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# Ready to Fight

Developing a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community  
Syndicalism

Shane Burley

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Press). *His most recent film is a documentary on Take Back the Land Rochester and its intersection with the Occupy movement, called Expect Resistance.*

There has been an effort by scholars and organizers alike over the last forty years to segregate anarcho-syndicalism from the rest of the broad anarchist movement. The labor movement dominated social struggles in the first half of the twentieth century, but as large business union bureaucracies were formed and new shop organizing began to diminish, the participation of anarchists in labor began to wane as community struggles around environmental issues, LGBT and women's struggles, and housing justice took precedence. The syndicalist strategies that defined the earlier successes of anarchism internationally diminished to only the most hardcore adherents of a labor strategy, though these ideas have had spikes during periods of economic crisis. This shift away from syndicalism as a strategic foundation has robbed movements of some of their tactical inspirations, and organizers from the New Left forward attempt to reinvent the wheel every time, completely reimagining every struggle as though it was disconnected from the entire history of libertarian social movements. This is a loss as these developing community struggles can still look towards these syndicalist battles in the workplace as a model for how to democratically structure movements.

The idea of community syndicalism, bringing the syndicalist organizing strategy out of the workplace and into other aspects of life, can be a way to intentionally create a specific set of tactics. These tactical choices could take the form of solidarity structures that form as a union, which mean that they unite a set of interests against an adversary that is in control of a particular sector of society, such as labor, housing, or health-care. These different sectors are the different puzzle pieces of social life that are all intimately affected by access to resources, and one in which a real element of class is present at all times. Since syndicalism in the workplace does not rely on simply one tactic, but instead on the use of solidarity, trying to utilize community syndicalism could simply mean a whole range of strategic points all building on some of the basic ideas of anarcho-

syndicalism. The question then arises: what are the core elements of anarcho-syndicalism that can be boiled down and moved from the shop floor to the neighborhood, from workers issues to healthcare and environmentalism, and to all the sectors where class struggle takes place?

## Finding Anarcho-Syndicalism

One of the first places people return to when trying to create praxis for anarcho-syndicalism is the foundational text *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* by Rudolph Rocker. As an “anarchist without adjectives,” Rocker used his experience working within organized labor to help develop anarcho-syndicalism as an approach within anarchism or as a set of tactics, rather than an ideological orientation separate from other schools of anarchism. Through this theoretical development he can be seen as uniting anarcho-syndicalism with anarchist communism and individualist anarchism in equal branches within an entire ideological framework, where syndicalism is the revolutionary approach of anarchism within labor. This both fights for the position of the working class within their workplace while simultaneously building a structure that runs counter to the existing mode of production. In *Theory and Practice*, Rocker identifies the organized solidarity between workers as the key political organization for syndicalists.

“Just as the party is, so to speak, the unified organization for definite political effort within the modern constitutional state, and seeks to maintain the bourgeois order in one form or another, so, according to the Syndicalist view, the trade union, the syndicate, is the unified organization of labour and has for its purpose the defence of the interests of the producers within existing society and

veloping through our collective decision-making. When the institutions of mediation begin to wane, and our collective power begins to challenge their money, we know that there is something fundamentally remarkable taking place.

## Toward a New Movement

The difference between having a radical vision and actually doing organizing work means taking your ideas and outfitting them with a tactical mindset. Without keeping cause and effect in context, you will not be able to assess your moves in a realistic way, and envision how to approach various stepping stones, much less know the endgame. Syndicalism is the way that you can develop a conscious set of tactics to accompany an anarchist vision, a way of collectivizing our work and creating direct action as a daily course of living. Tactics have a shelf life, and if they are debated abstractly for too long, they eventually stop being relevant. Instead, we need a tactical framework that realizes anarchist principles in a real way that can give us a structure to move forward, constantly developing and attempting new things. Our ideas stay fresh if they retain an imaginative spark, and we can continue to apply them on a foundation of participation and direct democracy.

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out as a sector in the same way as labor or housing struggles. Instead, it may make sense to have ecology exist in a similar framework to housing-centered community syndicalism. If a particular ecological issue affects a population of people, a specific instance of hydraulic fracking for example, the group can unite in common solidarity to combat this since it affects all involved. Climate change, on the other hand, expands across the globe and affects people in myriad ways that are not all common. In this situation, it may be more difficult to identify it as a particular sector and may mean simply that the traditional community syndicalist strategy is just not fit for a particular approach or it must be used only in certain aspects of the struggle.

None of these modes of community syndicalism succeed without a militant wing inside workplaces. The point of production is an obvious place to create a rupture in capitalism and assert workers' control. Housing presents a fundamental contradiction in capitalism with the large number of empty homes exceeding the number of homeless people in America, and many are familiar with this crisis of overproduction. If this contradiction was to be solved and all people were to be promised safe and adequate housing, it would be too much for the system to bear and it would already have shifted into a state of revolutionary transformation. Syndicalism exploits these cracks with the vision of smashing both capitalism and the state entirely, and labor has traditionally had the largest success on the Left. If we are going to create a self-managed society in the interests of our diverse needs and desires, we will have to take over production and remold it in our own image.

There is an easy way to test your tactics. Ask yourself both if they have been successful pushing any forms of progressive reforms, and if you can see in them the twinkle of a new world of direct democracy. We should be able to see a possible future every time we get together, hash things out, and see our world de-

the preparing for and the practical carrying out of the deconstruction of social life after the pattern of Socialism. It has, therefore, a double purpose.

1. As the fighting organization of the workers against the employers to enforce the demands of the workers for the safeguarding and raising of their standard of living.
2. As the school for the intellectual training of the workers to make them acquainted with the technical management of production and economic life in general, so that when a revolutionary situation arises they will be capable of taking the socio-economic organism into their own hands and remaking it according to Socialist principles.”<sup>1</sup>

The fundamental approach presented here is to demonstrate that the methods for challenging the bosses now will create an organizational structure that can then take over once this opposition eliminates the owners from the workplace. Syndicalism rests on this notion of dual-power: our fighting organizations now must be directly democratic so as to reflect the revolutionary character of the society we want to see. A transfer of power can take place from a ruling minority to the producing majority over the course of struggle, and so their organs of change better be ready for this transfer without replicating unequal structures.

Though anarcho-syndicalism has often been put at ideological odds with broader and more open social anarchist and anarchist communist ideas, Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt call for an end to this ideological clash. They build on Rocker's idea that the organization of battle now is also

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<sup>1</sup> Rocker, Rudolf. *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*. (Secker & Warburg, 1938. Sixth Edition: AK Press, 2006), 56–57.

the organization of the future: that the tools of the future are also ones that can produce immediate benefit in terms of progressive reforms: “The syndicalist position that existed within mass anarchism centered on two positions: the view that reforms and immediate gains were positive conquests for the popular classes, and played a central role in improving the lives of ordinary people, building mass organizations, and developing the confidence of the popular classes in their abilities; and the notion that the unions could take the lead in the struggle for revolution and form the nucleus of the new society.”<sup>2</sup>

Schmidt and van der Walt’s definition of syndicalism creates a methodology for drawing together a reform trajectory that rests on the union form as the seed of a new social organization. Opinions could differ on the idea as to whether the union itself becomes the whole of the new social organization, or if it simply does so within the workplace and subsequently other areas of social life take on similar forms.

Syndicalism, in this definition, presents a radical vision of the labor union: a force that gives workers power at the point of production. A union is made up of workers who are not in a position of power over their workplace, but unite along the power that they do have in their position at the point of production and their ability to withhold their labor. Individually this is useless, but collectively it transfers the power from management or ownership directly to those who do productive labor. In this way, syndicalism refers to the core solidarity between workers, the power of which is necessary to conceive of a transition from reforms within the workplace to an entirely revolutionary transformation in the way workplaces function and the constructs of social systems and hierarchies

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<sup>2</sup> Schmidt, Michael and Lucian van der Walt. *Counter-Power Volume 1: Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*. (Oakland: AK Press, 2009), 138.

tro, in a speech called “Green Syndicalism vs. Anti-Civ: Social Revolution or Primitivist Reaction? A Polemic,” and delivered at the Boston Anarchist Bookfair, states, “Strategically, green syndicalism seeks to integrate class struggle into environmentalism: to overthrow the capitalist class and do away with productivism, both material – as in production – as well as ideologically – in culture and social relations.”

This is simply a broad statement of how a syndicalist anarchist approach to ecology differs from, for example, Deep Ecology, which is embraced by many eco-anarchist philosophies. It could simply be a vision to be employed in the other sectors of syndicalist struggle that involve environmental factors, or it could be the foundation of a new praxis entirely. Castro continues,

“Concretely, we can point to several tactics with which to move toward a green syndicalist future for humanity: workplace militancy, social antagonism, agitation, indignation, direct action, occupation (or decolonization), blockades of capital, general strikes, and particularly ecological general strikes. I see a militant transitional period as including two critical moments: one which would work to interrupt the drive of the death-economy that is capitalism, and another which would seek to construct a participatory and inclusive counter-power as an alternative to regnant barbarism.”<sup>12</sup>

As Castro illustrates here, ecology exists as an aspect of current class struggle, though he does not say how it can stand

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<sup>12</sup> Castro, Javier Sethness. “Green Syndicalism vs. Anti-Civ: Social Revolution or Primitivist Reaction? A Polemic.” Industrial Workers of the World: Environmental Unionism Caucus. Speech given at the Boston Anarchist Bookfair, November 11, 2013. [ecology.iww.org](http://ecology.iww.org).

organizations need to develop spaces where all people affected by decisions are invited to participate in decision-making, and if there is a delegate structure, it is merely to relay decisions made in broader assemblies. A whole library of tactical options remains available for the important process of experimentation, which enables groups to find what works for their particular set of issues and membership. This emphasis on experimentation can give organizers insight into how to approach different sectors and try to employ the syndicalist strategy within them. If a sector responds differently to the decision-making necessity, then it may help us visualize what tactical choices will work and what may fail.

As with housing, the larger sector can be made up of various decision-making bodies that help coordinate federated areas. This could mean that neighborhood assemblies make decisions for homeowners and area tenants, tenants union delegate councils make decisions for a complex, and a larger federation makes decisions based on delegates sent from assemblies for larger projects that unite them all. Again, this envisions a model for self-governance in the absence of the bourgeois state and corporate management, as well as allowing for affairs to remain governable at the local level while facilitating collective accountability over large-scale coordinated projects.

Housing presents an easily adaptable model, but a variety of other sectors of struggle in social life need to be addressed. The syndicalist methods of solidarity, collectivity, and exploitation of cracks in the system find strategies that work to advance the interests of the working class while presenting a vision for the future. For instance, environmental struggles often seem too nebulous to apply these ideas since they do not always have an affected body that is separate from the rest of the mass working class. In the environmental sector, the way that organizers conceptualize of the body needs to be altered somewhat, and the method is something members of the IWW have advanced as Green Syndicalism. As Javier Sethness Cas-

that stem from them. The union itself sustains this core solidarity between workers and the empathetic connections between them where they consciously understand that they cannot be successful without their co-workers' support and success. The union structure acts simply as an entity to give this solidarity some form of permanence, first to give collective struggle a structure to keep things stable and, secondly, to form a legal entity for the state to recognize. This infrastructural requirement often forces actual unions to run counter to the foundations of what a union ought to be, mainly in that they exist in the same framework as the state while the organization of workers in solidarity inevitably comes in direct confrontation with the state.

There are then a few key principles that we can broadly say make up the syndicalist project, both inside and outside the workplace. These hinge on the type of tactics used, the long-term vision for struggle and establishment of a new social order, and the methods for establishing power.

1. Solidarity, meaning the shared experience among workers along a common goal, is central to all tactical decisions.
2. Workers use this united front to exploit a crack in the system that exists because of their role in that system. In the workplace, this exploitation comes from the ability to collectively withhold labor, grinding the productive cycle to a halt.
3. The structure of the organization takes on a form of "social organization" that includes the mass of the exploited class in decision making, prefiguring a post-revolutionary social organization for that sector and possibly society as a whole.

If syndicalism organizes and focuses solidarity, there is no reason it has to be relegated to the workplace. The applicable

ideas are in the creation of strategies that force people in common circumstances to strike at the point where they are powerful in connection with each other, acknowledging that each individually does not have enough power to initiate the change.

## Bridging to Community

Community syndicalism simply takes these ideas and attempts to transfer them to another sector, continuing to base its organizing principles on the solidarity between people in similar circumstances and their ability to exploit their unique position in a given system. As the economy and social life force us into a number of different sectors as non-controlling participants, we can see how community syndicalism can be envisioned in a growing myriad of forms.

Ian McKay in his mammoth *Anarchist FAQ* project outlines community syndicalism as a form of directly democratic control through mass participation.

“As would be imagined, like the participatory communities that would exist in an anarchist society, the community union would be based upon a mass assembly of its members. Here would be discussed the issues that affect the membership and how to solve them. Like the communes of a future anarchy, these community unions would be confederated with other unions in different areas in order to co-ordinate joint activity and solve common problems. These confederations, like the basic union assemblies themselves, would be based upon direct democracy, mandated delegates and the creation of administrative action commit-

debated and decisions made on how best to win improvements. Beyond the locality, the syndicate should federate with similar organisations in other areas to collaborate on campaigns that have a wider scope. Each syndicate would send delegates to the federal assembly with a strict mandate and the right to recall and elect new delegates in their place if they abuse their mandate.”<sup>10</sup>

This model could be done for the community as a whole or replicated in specific form. In order to ensure application or replication of the model, there must be a degree of autonomy amongst the community-based “bargaining unit.” It then connects to other communities in a federated fashion for common projects, but not to create a centralized structure. Keeping the community units separate maintains the structure’s ability to adapt to the unique needs of people in a given area. This structure would then function more effectively in major struggles that arise, while planting the seeds for how a future society could operate. As the piece “Single Issue Campaigns, Community Syndicalism & Direct Democracy” points out: “Ultimately such an organization would be a libertarian communist society in embryo. It would have to overcome modern problems such as suburbanisation and rebuild the idea of community, but if organised in every neighbourhood, along with an industrial wing it would have the wherewithal to bypass the capitalist state and create a new society within the old.”<sup>11</sup>

The new structure primarily focuses on the form of decision-making and meeting style. In the classic option, members create assemblies and councils for democratic decision-making, both in campaigns and once power is seized. To facilitate this,

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<sup>10</sup> “Single Issue Campaigns, Community Syndicalism & Direct Democracy.” *Worker’s Solidarity Movement*, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie).

<sup>11</sup> “Single Issue Campaigns, Community Syndicalism & Direct Democracy.” *Worker’s Solidarity Movement*, June 13<sup>th</sup>, 2012. [www.wsm.ie](http://www.wsm.ie).

How, then, do these groups use solidarity to exploit a crack in the system? If the people are uniting along an entire neighborhood to create an organization that *works in their interest* rather than simply contributing to “activism” or “charity,” then this reflects community syndicalism modeled from workplace unionism. What this can generally show us is a form of internal critique, a way for us to see how effective our strategies are from taking us from a single campaign to a workable working class defensive organization to a prefigured new model for a particular sector, such as housing. The community union or general assembly can then implement direct democratic features in order to show people an alternative model to the commercial housing we have today, one that operates through general participation to secure community control over land and housing. If this organization becomes powerful enough to really threaten the current order in a given area, banks retreat, possibly allowing a new system of self-management to take over, just as when workers take over a workplace.

## Prefigurative Politics and Dual Power

Much of what we are looking at when developing a tactical skillset for community syndicalism comes from how we are able to transfer the structures we create to a post-revolutionary society. If we are to successfully push back the bosses and landlords with any effectiveness, we need to live now with a counter-structure that shows the possibility of working-class control, so we need workers/community members to be stable enough to handle *actual* control. Community syndicalism offers solutions/tactics not in a sector-specific way, but in a way that benefits the entire community.

“The community syndicate would ideally be based upon the mass assembly of members, where issues like local services, education, rent etc. could be

tees to see that the memberships’ decisions are carried out.”<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, McKay fundamentally takes the ideas of workplace organization and transfers them to the specifics of other areas of life. In a particular sector, a mass of people unites first to oppose those who control that sector and then, after the challenge is complete, to form a new democratic way of organizing the sector.

Tenants unions have become an obvious example of this use of community syndicalism in that they almost perfectly replicate the notion of the workplace union. In this case, a collection of tenants in a building or across a development come together to make demands of the owners and property managers in regards to their living quarters. Repairs, fair rent prices, issues of property organization, and even utilities can all come together as points to force through the collective participation of the tenants. Their power is not in the ability to withhold labor, but with the ability to withhold rent. Just as in the workplace, a single person withholding rent will simply get him or herself evicted. With the union, however, hundreds, even thousands, of tenants withhold rent, which is enough to entirely shut down a complex and cease its functioning. The process for evicting all the tenants would be too massive and getting new tenants in would take so long that the owners or property managers would not be able to recover, forcing them to shut down. In this way, the tenants maintain control when they are working as one force.

Across the entire housing movement this presents an incredibly powerful idea for how ordinary people can address foreclosure and the housing crisis. First, tenants in large buildings, especially public housing, have an immediate organizing model to start addressing injustices collectively. Homeowners in a

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<sup>3</sup> McKay, Ian. “What is Community Unionism?” [org.www.infoshop.org](http://org.www.infoshop.org).

more conventional neighborhood, however, have a completely different format. Here, mortgages are held by individual banks and then packaged and sold internationally through the securitization process, often times switching ownership multiple times over the years. Instead of having a common target, each homeowner on a given block may have his or her own unique master to serve.

In a situation where multiple homeowners have mortgages from different lenders, much of the same principles apply as when there is a common target for successful organizing campaigns. In homeowner-centered eviction and foreclosure resistance campaigns, the same structures of solidarity have to be true. First, the person receiving the foreclosure and risk of eviction has to lead the charge. She is only successful if she brings in community and neighbor support along with the idea that this situation could easily be theirs and the eviction of another person can drive down property values in the neighborhood, forcing mortgages underwater and actually increasing foreclosure rates. When the neighborhood decides to unite around a common goal, such as establishing an “eviction free zone” or resisting all external development, the other homeowners do it in *anticipation* of this possibly happening to them. This is reminiscent of an industrial union model where all workers can be united in the “one big union.” In this case, all non-bourgeois homeowners are actually in the same situation, so it is useful for them to unite across the neighborhoods even if they do not appear to be vulnerable.

The homeowners also need to find a point of power from which to exploit their position. This situation is more complex for homeowners than it is for workers, but the campaign can take on a variety of tactics adapted from the sit-down strikes of the 1950s-60s. Instead of leaving, the homeowner in question stays in his or her house and refuses to leave. The neighbors show solidarity in that they literally prevent removal through a blockade and a general protest, the goal of which is to stall

associations throughout the world that show us proof of our ability to live without landlords. So, if we can organize ourselves to maintain our housing needs, what do landlords do? That is exactly the point. Landlords exist purely to take rent from us. As we develop true power as renters, we will realize that the real battle is for a system of housing that recognizes our right to decent, affordable place to live no matter what. This means getting rid of a world of for-profit housing. No one should exploit a system of vulgar inequality to create massive profits from our need to survive. We know that these inequalities will only exist as long as we permit them.”<sup>9</sup>

The language used in this passage identifies landlords in the same way that syndicalists identify bosses in workplace organizing, because they serve the same social function. They extend the interests of the ruling class by initiating points of control, so, as mentioned above, they can be countered with this syndicalist strategy.

The question is what can be included within this community syndicalist strategy. Tenants unions have not been the most dominant form of housing resistance in the US, and because of the unique nature of the 2010 foreclosure crisis, resistance to foreclosure-based evictions have often taken prominence. Take Back the Land became popular coming out of Miami, Florida, both housing homeless families in empty banked-owned homes and using direct action tactics to defend homes against evictions. Occupy Our Homes took these same tactical ideas out of the Occupy movement, creating dozens of local organizations and employing a great deal of eviction defense options.

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<sup>9</sup> Conetz, Juan. “Tenants Union: Fight Your Landlord and Win.” *org*, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2011. libcom.org.

fight for collective solutions to the foreclosure crisis.”<sup>8</sup>

This use of the “collective bargaining” agreements signals the connection between housing organizing and union structures.

The Harvard Law School chapter of Project No One Leaves, is another example. They are a group that focuses on getting law students to help people resist foreclosure, coming together with other community attorneys to give legal advice. The organizing and the legal strategy unite with a community banking option in a model of attack for homeowners facing eminent eviction. These organizations have modeled themselves almost entirely on the successes of organized labor, representing the building of unions both inside and outside the workplace.

When we think of a bargaining unit, the material gains people can make through collective action come first and foremost. These material wins are more foreseeable for tenant’s unions since they negotiate in unison for better repair protocols, lower rent and utilities, and a general say over property management. The part of the Tenants United project of Buffalo Class Action’s proposal for a citywide tenant’s union demonstrates that a tenant’s union can gain power through a few distinct areas, such as public pressure, eviction blockades, direct actions such as disruptions in owners functioning, rent strikes, and relying entirely on solidarity:

“In the struggle against our landlords, there is one important realization. Our landlords don’t do anything for us that we aren’t capable of doing for ourselves. We are more than capable of organizing ourselves to make repairs and maintain the buildings where we live. There are cooperative housing

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<sup>8</sup> Blanco, Marla Christina. “Fighting Your Eviction When Your Home is Your Workplace.” *Labor Notes*, December, 2013, 6.

authorities and, eventually, force the bank back into negotiations since the foreclosure process is no longer financially viable. Collective action here involves an entire community’s refusal to acknowledge or cower to the standard forces of removal, which is the marshal’s office executing an eviction with the coercive authority given to them by the state’s police force. By subverting law enforcement’s authority and reinvigorating homeowners’ negotiating power, a general neighborhood assembly and union can be formed so that they can make decisions collectively that will be enforced by their solidarity.

Housing exemplifies how community syndicalism or unionism can be applied in a number of possible sectors. Obviously, labor movement can expand outward and be used to target austerity by enforcing support for public sector workers, but there are tactics that can be developed from this model in areas of healthcare, anti-war work, prison abolition, anti-police brutality, and environmental struggles. The question is not how to take the “strike” and convert it to a new situation, but how to isolate the key elements of the syndicalist project and move them between sectors. The tactics can then develop from the way that organizers unite the resistance project today with the “new world” later.

Developing these tactics can be another matter because if we want to achieve a syndicalist vision of how to transform the world, we need to devise tactics that reflect that framework. This is difficult when the syndicalist pathway was envisioned through labor struggles, but we still need to study the successes and losses of syndicalism’s development to draw lessons for our own situations.

## Developing a Tactical Skillset

Instead of simply looking at the success and failure of the syndicalist or union models, of which there are many, we could

easily just look at the moments when those models transcend their original battles. For much of American history, unionism generally was not reflected within the state. The fight within the workplace designed Unionism, resulting in about half of the American workforce being unionized by the serene 1950s. This reflected that the American Left had become so prominent that it had to be absorbed into the apparatus of the state, or else come into direct confrontation with it. It is at this point that we began to see the shift away from simply being a workplace organization project, where issues of workers power and resources were centered on the struggle into the workplace, to being a general Left wing of the existing system. Here we see the beginning of the use of union dues for lobbying and electoral projects, hoping that labor could influence areas of the state in favor of larger union agendas. This shift also marked the decline in union numbers as new shops began to shrink and existing union locations began to be expelled as a change in perception was orchestrated from the Right.

The syndicalist project truly succeeds on those occasions when the union expands beyond its accepted role to become a revolutionary force that challenges the basic assumptions of the present order. These successes depend on striking workers deciding to re-enter their workplaces, to kick out their bosses, and to start the machinery of production on their own. These “workplace occupations” are the most basic aspect of the syndicalist strategy, and it is not complete until workers win and finally take over, initiating a new social organization that is in line with their values. To do this successfully, several elements need to be at play to ensure change occurs and to model workplace occupation on how we envision a post-revolutionary world to function.

First, countering the old representative forces is important for re-imagining the workplace as a place of social organization. Sheila Cohen, in her entry into the popular volume on

a directly democratic process that models a possible liberatory structure, they are operating under the banner of community syndicalism.

The Boston-based organization City Life/Vida Urbana is a several-decades old community non-profit that works to stop foreclosures in some of the most economically deprived sections of the city and the surrounding metropolitan area. The organization brings together different homeowners who are going through foreclosure and creates a sense of connection between them, ensuring that people support each other both emotionally and practically in terms of organizing. As was mentioned in the recent profile on them from *Labor Notes*, the idea is to take the union model out of the workplace and into the rest of life:

“The Association is a project of housing justice organization City Life/Vida Urbana. Steve Meacham, the group’s organizing coordinator, began his career at a Boston shipyard in the shipbuilders union. When he became a housing activist, he coined the slogan “A union at work and a union at home!” Under Massachusetts’s law, landlords can increase rents as often as they like and evict without cause—much like nonunion employers. Tenant associations like those organized by City Life have been able to win, essentially, collective bargaining agreements with landlords, Meacham explained. ‘Where the labor union negotiates wage increases and prevents unjust firings during a contract, a tenant association negotiates limits to rent increases and prevents unjust evictions during a contract,’ he said. ‘We adapted this organizing model to build a tenants association for people whose landlord is a bank, in order to

In these cases, we cannot allow one person's struggle to be a "one situation" campaign. Instead, solving the conflict must lead to a permanent organization that can both target change for all people immediately and in the long run. This shift must eventually lead to a revolutionary change, while providing a new model for it to be organized with:

"Just as in the workplace, in the community working class organisations are best when they are permanent, not temporary and based around single issues as the latter does not allow a body of experience and influence to grow from struggle to struggle... In the community, ultimately, socialists wish for the working class to take control. In order for such control to be exercised effectively, the working class needs local organisation as well as workplace organisation, as whilst the running of the economy might naturally be decided upon by workers deliberating in their places of work, it would seem to make little sense to have workplace-based unions decide over which roads need tarmacking in a residential area."<sup>7</sup>

The best options create community organizations to manage the community outside of the workplace, while workplace syndicalist unions handle specific workplaces. Community unions can handle all areas of life if the working class has already unified, but it may also make sense to have unions specific to certain areas of work.

What separates community syndicalism is that it attempts to be both a force of opposition and a prefigurative model. We literally want to develop the "new world within the shell of the old." Whenever organizers use the power of solidarity and

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<sup>7</sup> Snow, Keir. "The Case for Community Syndicalism." Anarchist Writers, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010, anarchism.pageabode.com.

worker's control *Ours to Master and to Own*, argues that direct democracy is a foundation of this worker's council:

"[A] fundamental feature of the formation of workers' councils is the instinctive adoption of direct democracy. This, unlike the "representative" type of democracy purveyed by conventional political and trade union electoral processes is a form of democratic decision-making that directly voices the will of the majority, as expressed through workplace-based delegates who are immediately held to account if they fail to hold to the decisions of the workforce. Direct democracy is demonstrated in mass meetings, delegate structures, and accountable, revocable "local leaders" typical of many workplace situations."<sup>4</sup>

A directly democratic organizing model not only transforms the way that the workplace functions from a top-down autocracy to a collectivized movement of all workers, but also shows a clear example of how direct democracy can function. This example presents a model that can expand outward from the workplace into the rest of society. As a result, basic confrontation with the bosses, as a form of social struggle, can lead into the functioning of a new social order.

Escaping the mediation of beauracratc institutions is also represented in how workers actually take on this confrontation and choose tactics. Shutting down the bureaucratic functions of the workplace necessitates direct action, which often predicts direct democracy in that it inspires a non-mediated approach to problem solving. Emmanuel Ness points out that while workers naturally gravitate towards direct action as a

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Sheila. "The Red Mole: Worker's Councils as a Means of Revolutionary Transformation." *Ours to Master and to Own*, ed. Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 56.

foundation, successful workplace occupations have depended on a few distinct factors:

“We start with the assumption that labor seeks democratic control over its work, and factory takeovers are just one step in the process of workers’ control and self-management. From the 1930s to 2010, factory occupations have been contingent on four main factors:

1. Development of working-class consciousness, rooted in collective needs.
2. Calculations of the economics of workers’ capacity to confront capitalists.
3. Institutional arrangements in capitalist society regulating workers through the state. The state always privileges business over workers, except in crisis conditions, when modest concessions are provided to insurgent workers who demand control over social and economic resources.
4. Capacity and support of workers’ efforts to self-organize and mobilize under repressive conditions.”<sup>5</sup>

If we take workplace organization in its most fully realized form as the point of inspiration, we need to find ways of applying these key lessons to our community struggles.

These lessons can be transplanted across sectors where solidarity and the exploitation of people’s particular position are in play. Instead of just considering our relationship to the means

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<sup>5</sup> Ness, Immanuel. “Workers’ Direct Action and Factory Control in the United States.” *Ours to Master and to Own*, ed. Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011), 304.

of production and the ways that the shutdown of labor can be a bargaining chip, we must consider how we can unite into a collective or council to make similar demands in profoundly different circumstances. Avoiding the transition to acting as a lobbying agent and focusing on direct action and direct democratic organizing is central to developing a community syndicalist strategy. Housing remains one of the clearest examples, as we have seen this happen in housing most specifically, and it shows how strategies from labor can be easily transferred to something else. In this situation, the relationship between the tenant and homeowner to the controlling stake of their household, whether the bank or the landlord, needs to be considered. As mentioned previously, the exchange of rent exemplifies this relationship. As is pointed out in In Keir Snow’s *The Case for Community Syndicalism*, there are several options for action that can adapt to very different circumstances:

“Classically the withdrawal of labour is seen as the weapon the workers may wield to gain results, this works because such a withdrawal, through strike action, causes their employer to lose money. If we think about levers in a similarly economic manner in the community, where there is no labour to withdraw, we realize that the obvious means of financial damage is the withholding of rents. However, issues in the community often centre around service provision rather than being directly related to the land lord, and so levers must also be found that can be used against the local council. There are several options here, which broadly fall under the category of “direct action,” for example, blocking major roads will have a knock on economic impact about which the council will be concerned.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Snow, Keir. “The Case for Community Syndicalism.” *Anarchist Writers*, November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2010, anarchism.pageabode.com.