken on voluntarily from time to time by those who wished to, as a service to their local federation.

At every level in the future society, there would be conflicts and decisions to sort out all the time, typically of the nature of ‘should more resources be directed to goods A rather than B’, ‘should we look for people who are prepared to get up in the morning to run the early trains’, etc. The people most affected would hammer out all differences of opinion democratically. At the centre of all decisions over what and when to provide services, produce goods, etc., would be the issue of what is needed most — what can we best spend our labours on for the good of our society?

Direct democratic decision making structures also rely on good information, so that people can make good judgements, and to prevent endless argument based on a difference of information rather than actual values/opinion. Access to information relies on technology, as well as the ability to understand it, so free access to both information and education is crucial. It is in capitalism’s interest to hide and complicate reality, so information is invariably and intentionally poor, whereas in a society based on direct democracy, the natural interest would be to seek the best quality of information, so that discussion on real values and opinions could take place, rather than endless negotiation about who knows what.

Another obvious difference with capitalism is that the production process would be geared to meet people’s needs, not for individual profits. Rather than simply a series of isolated, individual workplaces, the production process would become a vast living organism based on democratic decision making, which would constantly be evaluating and updating people’s needs and how best to meet them. Within each workplace, people would have access to all the information about current needs, and accordingly, they would decide what to produce and how best to produce it. Thus, the necessity that the immediate workplace is co-ordinated by the workers themselves would be maintained.

## **Syndicalism**

The libertarian socialists clearly had a well-developed vision of a future society. However, they had not yet had the experience of participating in a mass movement towards this aim. In the immediate aftermath of the split in the First International, it was the ideas of Marx that began to gain ground. It was not until the turn of the century that libertarian socialist ideas re-emerged as the mass movement of syndicalism.

The ideas of libertarian socialism were clearly in opposition to Marx, because they grew from the experiences of the workers themselves. While the appeal of Marxism is discussed in Unit 22, there were also other factors in its rise, not least the violent repression that swept Europe after the crushing of the Paris commune in 1871. This was particularly concentrated in countries

where libertarian socialism was strong, such as Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland and Belgium. At the same time, there were some apparent signs of 'success' in the state socialism idea. This was especially so in Germany, where the state socialist SPD inspired by Marx and Engels had some electoral success, and established a mass membership. Out of this, it sponsored the growth of socialist parties across Europe.

Unlike the Marxist parties, the syndicalist movement of the turn of the century was characterised not by some all-embracing 'theory of syndicalism', but by a broad-based range of federated organisations, sharing the same basic aims and principles. From the beginning, syndicalism was (and so anarcho-syndicalism is) a movement of struggle – not a theory that seeks to constrain all of humanity's past and future into an all-embracing formula. In each country/region, the syndicalist movement developed differently, according to the prevailing conditions there, rather than according to a central, abstract theory, to be developed and superimposed on every situation.

Since capitalist conditions were similar, and the movements were influenced by similar ideas, the emerging syndicalist movement was bound to have similar basic characteristics that were common across national borders. Where local or national conditions and experiences differed, there were also differences between them, reflecting the responses by workers in each country. The first of the clearly defined revolutionary syndicalist movements occurred in France, where much of the impetus came from the failure of parliamentary politics and, in particular, socialist parties. There was no real trade union movement and the economy was more decentralised than in many other capitalist countries. This led to the syndicalist movement and its organisations emerging spontaneously. In Britain and the USA there was a strong existing union movement. The failure of these unions and the increasing centralisation of the national economies was a driving force behind these syndicalist movements. In Spain, the ideas of the libertarian socialists had formed the basis of the emerging workers' resistance, and this led inevitably to a strong anarchist influence in the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement from its earliest conception.

Though many differences existed between the various syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations, all shared the same origins, based on opposition to capitalism, parliamentarianism and state control. All rejected the idea that the state could be used to bring about a socialist society. There were differences in relationships with political parties, as reflected in local experiences, so that some movements expressed their total opposition to political parties immediately, while others took a neutral position at first, until they realised through their own experience the futility and danger of this stance.

All syndicalist organisations argued for the establishment of workers' organisations based on the economic struggle. All would function according to the principle of solidarity. For the syndicalists, these economic organisations were seen as forming the basis of a new society under which the workers themselves rather than the state would run the self-managed, worker-controlled economy.

## **Morality, culture, tactics**

In rejecting capitalism, the early syndicalist movement totally rejected the morality that underpinned capitalism and the society based on that morality. The new society would be based on a new socialist morality. This would not simply emerge miraculously from the ashes of some

future socialist revolution, but would begin in the here and now, within the shell of the capitalist system.

In building the new society in the shell of the old, they sought to create a new socialist culture within the working class, based around the main organisation of the working class – the union movement. This culture was to be built totally independently of the existing capitalist order. It was to be based on the principle of solidarity, the idea that only through co-operation in society can human beings be liberated and free. Most importantly, this new culture was to be the very negation of that of the capitalists', based as it is on pure self-interest and the pursuit of profit.

In order that the new society could evolve, a means of struggle was needed that was also independent of the existing capitalist system and the existing social order. The solution to this was direct action – as both a means of struggle now, and the means by which capitalism would be eventually overcome without the need for a state. Hence, direct action went beyond a mere method of self-managed struggle, it was the means by which capitalism could be replaced without the need for outside interference.

We should be clear about what those in the emerging international syndicalist movement meant by direct action. It did not simply imply that the struggle stays under working class control, although this is an essential ingredient of it. Nor should it be seen as merely a more effective form of struggle than parliamentary action, though it undoubtedly is. The crux of direct action was recognised as the means by which people become conscious of their oppression and how to counter it. Through self-organisation for direct action, people would gain confidence in themselves, and through common struggle, they would become aware of their common oppression. Through direct action would come the confidence required for self-education, to understand and codify their oppression, and develop alternative strategies and systems to overcome it. Through this, in turn, would come new forms of social relations based on solidarity, the ethical underpinning of the new society. Direct action is far more than just a street tactic.

Every direct action is a step forward in developing an alternative culture. Every direct action therefore allows those involved to reduce their dependence upon capitalism and turn their attention to the evolving culture of resistance, the start of the future society. Direct action is the vehicle that forms the basis of change, and also the confidence and ability to create further change towards liberation. Through every direct action, people demonstrate to themselves that they are not merely dispensable wage slaves, working class cannon fodder or beasts of burden with little intellect. They gain confidence in their abilities; gain a sense of their own worth, and in so doing become more acutely aware of their own oppression and the need for an alternative to capitalism.

Self-confidence as a primary ingredient in struggle and change cannot be overstated. People celebrate confidence while capitalism kills it. All oppressive societies must develop a belief system that underpins the oppression within society, since they cannot rule by violence alone. At the heart of the belief system is usually the idea that there is no alternative to the current order, that the oppressed have no alternative to their oppression, and that things could/would be worse otherwise. Without the ruling elite, society would collapse into chaos. This simple confidence trick cannot be maintained if masses of people have confidence in themselves and their humanity. No confident direct activist will believe that running society must be left to their "leaders and betters".

In attempting to build a new society within the old, the early syndicalists were trying to install confidence in their fellow working class. Through self-organisation and self-education, they sought to illuminate for people their own potential and the possibility of a new society based on

that potential. Their vision was that, if this process got started, it would build itself and, in so doing, ensure the emergence of a new, confident, self-reliant working class culture that would grow to the point that it would shatter the existing capitalist ideology. This shattering point would be reached through a number of revolutions, culminating in a lasting and complete direct action — the general strike — through which capitalism would be finally brought to its knees and overthrown.

In direct action, then, the syndicalists were laying down the basic tenet of anarcho-syndicalism; that the task of freeing the workers can only be achieved by the workers themselves. Only through common struggle based on self-organisation could workers bring about their own liberation. This is the very opposite of the Marxist idea that a transitional period of state control would be needed in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, because the workers would be incapable of taking control of society themselves.

## **Work, creativity, leisure**

The early anarcho-syndicalists were also able to develop a sophisticated vision of what a future society would be like and what its potential holds. It was not just a means of ending poverty nor simply about creating economic equality. These were simply the critical prerequisites for the real purpose of the future, free society, a time when each and every individual could develop themselves to their true potential. It is also interesting that, despite the obviously alienating working conditions at the time, the libertarian socialists did not see work per se as the problem, but the system which created the working conditions. They did not therefore see production in the future society as primarily a necessary chore of utopia. Self-management of production would transform the production process so that it not only ensured that all society's needs were met, but also became part of the means of personal liberation. People would be able to enjoy most work, because they were in control of their actions, they did work freely, and they could be creative in the way they undertook it. In fact, 'work' as such would be transformed beyond recognition.

This demonstrates the extent of the vision. Today, though many working conditions are better, most jobs are drudgery, and it is still difficult to envisage such a transformation of work. At the crux of the matter, under both capitalism and state controlled industry, we have little control over what we do. Driven by external authority and need for a source of income, we are often alienated from what we produce. In such cases, we are a mere tool under the control of capitalism and state. The idea of work as a means for individual creation and expression is remote.

For anarcho-syndicalists, work should be, as far as possible, a means of free expression. The opportunity for this is maximised by work being organised and controlled directly by those doing it. For this reason, the means of production becomes more than just a way to provide for the needs to ensure physical survival; it is itself a vehicle for individual development. This may sound like a glorification of work or a rallying call for a new work ethic, but it is not. Much work can be transformed or done away with — the only work that will take place will be that which is deemed worthwhile to meet identified needs. Equally, not all of this may have the potential to be particularly creative or stimulating. So-called monotonous or unpleasant work may exist, although even this will be transformed by being under direct workers' control. Where necessary, such monotonous work would need to be shared out in society equally, by co-operative negotia-



tion at the local level. The over-riding effect will be that the work process will not only become the means of life, but a principal way of expressing life.

Another area where the early anarcho-syndicalists developed a sophisticated vision was in the relationship between work and leisure. With capitalism and waged labour, people are forced to sell large parts of their lives. As a result, they tend to 'write off' work time and 'treasure' leisure time, treating them very differently from each other. One problem is that work is often so bad that it affects part or all of the remaining leisure time. Another problem is that the artificial distinction between work and leisure, forced upon us by capitalism, is often neither healthy nor conducive to enjoyment or life quality, on either side of the distinction. Aware of this unhealthy division, the developing anarcho-syndicalist vision sought to counter it by breaking down the distinction between work and leisure in the future society, by seeing the productive process not as primarily a burden, but a means of expression and enjoyment. Today, we could harness and develop modern technology further to provide truly flexible and mixed productive and leisure time, while improving the creativeness within production. This could provide the basis of a modern vision of an integrated, balanced and fulfilling life of work and leisure.

Meanwhile, the capitalist reality of work is a place where workers are often forced to undertake tasks, which pose immediate or long-term threats to their health, well-being and life. Moreover, there is worse than economic exploitation; there is also capitalist domination, where workers are not only used to produce profits for their masters (sic), but are forced to do so in a threatening atmosphere. With this type of situation increasingly common across the global economy, the need for a lasting alternative and means of obtaining it grows daily.

The vision of the early anarcho-syndicalists was therefore considerable and, perhaps surprisingly, much of it remains at least as relevant today as then. Undoubtedly, their view of workplace struggle went far beyond merely a means of securing improvements in pay and conditions. The workplace was an area of class struggle where the workers would continuously extend their power, gaining ever-greater control over the working process, until the point at which capitalism could be overcome. It was also a means by which a new culture based on solidarity could be developed, practised and strengthened, until it replaced the dominant capitalist culture based on barbaric, narrow-minded selfishness.

Such was the level of wider support for the syndicalist tactics of direct action leading to the general strike, that state socialist parties incorporated the general strike idea into their own strategy as a vote winner. It sat rather uncomfortably with their state control stance, but they nevertheless argued that the general strike would be used to achieve state power, or to force the ruling elite out of power, should they refuse to accept the socialist victory in a general election. As such, the general strike became a means for securing or underpinning the political party's bid for state power – a rather sad thought.

## **Social economic politics**

Faced with a rapidly expanding syndicalist movement, the state socialists attempted to argue that the syndicalists' refusal to form political parties reflected their unwillingness to participate in wider political debate. They attempted to portray the emergent anarcho-syndicalism as a form of militant trade unionism. The goal of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism was claimed to be beyond the intellectual capabilities of an organisation made up and controlled by working people.

Without the aid of political parties led by middle class intellectuals, they would be incapable of achieving revolutionary consciousness (to paraphrase one notable Marxist leader).

These attacks said more about the prejudices of the socialist leaders themselves than the ideas of syndicalism. The socialist party said the unions should concentrate on day-to-day demands, while the important struggle of changing society should be left to the political parties. They said this for their own good reason — they either believed it, in which case they were sadly mistaken, or they said it because to say otherwise would undermine ‘their’ party’s reason for being. Not surprisingly, they were alarmed by the rise of a movement that had no apparent need for the party, and whose unions fought directly in the workplace as part of the wider struggle against capitalism. They were particularly worried by the idea that social, political and economic liberation could only be achieved by workers themselves by making use of their only real power — their economic power, and that parties were irrelevant or worse in this process.

Another aspect of the syndicalist unions was the sheer breadth of the political and social issues they were prepared to get involved in. Included amongst these were campaigns for immediate political rights, for free speech, against militarism and fascism, and supporting the right to free assembly. As part of these campaigns, they argued that such rights could only be gained and maintained by workers self- organisation. They saw political and economic struggles as part of the same, and insisted that every attack should be resisted directly by the workers themselves, whether it be on freedom of speech or levels of pay. As they pointed out, political rights do not originate in legislative bodies passed down to society by benign states, governments and leaders anxious to reduce their own control over society. The people themselves force them out of the leadership. Should the movements, which fought for these rights, fail, such rights, would quickly be withdrawn. This prediction has unfortunately many modern realities, not least of which being the fact that the right to strike in Britain has now all but been undermined to the point of being worthless, as union power has declined.

The modern workplace is far more than just a place where capitalists exploit workers for profit. It is the place where management exercise control over workers as both their means of exploitation, and of staying in control of society as a whole. Disputes at work and within the wider society are more often than not about control and staying in control. Thus strikes over minor issues, which result in bitter confrontations, invariably extend beyond the immediate economic issues, to the issue of control and the managers’ right to manage. The economic struggle cannot therefore be divorced from the wider political power struggle; they are part and parcel of the same. The early anarcho-syndicalists recognised that this was a major contributory factor in the upsurge in their movement. In rejecting political parties, they specifically did not reject the idea of struggling for political rights. The many fights for the freedom to speak, organise and meet, and the campaigns against militarism and fascism are testimony to this. They saw such struggle as part of the same struggle against capitalism and the state, so, as with the economic struggle, it could only be conducted by the workers themselves through direct action, to the point that capitalism could no longer contain it.

## **Planned spontaneity**

Although the early syndicalists were able to lay down some of the foundation ideas and principles of what was to become anarcho- syndicalism, their movement was clearly flawed in im-

portant ways. Many of the problems stemmed from their view of the events and developments that would lead to 'revolution'.

Such was the faith of the syndicalists in the economic power of working class solidarity that the movement became very mechanistic. The basic idea was that it would continue to grow, involving larger and larger sections of the working class, until it became unstoppable. The general strike was the point where the workers would withdraw all forms of co-operation, both economic and social, leading to the final collapse of capitalism, heralding the free society. In this respect, their view of the general strike was similar to Benbow's Grand National holiday idea (Unit 2), where, once organised, workers would only have to all stop work for an extended holiday to bring about the collapse of capitalism.

For many syndicalists, the revolution was seen as an orderly process, with a relatively quick, simple and straightforward transfer of power from capitalism to socialism, and so an identifiable switch point from the old world to the new. This view persisted amongst various groups throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

One problem with such a mechanistic view is that it virtually ruled out any element of spontaneity. This contrasts widely with the views of the libertarian socialists within the First International, who had placed great value on spontaneous events and action as a creative force. Although the syndicalists had inherited the libertarian socialist view of the unions as the cells of the new society, organising towards the revolution within capitalism, they had generally lost their idea of the revolution as being primarily a spontaneous act that could not be planned out in advance. Further, they no longer stressed the idea that during the revolution, freed from the yoke of capitalism, workers would establish their own new forms and structures that would form the basis of the future society.

The libertarian socialists had never seen spontaneity as enough. As they pointed out, if it was, the desperate state of poverty and oppression would have meant that revolution would have occurred long ago. The idea of the unions was to raise the awareness, consciousness, confidence and solidarity of workers. The social and political role of the unions was seen as a critical accompaniment to the economic-based class struggle, so they became integrated organisations in the pre-revolutionary period. They were also seen as the means by which society could take control of the means of production in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. From then on, new structures would be developed by workers themselves to organise society based on the principle of freedom. All involved would decide these structures, at the time, through the direct democratic process.

There was therefore a difference between the early libertarian approach and that of many of the syndicalists – a difference that, as ever, was tested through practice. In this case, the lessons of experience were learned hard. In the main, capitalism reacted with unrestricted force to the rise of syndicalism. Faced with a movement which argued for outright class war as the means of building a new world within the old, the ruling class went into kill mode, unleashing wave after wave of violence and repression across the world against the syndicalist movement.

As a result, many syndicalist movements began to rethink the strategy of the general strike. They were seeing and experiencing international capitalism ruthlessly trying to smash the threat they posed to its dominance. The revolutionary movement was itself under threat, under the combined weight of brute force and the development of anti-revolutionary tactics by the state, such as imprisonment, torture, 'disappearances', harassment and victimisation of anyone considered a potential 'ringleader' or who was particularly active. As a response, they began to consider their

own offensive moves to defend their revolution. From this came the realisation that the general strike idea could be made more effective by making it a more pro-active action. Instead of it being a matter of withdrawing working class co-operation in order to bring down capitalism, it could become a means through which workers would take immediate control of both industry and the community to actively destroy capitalism and defend the revolution. As an alternative to simply staying away from work, they would take control of it in order to ensure production on behalf of the revolution.

The lessons of both Russia and Spain were to drive home this point. International capitalism attempted to crush both, through assisting the capitalists and the fascists respectively and, in both cases, actively isolating and attempting to starve out the forces of revolution. Economic power was not going to be enough – physical force and firepower would be needed to defend the revolution. The main vehicle for these violent defence units was the workers' militia. Like all anarcho-syndicalist organisations, the militias would be based on the principles of freedom and direct democracy. Membership would be voluntary, delegates would be elected to co-ordinate activity, and they would be subject to immediate recall.

Through bitter experience, it was realised that capitalism would not stand by and let a passive, planned general strike succeed. What was needed was something more pro-active and flexible – with more spontaneity. As modern anarcho-syndicalism began to take shape in 1930s Spain, an element of spontaneity was incorporated into its tactics. Gone was the syndicalist implication that the organised revolutionary movement would effectively determine the course of the revolution and provide the organisations for the post-revolutionary society. In its place, anarcho-syndicalists came to see their organisations as placed within the broader working class, growing as the revolutionary temperature increases. Their integrated social, political and economic organisations would provide a focus for self-reliance in the build-up to revolution, as well as launching mass direct actions in the form of general strikes whenever possible, and supported spontaneously by the wider working class.

## **Collective solutions**

The rise of authoritarianism within the Russian revolution presented perhaps the biggest reason for the anarcho-syndicalists to ditch the syndicalist idea of society being run by the unions. The fear was stark; that the unions could become an authority within wider society, by concentrating power in their organisations within the production process. What about those who were not in revolutionary unions – would they get an equal say in the running of their workplaces?

The answer to this question was that everyone must get an equal say in the running of their workplace after the revolution, otherwise a central tenet of anarcho-syndicalism would be breached. The solution was to apply the principle, not the organisation, to the post-revolutionary situation. In other words, the idea was that in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, workers would organise their own structures based on elected recallable delegates. This was duly tested within the Spanish revolution. Although the anarcho-syndicalist union confederation in Spain, the CNT, spearheaded the initial take-over of industry/agriculture, it did not then attempt to 'own' or run the liberated workplace. Recognising that not all workers were part of the union, the CNT encouraged the formation of collectives, which included everyone involved, both CNT and non-CNT members, and these collectives elected peasants' and workers' committees.

Moreover, membership of the collectives was voluntary, so people could choose to stay out if they wished. In this way, though the CNT played a major role in the move towards workers' control of work, its objective was to establish community control over society by the whole of society. If it had sought to take over workplaces itself, it would have placed itself as a barrier to this process, instead of assisting it.

Another learning process took place within the early syndicalist movement, around the internal structures of their organisations. At the time, they envisaged the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism as imminent. When this did not happen, they were left with longer-term organisations than they had originally planned for. At the same time, they became aware of the potential flaws and weaknesses within such organisations. Many syndicalists in Britain had seen the corruption that had grown in the existing reformist unions, as leaders sought election and became embroiled in government, forming a new arm of the capitalist class. Workers, once elected into full-time positions, quickly lost touch and began to be absorbed by capitalism. The syndicalists were horrified at the possibility that this could happen within their organisations and, as a result, they increasingly sought more democratic control and accountability in them.

Once again, experience of practical realities led to the revision of previous conceptions, and in this case, organisational structures. By the time the anarcho-syndicalist movement emerged, the idea of full time positions within anarcho-syndicalist organisations was rejected. Officers of the union were elected as delegates, carrying out their duty after work. Here we should emphasise the word 'delegate'. The whole ethos of anarcho-syndicalist organisations was (and is) therefore based on decentralisation and direct democratic control from the bottom up. The life of the organisation is conducted by the activity of the membership as a whole rather than through elected officials. As early as the 1930s, the drive for democratic control had ensured that the Spanish CNT, with a membership of one million, only maintained one full-time administrative position.

The emerging 'permanence' of anarcho-syndicalist organisations also allowed the movement to extend and broaden its activity. As we have already seen, just because workers came together in unions to fight capitalism, this did not mean that these organisations were solely about economic issues. Quite the contrary; building the new society in the shell of the old meant exactly that. Consequently, numerous educational, social, youth, women's and cultural groups were formed within and around the anarcho-syndicalist union. Spain again presents a clear glimpse of this, illustrating how anarcho-syndicalism really is not just talk or theory. The years leading up to 1936 brought a rapid rate of development of the working class culture that would contribute to the basis of the future society, alongside but separate from the dominant capitalist culture. After the revolution, this culture continued to develop in an explosion of expression and new ideas of liberation.

## **A real living alternative**

The anarcho-syndicalist 'union' bears no resemblance to the trade unions of today. The difference stems from the recognition by anarcho-syndicalism that what has to be overcome is not just economic exploitation, but oppression as a whole, and this has various origins and reappears time and again in different forms. Over the years, as anarcho-syndicalists have gathered experience, these unions have become broad and adaptable, to allow struggle against the full range of oppression dished out by capitalism, the state, and their sick society.

To give just two prominent examples, the *Mujeres Libres* and the *Juventudes Libertarias* have been actively engaging with women's issues and youth resistance respectively, since the 1930s. The use of the Spanish CNT example is not accidental, for it was in the Spanish revolution that the strength of the idea of building the new world within the old was really borne out. The anarcho-syndicalists were able to defeat Franco's fascist coup in their stronghold of Catalonia and, using the strength of their own existing organisations and the defeat of fascism as a springboard, they launched the new society (see Units 15–18).

The fact that this new society succeeded at all is remarkable given the ranks of world-wide opposition (including the Soviet-sponsored communists); the fact that it actually flourished, practised the principles of freedom and equality, and improved production and quality of life during a bloody war, is testament to the idea. Much crucial groundwork for the establishment of libertarian communism in Spain had been underway for many years, within and around the CNT, as shown in the resolutions passed at the CNT conferences in the years before the Spanish revolution. Indeed, in many ways, this period foreshadows the revolution, which was not timely or prepared for, but forced upon the CNT by the fascist coup (see Units 15 and 17). As one Spanish anarcho-syndicalist wrote at the time:

“The Spanish revolution was mature in the popular consciousness for many years, the anarchists and syndicalists of Spain considered their task to be the social transformation of society. In their assemblies, in their journals, their brochures and books, the social revolution was discussed incessantly and in a systematic fashion.”

## Dark ages

While holding up Spain as the first example of a large anarcho-syndicalist movement, it must be made clear that the CNT made significant mistakes during the Spanish revolutionary period. After all, anarcho-syndicalism is not a theory, but a movement shaped by reality. Looking for mistakes and weaknesses is part of the means by which we learn, change and move the anarcho-syndicalist project forward. Ahead, everything still looks the same — a world striving for ever-greater freedom, based on equality, solidarity and direct democracy.

Without wishing to sweep the entire remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century aside, the global anarcho-syndicalist movement struggled and largely failed to come to terms with the lessons of Spain. Before it could, it was hit with a barrage of setbacks that knocked the life out of the international movement for half a century.

There was the rise of totalitarianism, both fascist and communist, and the effects of the Second World War, which in breaking up workforces and wiping out dissent, all but finished the international anarcho-syndicalist movement. After the war, Marxism dominated the socialist movement, and anarcho-syndicalism kept a foothold in only a handful of countries.

The post-war rise of Marxism occurred because it responded to the capitalist boom and its attendant prosperity, by becoming increasingly reformist — as it had done previously, prior to the Russian Revolution. The British Communist Party now concentrated its strategy upon influencing the Labour Party. Meanwhile, in the less developed world, Soviet imperialism made inroads as state control (and Soviet aid) was seen as a means to organise national liberation struggles, aimed at bringing freedom from the dominance of capitalist imperialism. Others trod their own path without Russia, and from South America to China, state-oriented communist revolutions

occurred. Unfortunately, as in Russia, state control only brought new elites based on a small intelligentsia. Tragically, the same mistakes were repeated across the globe as workers, who had shed blood to throw off advanced capitalist or imperial dominance, found themselves facing a new ruling class, often more brutal and corrupt than that they had overthrown. Driven by Marxism, these new elites introduced forced industrialisation programmes, which achieved little but undermined the rural economy, often leading to widespread starvation.

In the advanced world, reformist socialism was sucked into increasingly bourgeois politics. Socialist parties, which had once set out to conquer political power under the flag of socialism, gradually sacrificed their socialist convictions one by one, until they became political lightning rods for the security of capitalism. The capitalism they had sought to conquer had finally conquered them and their 'socialism', and there was nothing left to fight for except the enemy. Some of the socialist parties, though crumbling in terms of any pretence at revolutionary intent, were successful as capitalist puppets, and they lured many bourgeois minds and career hungry politicians into their camp, which helped to accelerate the decay of socialist principles. Soon, success was measured in terms of votes at the polls. Even talk of struggle, direct action, self-reliance and self-education was increasingly seen as a hindrance to this 'success'. Hence, such 'ideals' were sacrificed to the god of the polling booth. Activity in the workplace and the community gradually fell away. All that was required of the workers was that they turn out on polling day. Socialist parties encouraged apathy as a means of control, until what was once a living, breathing socialist movement withered to become an electoral machine.

In Britain, the drift away from socialism has finally run its course with the rise of New Labour, which now can no longer bear to speak the name. The idea of a state controlled 'communist' system as an alternative to capitalism has also effectively died, with the final collapse of the Soviet Union. The workers' state in China is now rushing to embrace the free market. Practically, only Cuba and North Korea are left to carry the Marxist banner.

## Postscript

The rise of syndicalism around the turn of the century was the first real global mass-movement that was based largely upon the ideas of libertarian socialism, developed in and around the First International. While many 'mistakes' were made, they were learned from, and the result was the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism in a recognisable form.

The first real opportunity to put anarcho-syndicalism into practice came in Spain in the 1930s. Again, mistakes were made, although, it has to be said, the remarkable success of the collectives movement also provided a clear demonstration that people could run their own communities and production systems using anarcho-syndicalist principles, even in modern industrialised cities such as Barcelona.

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was a dark age for global anarcho-syndicalism, as workers embraced Marxism and social democracy around the world. Towards the end of the century, it became all too apparent that both these options for achieving a better world had failed dismally and would continue to fail, not least due to the fundamental weakness of maintaining that tool of oppression, the state.

Now, at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there are signs that anarcho-syndicalism has begun to re-emerge as a real hope for the future. It does not have all the answers, but it does have a

long history of experience of struggle and of a working class learning from its mistakes. As it slowly recovers its strength, anarcho-syndicalism may emerge any time soon, as it has before, as a movement against oppression aimed at ever-greater human freedom.

In the next and final Unit in this course, we shall attempt to assess the current aims, aspirations, ideas, tactics and, above all, the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism in Britain at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## Key points

- For both libertarian socialism and modern anarcho-syndicalism a future society would be democratically controlled, since the goal is the management of things, not people.
- There is no all-embracing ‘theory of anarcho-syndicalism’. Anarcho-syndicalists simply advocate a broad-based range of federated organisations, sharing the same basic aims and principles opposed to capitalism, parliamentarianism and state control, and for the establishment of libertarian communism.
- In rejecting capitalism, the anarcho-syndicalist movement totally rejects the morality that underpins capitalism and the society based on that morality.
- In direct action the basic tenet of anarcho-syndicalism was laid down; that the task of freeing the workers can only be achieved by the workers themselves.
- For anarcho-syndicalists the economic struggle cannot be divorced from the wider political power struggle; they are part and parcel of the same thing.
- State socialist parties incorporated the general strike idea into their own strategy in an attempt to win votes.
- Integrated social, political and economic organisations will provide a focus for self-reliance in the build-up to revolution, as well as launching mass direct actions in the form of general strikes whenever possible, and supported spontaneously by the wider working class.
- The whole ethos of anarcho-syndicalist organisations was (and is) based on decentralisation and direct democratic control – from the bottom up.

## Checklist

1. What were the differences between the Marxist and libertarian socialist attitudes towards the peasantry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?
2. What is meant by the phrase, “the management of things not people”?
3. How did the early syndicalists see the building of a “new society in the shell of the old”?
4. What was the libertarian socialist attitude towards work and leisure?
5. What is meant by the expression “planned spontaneity”?
6. Do anarcho-syndicalists see a future society run by the unions?



## Answer suggestions

1. *What were the differences between the Marxist and libertarian socialist attitudes towards the peasantry in the early 20 century?*

The Marxists determined that the peasantry were condemned by the laws of history to be reactionary, only seeking to own and cultivate their own small patch of land. They decided that the new workers' state would have to forcibly collectivise the land. The libertarian socialists bitterly disagreed with this, arguing that irrespective of whether they were 'reactionary' or not, collectivisation could only work if it was voluntary – and free. They were confident in both the peasants and their ideas.

2. *What is meant by the term, “the management of things not people”?*

A future direct democratic society would not be some all-embracing state-like system where decisions about all aspects of human life are made by some centralised administration. Things are the products and services we make/provide because we decide we need them, they will need to be managed, leaving people to manage themselves. Government will be replaced by 'industrial' organisation. People will come together freely within the production process to plan, make and otherwise ensure their needs are met. Outside the workplace and production process people will naturally and freely come together on the basis of their common interests to pursue their own desires and needs. These groups will be self-organised, voluntary and entirely self-regulated. The organisation of society will therefore be limited exclusively to the needs of production and consumption. Society and the life of those within it will therefore have two components – self-managed, federated production/provision for needs, and the rest, made up of a patchwork of interlocking self-interest groups, all self-regulating, overlapping and interacting as their interests coincide.

3. *How did the early syndicalists see the building of a “new society in the shell of the old”?*

In rejecting capitalism and the state, the early syndicalist movement totally rejected the morality that underpinned capitalism and the society based on that morality. The new society will be based on a new socialist morality that will not simply emerge miraculously from the ashes of some future socialist revolution, but exists in the here and now, within the shell of the capitalist system. In building the new society in the shell of the old, they sought to create a new socialist culture within the working class, based around the main organisation of the working class – the union movement. This culture was to be built totally independently of the existing capitalist order based on the principle of solidarity, the very negation of that of the capitalist principles of pure self-interest and the pursuit of profit. In order that the new society could evolve, a means of struggle was needed that was also independent of the existing capitalist system and the existing social order; direct action.

4. *What was the libertarian socialist attitude towards work and leisure?*

Despite the obviously alienating working conditions at the time, the libertarian socialists did not see work per se as the problem, but the system that created the working conditions. They did not therefore see production in the future society as primarily a necessary chore of utopia. Self-management of production will transform the production process so that it not only ensured that all society's needs were met, but also became part of the means of personal liberation. People will be able to enjoy most work, because they were in control of their actions, they did work freely, and they could be creative in the way they undertook it.

5. *What is meant by the expression “planned spontaneity”?*

The faith of the early syndicalists in the economic power of working class solidarity that the movement became very mechanistic with the basic idea was that it would continue to grow until it became unstoppable. The general strike was the point where the workers would withdraw all forms of co-operation, both economic and social, leading to the final collapse of capitalism, heralding the free society. In practice they realised that making it a more pro-active action could make the general strike idea more effective. It could become a means through which workers would take immediate control of both industry and the community to actively destroy capitalism and defend the revolution. As an alternative to simply staying away from work, they would take control of it in order to ensure production on behalf of the revolution. Anarcho-syndicalists also came to see their organisations placed within the broader working class, growing as the revolutionary temperature increases. Their integrated social, political and economic organisations would provide a focus for self-reliance in the build-up to revolution, as well as launching mass direct actions in the form of general strikes whenever possible, and supported spontaneously by the wider working class.

*6. Do anarcho-syndicalists see a future society run by the unions?*

The rise of authoritarianism within the Russian revolution presented perhaps the biggest reason for the anarcho-syndicalists to ditch the syndicalist idea of society being run by the unions. The fear was stark; that the unions could become an authority within wider society, by concentrating power in their organisations within the production process, while those who were not in revolutionary unions would not get an equal say in the running of their workplaces. So the idea developed that everyone must get an equal say in the running of their workplace after the revolution, otherwise a central tenet of anarcho-syndicalism would be breached. The solution was to apply the principle, not the organisation, to the post-revolutionary situation. In other words, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, workers will organise their own structures based on elected recallable delegates. Similar structures will operate within the wider community and these can be inter-linked in a web-like structure.

## **Suggested discussion points**

- What are the main differences between the early libertarian socialists, syndicalists and today's anarcho-syndicalist movement?
- In the industrially 'developed' world, leisure is seen as separate from work, and many forms are commodified and informed by capitalist concerns (t.v., film, sports, hobbies magazines). How might this split be resolved, and capitalist interests be withdrawn? What alternatives can we explore?
- How can 'repression from within society' i.e. sexism, racism, disablism and other forms of adverse social discrimination be countered effectively in the twenty-first century?
- In which ways is direct action 'far more than just a street tactic'? Why is this important?

## **Further Reading**

This Unit draws on ideas introduced in Units 1–22, so these are a starting point for tracing the origins of anarcho-syndicalism. To find out more, you can always contact us at SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW (da@directa.force9.co.uk). Alternatively, try the Internet; the Direct Action website is one starting point for links to SF and other organisations and their ideas (www.directa.force9.co.uk), or libraries and second-hand bookshops. To mail order further reading, try the AK catalogue, from AK Distribution, PO Box 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd).

## Unit 24: The spirit of anarcho-syndicalism

This Unit is slightly different from the previous 23 in that it attempts to take anarcho-syndicalist history and project it forward into the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In so doing, it builds directly upon Units 22 and 23, which trace the origins, motivations, ideas, aims and principles of anarcho-syndicalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries respectively.

This is not a 'definition' of anarcho-syndicalism in any sense. In fact, to attempt something like a 'manifesto' would be both futile and contrary to the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism, which is characterised by independence of action around a basic set of core principles; centred on freedom and solidarity. Anarcho-syndicalism has grown and developed through people taking action, having experiences, and learning from them. To try to produce an all-encompassing theory to live or organise by would therefore be alien to anarcho-syndicalists. Instead, this Unit is a small group of people's feelings of what is the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

It is structured in three sections; a short introduction to the choices on offer to us in changing society; a discussion of some of the ideas at the core of anarcho-syndicalism today, and; some notes and comments on 3 examples of types of struggles taking place today. As ever, the idea is to contribute to new and more effective action, from which we can collectively bring about a better society more quickly. That is the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism, and also the spirit of this Unit.

### This Unit aims to

- Take anarcho-syndicalist history and project it forward into the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- Provide some ideas as to the choices on offer to us in changing society today.
- Provide a discussion of some of the ideas at the core of anarcho-syndicalism today.
- Present some notes and comments on 3 examples of types of struggles taking place today.
- Contribute to new and more effective action; from which we can collectively bring about a better society.

### Introduction

This Unit is different from the previous 23 in that it builds directly upon Units 22 and 23, which trace the origins, motivations, ideas, aims and principles of anarcho-syndicalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries respectively. As this is a summary unit there are no key points, checklist, or discussion points. This unit is not a definition of anarcho-syndicalism in any sense. In fact, to attempt

something like a manifesto would be both futile and contrary to the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism, which is characterised by independence of action around a basic set of core principles centred on freedom and solidarity.

Anarcho-syndicalism has grown and developed through people taking action, having experiences, and learning from them. To try to produce an all-encompassing theory to live or organise by would therefore be alien to anarcho-syndicalists. Instead, this Unit is a small group of people's feelings of what is the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. That is the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism, and also the spirit of this Unit.

## **Life today and changing it**

Anarcho-syndicalism is a response to oppression. Today, in Britain, oppression is a part of daily life, be it alienation, poverty, or any of a myriad of other sources of authority and suffering. Society is failing and our individual needs are not being met. The task of anarcho-syndicalism is to find a means of understanding what the source of our oppression is, what would overcome it, and how we can best steer our way towards this goal.

That is not to say that everything is oppressive right now. In reality, we do practise solidarity and mutual aid, we help people across the road, do odd jobs for each other as favours, give gifts to each other with no expectation of return, etc. Sixty percent of the productive economy (work) is unwaged; we do it voluntarily. Child rearing, housework, caring for and supporting family and friends, not to mention a wide range of voluntary work falls into this category. The point is, we do these things despite capitalism and the state, which constantly try to tell us that we are not like this, we are selfish, so we need their systems to regulate us and satisfy our in-built profit motive.

Our real motivations as social humans are demonstrated by why we decided to live together in the first place. Society is the result of the grouping together of humans for their mutual benefit. It is society that allows us the space, support, resources and freedom to develop as 'individuals'. The sense of individual self is therefore a result of society. Without society, we would each be alone, isolated, on the edge of existence. Through society, we have developed communication, pooling of resources, free time, culture, in short, individuality. This is not to say that social behaviour (society) marks the start of the human race, nor that it is unique to it – many animals have social networks too. The point is that society is the vehicle through which we have long realised that we can develop ourselves (our egos, if you like), obtain collective security, free time (and therefore, potentially, freedom) and become, above all, distinct individuals. We get all this through having the time to do our own thing. That is, until capitalism and the state come along and tell us we have to spend this time earning the right to survive, and that we should die fighting wars and live by unjust laws 'for our own good' (sic).

Society is not only the source of human individuality, it is also both oppressive and freeing to varying extents, depending upon how it is organised and structured. Modern society may not appear to be very structured or regimented, but it is. There is no such thing as free trade, free votes, or free expression in today's highly organised society – it depends on money and power. This is apparent to anyone who has ever stepped outside the rules/law/social norms; they see, no matter how easy-going it seems on the surface, how regimented it is in reality.

'Freedom' in capitalism and New Labour terms is empty rhetoric; the word is used because it sounds good. Real freedom can only happen by removing the authority, oppression and inequality that these agencies stand for. Making society freer in this real sense is good for individual development. It is a source of social enrichment, and as society gets richer, so do we as individuals. Indeed, social freedom and individual freedom are directly related. Freedom requires free time — the more non-coercive, self-directed time we have, the freer we can potentially be. But there is a lot more we need too — access to physical and social resources, including goods and services, and equality, are paramount. Anarcho-syndicalism seeks ever-greater freedom in society, since this will lead to more individual freedom, which in turn will produce more creative development, leading to more social development, and so more possibility for yet-greater freedom than before.

A world of rich and poor, far from encouraging 'healthy competition', must inevitably result in oppression, exploitation, bullying, a deep sense of injustice, guilt, insecurity, and inadequacy. To seek and drive for more inequality, as capitalism does, is to intensify these unhealthy, oppressive forces within society. The very opposite of this is to seek to intensify freedom instead. In a mutually free society, with equal and free access to our productive efforts, by definition, there can be no more 'rich and poor'. This is a basis, a starting point, from which we can seek more freedom. Anarcho-syndicalism is on this quest and, as such, it is the antithesis of capitalism and the state.

## **Alternatives**

Having come to the conclusion that we are being conned by capitalists and politicians into accepting a raw deal, what are we going to do about it and how? Basically, there are three options.

Firstly, we can accept the ideas of inequality and leadership (and therefore the idea that we either cannot or will not be bothered to look after ourselves), but look to 'tame' the beasts of capitalism and the state so that they are less harsh on us. This notion is at the heart of so-called 'social democracy', various forms of which are practised across western Europe, and have been since the Second World War. This really began to fail obviously around the mid 1970s, when recession caused the cracks in the underlying economic theory to appear. Once this occurred, it became clear that, as labour was no longer in short supply, capitalism would go back on the offensive. This happened quite dramatically in Britain, where Thatcher's politically-motivated policies, though economically weak, were pursued vigorously, leaving millions out of work and free trade capitalism once more on the rampage. Unregulated capitalism is now once more established as the mechanism of choice for the ruling elite, as we are told there is 'no alternative' and 'the market must decide'. The result is more and more inequality and inhumanity, both locally and globally. The idea that capitalism can be tamed or made 'human' is now decisively discredited. No-one knows this more than the social democrat politicians themselves; the centre left parties across Europe have quickly and quietly dropped any idea of the socialist state and almost crushed each other in the stampede to embrace the free market god.

The second option is state capitalism, sometimes called state communism. The Marxist idea that the state can take over from capitalism and run the economy through state control for the benefit of everyone, is, looking back on it, nothing more than a very, very nasty joke, or it would be, if millions of people across the world had not been killed in the process of proving beyond any doubt that any and every 'communist' leader is a potential, and likely actual, tyrant. To

libertarians, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, the failure of Marxism is no surprise, since it is based on exactly the same pretext as the systems which existed before it appeared — that the state as an outside force could make life better. Within Marxism, however, the state acquires so much direct and pervasive control that it draws even more of the creativity and life out of people. This leads to inevitable economic collapse, as incompetent bosses, unhindered by private competition and efficiency needs, dish out the wrong orders to a demoralised workforce. With China joining the rush for the market, only Cuba and North Korea remain as the last vestiges of the disastrous failure that is Marxism.

The third option is to oppose the state idea and the authority it stands for, and to oppose capitalism and the values of greed and inequality that it stands for too. However, where will the power vested in the state and capitalism go to, and how will those with vested interests in the current system be persuaded to participate in the process? Instead of replacing the state and capitalism with other power centres, other states, or attempting to temper their worst effects, anarcho-syndicalism is about devolving power to the individual, and going for freedom.

Power is only with the state and capital by force and persuasion through manipulation. To state the obvious, when a critical mass of people are no longer persuaded and are capable of opposing the force used against them, change can happen. Put another way; capitalists and statists will yield when they no longer have or can sustain their authority and power. The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is freedom; the means, methods and principles are all anti-state, pro- solidarity, anti-capitalist, pro-equality, anti-authority, pro-direct democracy. The self-made, bottom-up society is the only arrangement by which humans can benefit from social interaction, without the selfish interests of a few getting a hold through an external agency (e.g. the state) or systemised inequality (e.g. capitalism).

## **21<sup>st</sup> Century anarcho-syndicalism**

As mentioned above, since society is the product of us grouping together, it is both a reflection and a determinant of ourselves. We constantly react to our surroundings — to our society. For example, one way in which we react to exploitation is by fighting back. Just as we recognise that by coming together in society we have greater potential for freedom, so we also recognise that if we come together to fight back against exploitation, we will be more effective than if we operate as individuals, alone. This is the basis of the libertarian organisation, the revolutionary union, the local activist group — it is more effective than the sum of its individuals.

The way society is structured determines how it is and how we will react to it. If we create a society, which assumes we are nasty, brutish and selfish, it is inevitable that, to a greater or lesser extent, we will be. The only way we are going to change this arrangement is by starting to create and live a new society with new social codes which are not oppressive, and from which we can become more free. We develop ourselves by coming together and collectively fighting against oppression and for a new society where the emphasis is on freedom. Beyond this, the detail of how best to fight at any one time or in any given situation is down to those involved in the immediate action. However, we can draw on our history and the resultant theory we have developed to help us rule out some options as being non- starters. For example, the reform model, that of seeking ever-greater concessions from capitalism until ‘it’ miraculously decides to call it a

day, will not work. Any form of parliamentary-based action is futile — all we do by this is create a new leadership for us to be exploited by.

The Marxist idea that we can dream up (or ‘scientifically’ determine) a theory, from which a single strategy or ‘recipe’ for revolution can be determined, is also inherently flawed. Every situation is unique and demands a unique response, which must come from the people involved. This is not to say that many situations are not similar, or that the same tried and tested forms of struggle cannot be used over and over again. It is simply that these things do not necessarily follow or apply. How we respond to our oppression must not be pre-determined, but this does not mean we must start from zero every time, erase the past, and so make the same mistakes over and over. It also does not mean we should not have a theory or theories at various stages of development and testing, nor that we should not try out new or different ideas and tactics in different situations in order to develop experience and be more effective in the future. All these things are necessary if we are to move forward as rapidly as possible. The basis of every action and every idea is not an over-arching ‘king theory’ as in Marxism; it is our basic aim of ‘freedom by free means’ and our inherent culture of resistance. This culture always exists in all of us — it is an automatic response within us to our exploitation. However, much of the time, it may be kept at bay by our need to ‘make the best of a bad situation’, to seek a basic minimum level of quality of life — security, satisfaction, etc. Nevertheless, inevitably, at some point, just as slaves will come together to resist their slavery, our vision of a better future will come to the fore and we will come together to try to move towards it.

One of the most disturbing things about our present capitalist, state-centred reality is how much we are all suffering. For a lot of us a lot of the time, this may just feel like a dull ache or vague feeling that something is not right. Undoubtedly, some suffer much more than others, but many of us are, directly or indirectly, oppressors at some point, as well as also (more often) being exploited. We indirectly damage the environment, others’ livelihoods and maintain and tolerate oppression within society at global level. Even the greediest, richest, nastiest fat cat lives in an oppressive society — he (sic) may be a ‘winner’ in that society, but the fact is that it remains a detriment to his quality of life. If we are all to see a better quality of life, we need to act collectively to change things. As we have already seen, putting faith in representatives, politicians, or whoever to lead the struggle on our behalf automatically dooms it to failure. Benevolent, impartial leaders do not exist, per se, and so reform, which means using some alternative ‘better’ form of authority, cannot work. Capitalist and statist structures (and those who climb up them) cannot lead us towards freedom, since they lie in opposite directions with opposite interests. Authority breeds authority, freedom breeds freedom. You cannot get either by using the means of the other.

Logically then, not only are we aiming for a society free of oppression, but we are also committed to using tactics in the struggle that are themselves free of authority and oppression. What we are about now, then, is building ourselves toolkits of non-oppressive forms of organisation, struggle and social relationships. Through constant use and experimentation, these can be improved, until we have a formidable knowledge of free organisational forms, and a massive array of tactics and methods. All of this means constant application — putting ideas about how we want to live into practice, now. In other words, we operate by building our new society in the shell of the old. In doing so, we demonstrate what works, and defend our new embryonic society against the inevitable onslaught from capitalism and the state, whose interests are directly opposed to the nucleus of freedom we are beginning to develop.



## Revolution

Revolutions are stages in the wider process. Revolutions happen when people's expectations are much greater than the ruling elite are prepared to give in to. Unfulfilled promises and extreme exploitation spill over into full-scale class war. Absolute freedom is a goal for the new society, and one which will never be reached. Therefore, there is no simple recipe along the lines of 'struggle, then general strike, then revolution, then utopia, then end of the world'. Instead, the struggle for greater freedom starts now and it never ends. Along the way, there will be explosions into revolution, and periods of desperate defence against full scale attack from authoritarians. Revolutions are necessary battles in the wider war to overcome authority and reach ever-greater freedom. To state the obvious; if today's freedom is greater than yesterday's, we have moved forward, but if tomorrow's freedoms are to be greater still, we will always have some way to travel.

Marxists would argue that, if you create economic equality, then you will end oppression automatically, and a 'final' static post- revolutionary society will emerge. We know from the various disastrous experiments in the name of Marxism how dangerous this flawed theory is, and that there are many forms of oppression other than economic –that authority is actually the root of oppression. However, the idea of a static utopia is also neither attractive nor realistic. Who wants to live in a 'final' utopia? Even if we did, we would find that freedom is a relative concept – there are forms of freedom we do not yet understand or comprehend, waiting for us to discover and strive for them when we do.

The revolution, in the sense of an explosion of anger and action, is one battle in the wider class war. It is an outpouring of freedom. The state and capitalism may eventually regain overall control. The revolution hasn't failed it is simply another step. The larger the step, the less power is regained by the forces of oppression, the more is retained by the forces of freedom. The revolution, in the sense of the entire movement, is the culture of resistance; the pursuit of more freedom, forever.

## State culture

The idea of the state is that we give away our freedom – the freedom to do as we like – in favour of the freedom to not be subject to other people's innate evil. The state has no function if we 'discover' that people are not innately evil or inherently nasty. In fact, people are not. Before the state, we came together and realised the benefits of living in groups. We voluntarily associated with each other, and realised we could mutually benefit from it. We wouldn't have done this if we were constantly selfish and brutish towards each other. We found we had enough spare time to develop communication, art, expression, culture, and individuality. Instead of being isolated beings continuously seeking survival, we became social beings capable of individuality. Instead of being chained to the constant need for food, water and warmth, we became free of these chores. Freedom and individuality can only appear within society.

If there is any 'innate' evil, if that serial killer next door really is 'innately' evil, pre-programmed to do such things, then neither the state nor capitalism will prevent that behaviour from taking place, as we all know only too well from reading the papers. In fact, we do not know whether such evil is innate or the result of our human environment; society. Nature or nurture is

of no real significance here. What is significant is that the vast majority of anti-social behaviour is caused by the nature of our present society. People rob predominantly because they are poor or in need, or because they are brought up in a 'fuck you' society where such behaviour is tacitly encouraged by leaders and politicians, who do the same but on a bigger scale, and often, within their 'laws'. And so it goes on — authority, bullying, oppression and inequality leads to more authoritarian, bullying, and otherwise oppressive behaviour.

Under the state, we are all subject to authority. In 'agreeing' to this, we get individual 'freedom', except that this concept is nonsense. Freedom is not like money, something that can be stockpiled and handed out at will, it is a social phenomenon. Freedom can only exist within a group of people, or a society, where authority is removed or is not present. The freedom to do certain things (like not be killed) is promised by the state, but is not delivered. The simple reason is that creating a system based on the premise that we will kill given half the chance ensures that some of us will. Creating a system based on the premise that we are selfish and nasty ensures that many of us will be, at least some of the time.

We are promised by the state that, in exchange for our obedience, we will have security — a fundamental human desire. In reality, we can only be sure about one thing — that we will be ripped off. Crime is one of the biggest single examples of how the state delivers the opposite of the security it promises. The vast majority of crime is a direct product of the oppression and inequality that the state and capitalism dish out each day, and it causes stress and insecurity to millions.

Even if we do have an instinctive desire to 'free ride' (live off other people's endeavours) or to be selfish, or to be greedy, the fact is that we know that in the long run, this is not good for us and it is 'wrong'. This knowledge should be enough to want to create a society where this sort of behaviour is neither expected, encouraged, nor socially acceptable. Instead, we have, at best, an 'I' society — and more often than not, a 'fuck you' society. The reality is that we are expected to be like this, and so we are treated like this. Instead of telling people who act like this that they are out of order, our society says 'we knew you would do that, so that's OK, we have a control mechanism for that'. The control mechanism in question works differently depending on your background, status and connections. The very heart of the problem is that it is an external agency which is doing the regulating, not the people in the society themselves.

We are a product of society, and we have been social for a long time — since we realised that freedom and individuality were good things and attainable through society. Therefore, despite our present society, which treats us badly and makes us more selfish, we cannot help ourselves voluntarily helping each other. It is what worked when we first came together in society. Hence, we help each other all the time, we do things voluntarily with no expectation of direct return — only the knowledge of a greater return in the wider society. If you help someone across the road, you know they are unlikely to ever help you, but you know society is a better place for it. The gift society is alive and well, despite the best efforts and expectations of capitalism and the state.

Society and culture are the source of our freedom. Our physical instincts to survive did not disappear with the creation of society, they were simply added to, with the addition of social motivation — the possibility of higher and greater freedom and individuality. Our place in society becomes important once we are reasonably 'sure' of our survival. We could call social needs 'higher needs' because they come after the 'basic' needs. In any progressive global society, we should have assured each other of basic needs long ago — no-one should have to die of starvation,

for example. We should be moving on to satisfying our 'higher' needs by voluntary co-operation – the way we know it works.

## Organisation

Since we have recognised the futility of the reform of capitalism and the state, we have to determine the best way to start creating our new, free society (within the shell of the old), based on voluntary co-operation. Clearly, our response must be co-ordinated and collective. This means we need organisation. But equally, it must be based on freedom, with anti-authoritarian structures and conducted by voluntary means. The society we seek will be self-regulating, self-managing, self-educating, self-reliant – in other words, without orders, or a higher authority. It will be fundamentally equal – based on equal access to products and resources.

What about motivation? What apparently drives capitalism and the state is greed, selfishness, desire to get above others, necessity to obey orders, and inequality (stimulating the desire to get above others). The motivation for our movement must be the same as the motivation for the society we seek – ever-greater individuality and freedom. So we must develop non-authoritative, voluntary organisations that are motivated towards individuality and freedom. The term organisation in this sense means organic bodies – networks of like-minded people doing co-ordinated things in a voluntary setting, identifying with and supporting each other. In other words, we need to come together in groups, where we can develop our activities and ideas, and practise mutual solidarity – the basis of our future society. These groups (solidarity groups if you like) must be without leaders or authority from above, so they must be based upon direct democracy, where decisions are made by all.

However, we cannot envisage having mass-meetings of, say, more than a few houses, streets, or a village or neighbourhood. Above a certain size, this mass-meeting idea will become unwieldy; distances will be such that not everyone can easily meet regularly together, and people will not know each other so well, will not have the time or confidence to express themselves, etc. Groups that are viable in size (whatever that may be) will have to federate together. This simply means that they will each elect a delegate to meet regularly at federal level to discuss matters and pass on their community's decisions, in particular, those which affect more than one group. A delegate is someone who carries out the wishes (and only the wishes) of the group they are from. This is different from a representative, leader, or whatever, who has the power to make decisions in the name of the group they come from. Under direct democracy, a delegate or officer is elected only to carry out or take forward specific tasks or views given to them – they are also not given any special allowances for doing this service, and they are subject to instant recall whenever the local solidarity group they represent wishes. They must also only serve a set time as a maximum, after which someone else has a turn, so that no 'specialist' clique can emerge within the group.

These are some of the basics of the organic relationships needed to successfully create a culture of resistance capable of building a new society. These solidarity groups, linked together into a solidarity federation, are only there to further our aims of creating more freedom and individuality. They do, however, provide us with the dual purpose organisations we need – capable of both creating and practising the basics of our newly emergent society starting now, and exercising community resistance to defend ourselves and our new society from the worst ravages of capitalism and the state.

There will inevitably be more detail required to ensure that our organic relationships remain free, voluntary and non-authoritarian in a future society. Also, we will constantly have to review how we act in them to ensure we are effective in what we are doing. Some of the groups we set up to fight capitalism may not be needed later on. New groups may be needed to meet new challenges. However, the organic form of relationship described above is basically it. Any idea of creating a large, monolithic, organised society in the future would be disastrous. We simply need a basic minimal structure to arrange the things we need to happen to ensure we can continue to be free, and spend the rest of our time on our own interests. Society will be the myriad of self-organised, voluntary groups of people, some transient, some more 'permanent', interlocking and overlapping in a patchwork of diversity. These will be people pursuing their own interests, their own personal development, in their own ways.

In order for people to be able to pursue their own 'development' in a free society, two main conditions need to be met. Firstly, how will people know that freedom is possible and what they can do to achieve it, and where will they gather the confidence to go for it? Secondly, we have already considered equality, and the need for everyone to have equal access to products, services and resources, but who will provide these and how will it be organised? The first is considered in the following section; the second is considered subsequently.

## **Self-education**

For many people, 'school' and 'education' are dirty words, and rightly so. The state and capitalist-sponsored education system is designed to fail most people and prepare them for a life of failure, inadequacy, poverty and down-trodden cheap labour. For the small minority, it is designed to tell them that if they comply with certain rules, they will do well; that they are 'better' than most people, and that, therefore, they have the 'right' to order them about and make decisions about their lives.

One of the main reasons we put up with our current bad deal is that we feel pretty powerless to do anything about it. Worse still, most of us have some lingering doubts from time to time; what if we are incapable of looking after ourselves? What if the world does descend into 'anarchy' (sic) if those who know better let go of the reins?

Inadequacy and low self-esteem are essential ingredients in oppression. However, any anarcho-syndicalist analysis of capability must necessarily be opposite to a Marxist analysis. For Marxists, the problem is that most people are ignorant, and they will stay that way until after the great event, the 'Revolution'. They therefore need leading to the 'promised land' by the party — composed of the few clever ones. This ludicrous idea is at least as alienating as any capitalist one. For anarcho-syndicalists, ignorance is a collective problem we must all overcome, and all respond to, and all encourage each other to respond to. Feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence do not just die away miraculously; they only disappear when self-belief takes hold.

Passivity is not necessarily guilt. Though, if we accept authority, by giving in to the attraction of 'don't worry, I'll do it all for you', then, whether we are lazy or inadequate, the outcome is the same — we make a rod for our own back and we further accept our own oppression by giving in to the myth that managers have the right to manage us. We cannot afford to be passive, and therefore, we cannot afford to accept the myth that we are inadequate. No-one is 'inadequate'.

We are all better or worse than each other at various things, but everyone has the same right to not be bossed around.

The struggle against capitalism and the state must therefore start with the struggle for self-confidence and ego — the realisation of self-belief. With self-reliance and co-operative sharing of ideas — self- education — we can start fighting back at the great myth of the stupid working class. In our heart of hearts, we all know how stupid the boss is, and we all know we could organise our work far better without interference from management. Self-education and self-confidence are not all we need, but they are crucial, and a bit of both now makes the rest much easier.

## **Beyond work**

Work — economic exploitation — is the mechanism used within capitalism to make a profit out of people. This is the driving force of capitalism. In the fight to replace capitalism with a better society taking on the mechanism, which is the source of profit, the exploitative economic system, is crucial. We must organise at work and fight back whenever we think it is worth it, to advance the struggle against our economic exploitation. But this is not enough — just as there is more to capitalism than profit, so there is more to replacing it than acting to change the economy. As we have already seen, the real focus of freedom is overthrowing oppression, the source of which is power.

Economic power is but one form; there are many other forms of power originating from politics and society. Also, this talk of fighting capitalism in the workplace begs a brief consideration of what work means today. Let us presume there are basically three types of work today, two within the ‘economy’ and one ‘outside’ it. Firstly, inside the economy we have paid, productive work. Everything from day care to digging foundations, from factory to farm and from cashier to call centre, waged work to make things or provide services is in this category. The other ‘paid work’ category is essentially creative, it may be productive too, but it involves creativity, to a greater or lesser extent. The boundary between these two in terms of job type is not clear, since many jobs involve both production and a creative element. Nevertheless, the distinction is made because the creativeness of the latter makes it essentially enjoyable. Thirdly, outside the economy, we have productive work, for example, daily chores to meet basic needs of our dependants and ourselves. This is the same as productive work inside the economy, except that it is not waged. Non-productive unpaid work would be a fourth category, though this is usually called something like ‘leisure’. There is non- productive, non-creative paid work, which currently exists but would automatically cease in a future society, so we can discount further consideration of it here.

How will we organise work in the future society? Firstly, we can note that what is currently paid creative work is enjoyable, so it will take place voluntarily. This leaves currently unpaid work, and paid productive work. The former, it would appear, however much of a chore, also takes place voluntarily already, so can be expected to continue in a future society. The main question which remains then, is that after wages are abolished and free access to goods and services is established, who and why will people do this work, and will it be voluntary? The easiest part is the last part — all work will be voluntary, otherwise society will not be free and we will all suffer as a result.

The question of why will people work if they do not have to is also easily addressed. They will not have to, but it will be obvious that without it, no-one will have products and services they

want/ need. Therefore, work will be a social service, and most people will want to do their bit in order to ensure their stake in society. We must not forget here that all work will be completely transformed by the lack of orders and bosses. All workplaces will be run by the workers themselves, making all work, whatever it is, inherently more interesting, creative and responsible. Work which is currently tedious or unpleasant will, in the main, become interesting and creative, and therefore will be done voluntarily.

Nevertheless, if there remain two nagging doubts, they must be that (a) the odd person may not respond to social 'duty' and may not turn up for work reliably or at all, and (b) some work, such as cleaning sewers, cannot be creative and will be understaffed as a result, given a voluntary workforce. Firstly, shirkers will be allowed to shirk. Unlike the New Labour rhetoric of today, however, they will have a real stake in society, and they will have real options to do any sort of work they like. There will be no reason for them to not recognise that society and they will be better off if they do their bit. Secondly, any work that is not done voluntarily will not be done at all. Again, however, it must be pointed out that people will want sewers maintained and working. If, for whatever reason, people fail to organise this initially, then they will soon realise that it is important enough to warrant doing – at the expense of some other, less essential work, if necessary. Thus, even if the work is seen as a chore, like the washing-up and other non-waged chores today, it will invariably be done.

Work will be transformed by being self-organised and voluntary. Each workplace will have complete control over what they produce and when. They will receive numerous requests and support from various users of their products, to help them decide how to go about their work and what to produce, but the decision as to what goes on in the workplace will be that of the workers themselves. Communities or interest groups may sit down and decide what they want or need – health services, housing, access to self-education resources, consumer goods, and so on. Requests will go to the workplaces, or new workplaces may be set up if none are found.

## **Products and consumers**

As we have seen, the co-operative, democratic workplace could include any size or sort of industry. Always, the ground rules will be the same, based on freedom – no compulsion, free opt-in and opt-out, and direct decision making based on mass meetings of workers. Shirkers would be tolerated, though not expected, since work will be creative, so any shirker would be missing out on creativity. Like anything else in society, non-participants would inevitably find themselves not in the centre of things, and so marginalised from social life. Information about work will be available; perhaps it would be beneficial to produce guidelines on how many hours people are working, so that people may adjust their inputs to an approximate norm (though, again, no compulsion would be used). Basic needs – housing, health, educational resources, access to media and information, communal resources, etc., will all be available free at the point of use. Potentially, some groups may decide to also develop 'luxury' or non-needed goods themselves, which may have more limited availability. There may even be a recognisable 'economy', consisting of a market, democratically controlled, with consumers exercising choice over what they wish to consume (and by inference, what is produced, although no direction will be exercised over the production process). Again, it will always be the producers themselves who decide what goes on in their workplace.

A democratic market place would transmit information rapidly. Supply and demand under capitalism only creates problems because of the need to create profit from the process, via labour. As a means of establishing a balance between needs and goods, it is both efficient and useful as a concept. Whereas under capitalism, for example, high demand increases prices and leads to undersupply until the production process can react, in a future society, high demand would simply lead to undersupply until the production process could react. With free information and high quality goods, unlike under capitalism, where information is profit and quality of goods is only inefficiently related to value, the goods and the information about them will be much better.

The main mechanism for providing 'market information' will be people discussing their needs socially and then transmitting these to producers or setting up their own production units to meet these needs. Also, through this process, society as a whole will reach a consensus over how many resources to put into what sorts of activities, how much work we want to do, what our needs and wants really are.

By contrast, there is a world of difference between capitalist theory and practice, what it purports to achieve and what actually happens. Under capitalism, there is no miraculous match-up between production and consumption through supply and demand. Consumption is only confirmed after production, when the goods reach the market place, by which time it is too late — they have already been produced, hence the gambling and wasting aspects of capitalist production. There is then the added problem that market theory assumes that each consumer is prepared to put up with failure and shoddy goods — that they are prepared to try an infinite number of goods before selecting the one they want to consume (which, like many assumptions of market theory, is illogical and unworkable).

The 'free' market is theoretically at a state of rest. It works because there is demand and this is magically and automatically catered for. However, in reality, capitalists realised long ago that, by manipulating people's desires to 'create' demand, they could then plan their production process to meet this false demand in advance. Hence, the 'free' market is actually a planned economy — every product is planned by capitalists, who have gambled that they have 'created' a demand for it. By contrast, a system of demand planned directly by consumers, and met voluntarily by consensus between producers, will avoid these inevitable failures and falsities of the current market system. The production process will be truly dynamic, and there will be a wide range of choice of quality goods and services. The 'profit motive' will be replaced by the 'consumption motive', that is, people will influence the planning of production by their desire to consume. This sounds somewhat clumsy dressed up in the phraseology of capitalism. What it really means is that people will have no motive to hide information (as now), so information will be freely available about how good and bad products are in their design, effects on the environment, likely use and so on.

Then they will come to consensus in groups over what products they need, and then this information will be passed to the production process, where people will apply their experience and make up their own minds as to how and what to make/do and when. Since ideas and creativity will be the heart of society, wants and needs will flow from these, ensuring that patterns of consumption, development of good technology, and the broad patchwork production process are dynamic and continuously improving.

Note that in market theory, there is a largely false distinction drawn between producers and consumers, since we all are both. In a future society, the distinction would become much more blurred, given that work would be voluntary and consumption would not be organised on the se-

lective basis of whether you can afford it, but according to need and equality of access. Also, with no more armies of con-merchants, and no need for office blocks of financial service providers, no more armies and police, no more middle and upper management, and no more human resources, etc., to name a few, there will be a lot less work and a lot more done.

## **Solidarity ethics**

The idea of ‘common humanity’ is based on the premise that we are better off working together, in other words, in society. Therefore, rather than standing for a race, a nation state, or whatever, our social ethic is based on the idea that solidarity is our morality. We are ethical socialist, not state socialist. The central test of our society and of those acting within it is “how free or oppressive is this?”

We have a right to defend our ethical and moral fabric. If a group or individual threatens our moral code, we can rightly act to defend it. For example, if someone commits burglary, this interferes with free association and the right to security. We must act to stop it. However, our reaction would be completely different to the statist one, because we have a completely different view of humanity and society. Thieves are themselves not free, as they must accept that others may rob them. The basis of robbery is unfulfilled ‘need’ for goods (the ‘enjoyable risk’ aspect is not robbery but boredom and could not happen in a future society based on leisure). In a just and equal society, robbery would not therefore take place. However, let us accept the notion that there may be isolated cases of people wanting to take ‘more than their share’ for some reason. First, it is important to state that we can act to stop robbery. One way would be to give the robber whatever they wanted, another would be to physically protect the store against pilfering in order to protect the need for equality, another would be to sit with the robber and discuss the implications of their actions for society. The choice would depend on the circumstances.

Collective action would be far more effective than the police can ever be today, for they are protecting other people’s property and an obviously spurious set of ‘rights’ and ‘laws’, hence, not surprisingly, they get little or no support from the people they are trying to ‘control’. Today, it is blatantly obvious that things are unfair, and we are urged to take whatever we can get away with. Inevitably, some of us rip each other off. In a future society, confronting a robber personally with their crimes would in all likelihood be enough. Anyway, in a just society, no-one will be there to buy knocked off gear, since people will have a stake in society and believe that it must work through everyone taking responsibility for living by solidarity ethics. Faced with a moral majority, a robber will have nothing to gain by robbing.

Bullying, as with robbery, would be eliminated. Bullying is a complex form of oppression since it involves some form of direct relationship between bully and bullied. Some people are both to different people. Some people are forced to give tacit consent to allow themselves to be bullied. They may be shocked at first, but then they grow to endure it, and sometimes it becomes a long term pattern of behaviour. At its core, bullying depends upon lack of belief in one’s self – fear. In a confident, free, self-educated society, such a classic bullying relationship could not appear or survive.

Like robbery and bullying, in the absence of oppressive relationships, physical offences such as rape, murder, paedophilia, etc. would not happen, since they are directly related to the oppression in authoritarian capitalist, statist society (this is not an excuse for the perpetrators, merely



an explanation — virtually everyone is conscious and therefore responsible for their actions). However, what about the ‘motiveless murderer’ or ‘uncontrolled, unexplained paedophile’? If a case did occur, as a last resort, force would be used against the paedophile. The rationale for this is that such ongoing behaviour would make the perpetrator, by their actions, less human than their victims. Basic solidarity ethics would indicate that freedom is reduced by allowing continuation of such behaviour — justifying force being used to curtail the perpetrator’s freedom to perform paedophilia against people. Nevertheless, such a contemplation of force in an extreme and highly unlikely circumstance does not alter the fact that, in a society based on freedom, the crime we know today would automatically shrink and eventually disappear, for it is inequality and oppression which causes it. In other words, ‘prevention is better than cure’ would certainly apply to dealing with the prospect of crime in such a society.

So, in the most serious case of offences against our collective society, we will use force. Such force would be collective, organised through setting up a democratically controlled and accountable militia. A militia is a solidarity organisation like any other, based on the same structures and organisation principles discussed above. However, its purpose is physical defence of the collective society from attack by forces of authority. If people act oppressively, they can and will be stopped — authoritarians would be stopped, physically if necessary, from being authoritarian — abusing people. This does not make the militia a sort of ‘people’s police force’ — far from it. Being of and from the local community, it would be instructed by mass-meetings and would act according to solidarity principles.

The idea of some sort of detention as an option for ‘treating’ or ‘punishing’ anti-social people or groups is rejected on the basis of solidarity principles. Prisons (for, in essence, this is what forced detention means) are fundamentally inhuman and oppressive. They dehumanise all those involved, both detainees and guards, and in so doing, they dehumanise society. Current society supports oppression and it is therefore rife with robbery, bullying, fear, physical abuse, etc. It is literally hopeless in dealing with oppression, since the dominant ideology preaches that oppressive nature is innate. The tools for apparently ‘dealing’ with crime, prisons and punishment, inevitably spread oppressive behaviour further, and make the problem worse.

The real solution to anti-social behaviour is strengthening solidarity ethics, not undermining them. Who is going to want to associate with someone who is actively damaging society? In other words, such a person would effectively exclude themselves from the collective. The most likely course of action in a severe case of anti-social behaviour would be some sort of persuasion, where the person, excluded themselves from friendship and social interaction by being anti-social, is encouraged to change their ways and so integrate themselves fully back into the community. The person is therefore ‘self-sanctioned’. A mixture of support and waning friendship in local society may be a key stimulus for the individual to educate themselves and re-integrate.

Therefore, we can see some ideas for how ‘crime’ may be dealt with in the unlikely event that it took place at all in the future society. These ideas are not prescriptive, nor are they the basis for some sort of new criminal justice system. No such system would be needed. Decisions about what to do, like in every other walk of life, will be made by the community at the time, based on solidarity ethics.

## Some notes on resistance today

Below, we take a brief look at three examples of modern day struggles, and assess their value in assisting the struggle towards building the society we want. We could just as easily have looked at the on going struggles for gender equality, sexual liberation, children's rights, peace/anti-militarism, anti-poverty, decent housing and health, etc. In each, we would find people committed to what they believe in, some of whom are aware of the likely outcome of their actions, some of whom may even be misguided about what can be achieved from their particular strategy and methods of struggle. The vast majority have as their goal a basically similar world, without oppression, enslavement, and misery, and characterised by freedom, equality, mutual respect and the celebration of individuality, culture and diversity.

### Ecology

Many areas of the so-called 'ecology' or environmental movement are striving to use the same tried, tested and failed statist, social democratic means to a better environment. However, let us here turn to the more progressive, direct action inspired elements of the ecology movement, who have managed to organise and successfully counterpoise the dominant apathy and desperation in the face of capital power. In the best examples, such groups have increasingly begun to broaden their direct action basis into self-organisations capable of confronting capitalism as a whole. This stems from recognition that capitalism and the state are the root cause of current wanton environmental destruction.

The process of experience and refining of ideas and struggles is immediately recognisable from our examination of the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism from libertarian socialism and anarchism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. It is experience that informs development, not abstract, unworkable theories, characterised by failed projects such as Marxism. The realisation that global corporations require a global response, and the subsequent co-ordination of the global G-M resistance struggle is another example of such development.

One problem, which has plagued small elements of the ecology movement, is an underlying technophobia and work-phobia. This arises from a short-sighted view of technology and work as being the perpetrators of environmental destruction, rather than the reality of capitalism and the state. There has also been an occasional tendency towards a 'middle-class' view that work is unnecessary or that workers are inferior. This neo-Marxist perspective is dangerous, since it works against class solidarity and inadvertently supports the idea of leadership and authority.

Nevertheless, there are plenty of examples of the more progressive elements of the ecology movement broadening and strengthening themselves as a result of their experience, and moving closer to the progressive elements of other struggles against capitalism and the state ('progressive' in this case simply meaning based upon the principles of solidarity and for the aim of a free society). Indeed, recent struggles initiated by the ecology movement and trade unions acting in concert against global capitalism stand as a shining example of the 'coming of age' of a potentially major force for real change.

Another issue is how environmental impacts will be planned for, dealt with and how 'development', production and interference by people in the environment will be decided. Sustainable futures depend upon sustainable thinking and action. We have the technology to ruin the planet

at a moment's notice and we will never 'uninvent' that technology. Instead, the production process and the environment need to be brought into harmony. We will thrash out, through our meetings in free association, whether a certain action, which will affect the environment, must go ahead or not, based on information we have about the costs, risks and benefits involved.

Instead of capitalism 'owning' the environment, we will all exercise our discretion over what we do with it. What about the rights of rocks, plants, animals, ecosystems? They have rights, in as much as we think they have intrinsic rights to exist and flourish. Therefore, we must incorporate the values of these rights into our values and opinions over whether to destroy or damage them for our own gain or not. So, in a future society, we will value the environment for our economic gain (its productive value), our pleasure (its aesthetic and leisure value), and for itself (its existence value). These values will be discussed whenever natural resources are to be impinged upon. The issue of sustainability will not be reduced to time, discounted futures and utility theory; it will be central to the continual values debate, which people will participate in as part of their desire to make the world a freer and better place, not a degraded but 'profitable' one, as now.

## Unions

A union is a group of people acting together in their mutual interest. More specifically, today, it means a workplace organisation. A trade union is a workplace organisation of people with a similar trade or group of trades. The trade unions in Britain originated as economic working class organisations. In other words, they sought to win gains from the owners of capitalism, to improve their pay and conditions. In reality, many started off much more militant than this, with a clear aim of a future, socialist society, which they would play a part in bringing about, by eventually withdrawing their labour — their co-operation with capitalism. After this, the early expectation was that capitalism would sink to its knees and be replaced by the socialist society, where work would be controlled by the workers themselves.

Two questions arise here: Why did these early militant unions become the sad, obedient tools of capitalism that they are today? If the union idea is worth pursuing, how can we avoid the latter and ensure solidarity ethics are maintained at the core of the 'revolutionary' union?

Firstly, trade unions were and are not solely workplace (economic) based; they have always had a high social-political content. People in the same union share ideas and discuss issues way beyond pay and conditions. However, the bogus distinction between politics and economics, supported by capitalism and Marxism, is flawed, and the trade unions have, over the years, become increasingly damaged by imitating this distinction. The false idea that the union is for better pay, and the party is for a better future, is one reason why unions have declined. At its core, this stems from the underlying assumption most people in unions need leading to their 'promised land'. The election of union leaders to negotiate with capitalists and the state is fatal for the militant, revolutionary union. These leaders quickly acquire different interests from the workers they are supposed to represent. In protecting these interests, they become corrupt. The undermining process is not simple. Capitalists and the government are well versed in the skills of offering bits and pieces now in return for broader compliance, and the temptations are always there.

The initial mistake, however, is belief in the false idea that participation in capitalism or the state can ever serve the interests of working people. Since these very same institutions attack unions whenever the defences are down or when they realise the unions are no longer needed

(for example, when labour is plentiful), it may seem surprising on the face of it that people in unions have ‘fallen for it’. In the main, they haven’t – it is their leaders, with their own interests, who act as the middlemen in this process and cajole, force and betray their members into co-operation with the elite.

This brings us to the second question, whether and how the union idea can be pursued. Unions unite people initially around the issue of control of the economy, but they must also necessarily be both community-linked and involved with political and social issues too. After all, workers live in communities and politics and society affect work and vice versa. They also need to share the anarcho-syndicalist idea that the future society should ensure the management of things not people, free access to which are a pre-requisite to freedom. In workplaces, people come together to make things/ provide services. A union today should emulate as far as possible how the collective, productive process will be like in the future. In other words, they must be self-organised, based on direct democracy, avoid co-operation with the state and capitalism, and use direct action in confronting capitalism. Such methods ensure both that the struggle is effective and that further confidence and self-reliance can be gathered along the way.

At present in Britain, the Solidarity Federation includes Networks, which are affinity groups based around types of workplaces (industries). For example, the Public Service Workers’ Network exists to address issues specific to public services, in much the same way as an anarcho-syndicalist women’s group might exist to address the needs and issues raised by its members. The crucial factors are aims and means. So, not only must the aim of the network, and the future anarcho-syndicalist ‘union’, be a future society based on the pursuit of freedom, its methods must also reflect this aim. The statist, reformist and social democratic trade unions of the past 50 years bear no resemblance on either of these counts. They have comprehensively failed due to their structural weakness of power by proxy (voting leaders) and support for party politics. The idea of people taking responsibility for their struggle and pursuing it through direct action is anarcho-syndicalism and, without it, unions cannot assist us towards the society we want. On the contrary, unions today are a barrier to this aim, since they seek to build organisations based on authority.

The task of building a new movement founded on direct action, which will struggle on economic, political and social issues, and unite people against their capitalist and state leaders, is therefore extremely necessary. They may fight for better pay and conditions, but the methods and process of this fight are more important than the short-term outcome. In other words, using direct action and self-organisation instead of negotiation and leadership elections is paramount to success. The struggle must be based on solidarity – there are no short-cuts. “Unity is strength” is central to every struggle and every action, and only through this can we hope to progress. Any critique of current trade unions, which does not have this as its starting point, is doomed to failure, to being sucked into an endless cycle of erosion by the state and capitalism. It is the loss of solidarity and self-reliance, not a few corrupt union officials, that is at the core of the failure of unions today.

## **National liberation**

Nationalism is manifested in two basic forms. Firstly, the notion of supremacy; that one group is superior to another and so can rightly oppress it. This is most effectively embodied in fascism

and is the antithesis of solidarity, and therefore it is utterly abominable and directly opposed by anarcho-syndicalism. The second form is a response to national oppression. Typically, an identifiable linguistic or geographic group seeks to 'liberate' itself from a larger or more powerful group that is controlling and oppressing it. There are numerous active examples, and many have arisen out of imperial colonialism, a particularly nasty chunk of capitalist legacy.

The principal problem of national liberation struggle for the anti-statist anarcho-syndicalist form of organisation is that it is inherently statist. Advocating a more local form of state, the national liberation movement bows to the idea that the state is a desirable institution – just not in the current form. As such, it has the fundamental flaw that, if successful, it will generate a new state – which may or may not be 'worse' than the current oppressor, but it will nevertheless be an oppressive mechanism.

The fact is that the state idea involves a higher authority, which inevitably protects the interests of those within it, who have controlling power. National liberation struggles are therefore really a battle over the 'right to oppress', between the current state and the would-be new state. To support a state, even one that does not yet exist, is to support oppression. Even if it may appear that the liberation struggle involves lesser oppression (at present) than the current oppressor, as numerous cases show, the newly empowered 'liberated' state can often be even more vindictive, power-crazed and oppressive to 'its' people than the previous regime.

The essence of the nation state is antagonistic; power blocks faced up to one another. States have vested interests, and any other state is a potential threat to these. Since these 'threats' can also easily be made to look like threats to people within the states involved, the state idea leads to people being opposed to each other in different states. This degrades the solidarity idea. It also leads states to gain support in co-ordinating barbarous acts between people. The alternative to the state is common humanity. No-one's interests are higher than others', so humanity is equal everywhere; a self-regulating world based on collective, bottom-up solidarity, supporting and celebrating diverse cultural identities, skills and mutual interests. Equal, but very different.

Solidarity is the only way to reinforce humanity. There is no inherent problem with culture and identity, with seeing ourselves as from a distinct background or place. Just as individualism arose out of social interaction, so culturalism can only develop from being in a wider society of different cultures. When 'others' are enemies, they are not part of your culture; when 'they' become part of our common humanity, they are another aspect of our mutual society.

So the problem only arises when a culture or group sets its interests apart from and above others'. It then becomes an oppressive force – the embodiment of the nation state. By its nature, such a form of organisation will always undermine global equilibrium and global solidarity, by seeking to lead us back into oppressive isolation.

Thus, the anarcho-syndicalist alternative to the national liberation struggle is to build a global association based on global solidarity, against capitalism and the very idea of the nation state. This global organisation is not about crushing or deleting differences or cultures – quite the opposite; the more diversity of culture, the richer the global society. There are also, inevitably, things in this package which must be stated. The conditions faced by some people at present are the negation of humanity – we are far from being on a level playing field. We, especially those of us in the western world, must accept our complicity in benefiting from the ripping-off of people and the environment (however consumer-aware we may try to be). Massive wealth transfer and power transfer has to take place as we move towards global solidarity. We need to be ready to embrace equality, and this will not necessarily be pain-free. Nevertheless, redistribution of wealth and

power can only cause minor, short term discomfort, which will pale into insignificance alongside the inevitable and unquestionable benefits everyone will get from adopting global solidarity as the cornerstone for a future free of the nation state.

## **Solidarity forever**

Mutual freedom through solidarity is the spirit of anarcho- syndicalism. Only with this can we be creative and develop ourselves to our fullest potential, in our own vision – in other words, only then can we maximise our individuality. The way we organise our society and production processes will always be the key. We will need certain products and services, as we decide through our local organisations. In fact, ensuring equal access to the products and services we need is the only ‘management’ task we have. We must not manage each other, for this is contrary to freedom; we will, instead, simply organise ‘things’. We can only make real progress towards the society we want by practising and developing our self- reliance and self-organisation now; by building the new society in the shell of the old.

To varying extents, many struggles against capitalism and the state share the ethical aims of anarcho-syndicalism and its methods. Anarcho-syndicalism is not a dogmatic prescription, but a living, breathing, and dynamic range of methods and ideas, all stemming from the culture of resistance and the spirit of freedom. The methods and tactics anarcho-syndicalists adopt in any given situation are those that arise organically from the collective efforts and experience of those involved. Hence, anarcho-syndicalism is ever changing, in response to the ever-changing circumstances we are in, and the ever- changing experiences we have. A rich history, some of which has hopefully been illuminated in Units 1–23, provides a backdrop for clear yet sophisticated strategy rooted in basic principles.

Anarcho-syndicalism moves forward repeatedly, by experience, assessment, theory and testing. It is flexible but uncompromising in methods and aims, driven by a single endpoint – mutual freedom.

## **Further Reading**

This Unit draws on ideas introduced in Units 1–23, so these are a starting point for tracing the origins of anarcho-syndicalism. To find out more, you can always contact us at SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW (da@directa.force9.co.uk). Alternatively, try the Internet; the Direct Action website is one starting point for links to SF and other organisations and their ideas (www.directa.force9.co.uk), or libraries and second-hand bookshops. To mail order further reading, try the AK catalogue, from AK Distribution, PO Box 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd).

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A History of Anarcho-syndicalism  
A Self-Education 24 unit correspondence course  
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