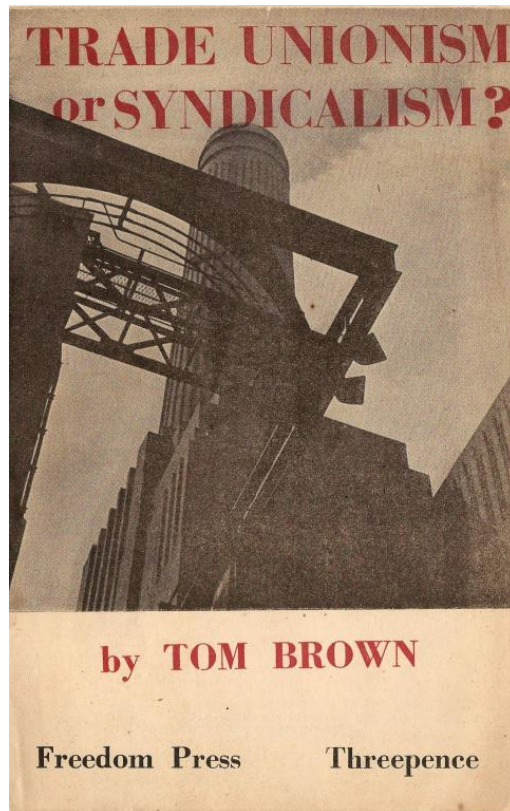


Trade Unionism or Syndicalism?

Tom Brown



1942

Contents

1. What's Wrong With the Unions?	3
<i>CRAFT OR INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM?</i>	3
<i>DOSS HOUSE ORGANISING</i>	4
<i>COFFIN CLUBS</i>	4
<i>CLIMBING THE SOCIAL LADDER</i>	5
<i>TRADE UNIONS AND THE STATE</i>	5
2. Strike Action.	7
<i>THE LIGHTING STRIKE</i>	7
<i>THE BOYCOTT</i>	8
"WORK TO RULE"	8
<i>THE SOCIAL STRIKE</i>	9
3. The Social General Strike.	10
<i>CAN IT BE DONE?</i>	10
<i>THE "JUNE DAYS" IN FRANCE</i>	11
<i>THE BALANCE SHEET</i>	12
4. Workers' Control of Industry.	13
<i>GOVERNMENT BY AMATEURS</i>	13
<i>A NEW SOCIAL PRINCIPLE</i>	14
5. A Spanish Lesson.	16
<i>COLLECTIVES EVERYWHERE</i>	16
<i>THE FERTILE LAND</i>	17
6. Revolution of Construction.	18

1. What's Wrong With the Unions?

HOW often we hear the question "What's wrong with the unions?" In factory, ship or mine, in pub and club, by non-unionists and trade-unionists, the question is raised.

Few would be daring enough to resist the criticism. During the past twenty-odd years the unions have rapidly degenerated as fighting working-class organisations. Wages have fallen when they might have risen. Rights have been lost and no attempt is made to regain them when circumstances have improved. Strike funds are withheld from strikers and the trade union boss is allied to the employer. To the degeneracy of the trade union bureaucracy is added the most shameless treachery of the new type of shop steward, the Communist, who gladly rushes to the managers' office to offer some new sacrifice of the workers. "Production Committees" of the trade unions attempt to get more work out of the workers skins without extra wages, or act as police courts and fine late comers.

Some would explain the decline of trade unions by attacking the leaders. We do not excuse the treachery or cowardice of obese and cynical labour leaders, but it is necessary to make a more objective study of our subject.

We cannot explain the decline of militant unionism simply by attacking the leaders. There have been many successful attacks on Right-wing leaders and their replacement by Lefts and Communists. Shortly afterwards, the Lefts and Communists have been bitterly attacked by their previous supporters for being even more reactionary than their predecessors. We must examine the ideas and structure of trade unionism. The leadership is but the natural fruit of the movement – *"men do not gather figs of thorns, or grapes of thistles."* Syndicalism alone gives a constructive criticism of Trade unionism.

CRAFT OR INDUSTRIAL UNIONISM?

Most of the early unions of the British workers were trade or craft unions; that is, they organised men according to the tools they used. If a man used certain woodworking tools, he joined a carpenter's union, slightly different tools would put him into another organisation. The unhappy result is that men in one factory, under one roof, and working together to produce one commodity, find themselves "organised" in a score of unions because they use different tools (the engineering industry has over 50 unions). Constant quarrels over poaching of members and demarcation arise. Even inter-union strikes have taken place.

This method of organisation may have been justified in the Middle Ages, when a craftsman often produced a whole commodity by his own tools and labour, but it is obviously outdated in the twentieth century, when dozens of trades, each subdivided and assisted or guided by technicians, clerks, storemen, and others combine in the production of even the simplest commodities.

Equally unfortunate are the younger unions – the general workers, such as the Transport and General Workers' Union. These unions seek to organise everyone without regard to any sort

of working or other relationship. All go into a higgledy-piggledy mass, so that a metal worker on the same job as a member of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, will find himself in the same union as tram conductors and farm workers; or a docker will be in the Municipal Workers' Union.

Syndicalism declares for *industrial*, not craft unionism. All workers in one factory, all producing the same commodity, should be in one union; all crafts, the unskilled and the semi-skilled, the clerks, the technicians, the women, and the youth. While the trade unions cry "*100 per cent. trades unionism*", the craft unions exclude from membership 50 per cent. of the population – the women-folk – and divide the "*organised*" workers among a thousand unions while about twenty-five industrial unions would be sufficient. ONE INDUSTRY ONE UNION.

DOSS HOUSE ORGANISING

Syndicalism organises the union branch at the place of employment. Most unions (the miners are an exception) form their branches near their members homes. If a man works in Poplar and sleeps in Willesden, he joins a Willesden branch of his union. The unions are organised like dosshouses – they ask no where you work, but where you sleep.

Now the workers' problems arise at his place of employment; there he can discuss with his mates the questions of factory safety or sanitation, piece-work scales, wages, or the tyranny of some petty overseer. But in his trade union branch he may not meet any workmate. In the engineering union he may meet fellow members working in various industries, chemical, power, shipbuilding, or transport; in many other unions it is even more varied. To sustain the greatest interest and militancy take the union branch to the job.

COFFIN CLUBS

The failure of the trade unions as fighting organisations is partly due to their friendly society character. They pay out sick, superannuation, unemployment, and death benefits, tasks now undertaken by the State. They have become not militant working class bodies, but coffin clubs. In the craft unions most of the contributions (often 2s. a week) and most of the energy of the organisation go to this end. Now the paying of friendly society benefits entails the accumulation of large funds. The existence of such funds means Investment-Capital. Investment in property, investment in capitalist enterprises which exploit their workers for profits, investment in WAR LOAN. These funds give the unions an interest in the welfare of capitalism which paralyses their activities as fighting bodies. The officials and the more timid members who hope to draw benefits fear a strike which might imperil the funds. Cut out the coffin club and a union can be run on a membership contribution of 3d. or 4d. a week.

It may be said that high contributions mean big strike funds and are a financial guarantee of militant action; but only a small proportion of the funds are paid out in strike benefit. In any case most strikes in the last thirteen years have been (and all strikes now are) unofficial and no money is paid out of union funds. But the absence of a war chest does not necessarily mean no strike. Some of the most bitter and desperate strikes have been fought on empty cash boxes. At the end of April 1926 most of the miners unions entered the struggle with about one week's strike pay in hand; yet they continued the fight for over nine months.

Let us never forget that the comparatively wealthy unions of Germany succumbed to Fascism without a struggle, while the impoverished unions of Spain for nearly three years fought the whole world of capitalism. The possession of property does not make one a fighter, but often brings the fear of losing that property. A human failing Hitler has thoroughly exploited.

CLIMBING THE SOCIAL LADDER

One reason for the existence of the “*Labour leader*” type is the high rate of salaries paid by the workers to their leaders; salaries supplemented by taking on extra jobs, speaking, or writing for the capitalist press. Their income puts them in another class. They eat different food, live in better houses, attend Ascot and royal garden parties, their wives are introduced to titled women, and generally they live in a new world. Any sympathy they had for the workers dies. Their hopes are not for an equalitarian society, but for higher salaries.

Listen to a frank member of the species: in an article “*I am not paid enough*” in the “Daily Express” of June 6th, 1939, Mr. W. J. Brown, General Secretary of the Civil Service Clerical Association writes: “*Among the relatively underpaid classes in Britain are the Trade Union leaders. I earn £1,000 a year. Sir Walter Citrine, the secretary of the T.U.C. also gets £1,000 a year. Mr. Ernest Bevin gets £1,250 a year. Mr. Marchbank, of the N.U.R. gets £1,000 a year.*”

Just to show us what he is aiming at he quotes the salaries attached to a few “*comparative*” jobs. Green of the American Federation of Labour and his rival Lewis of the C.I.O. gets about £5,000 a year each. Next the Civil Service bureaucrats: £3,500 for Sir Warren Fisher, but for Sir Horace Wilson (the Government Labour adviser) “*a beggarly £3,000 a year.*” On to the company directors: Lord Stamp, £20,000; Lord Ashfield (L.P.T.B.), £12,500; an Lord Gowan of Imperial Chemicals is reputed to get “*some £70,000 a year.*” Says W. J. Brown, “*Is there any hope that the anomalies will be ironed out? Very little. Trade Union memberships behave sometimes as if they had no hearts.*”

Organisers and secretaries should be paid the district rate of wage of their members, and there should be only the minimum of paid organisers. After all in the trade unions some of the most necessary work is done without pay by shop-stewards and others on the job. Organising, recruiting and struggling for better conditions. If those who envy Lord Ashfield leave us we have lost nothing, we still have the stalwarts who believe.

TRADE UNIONS AND THE STATE

A truly working class organisation can never collaborate with the State as do the trade unions. When the unions were first formed the State persecuted them, now it has won them over and incorporated them in the machinery of the State. Trade unions administer State health insurance and their representatives sit on Government committees from Labour Exchange committees which chop unemployment benefits to Royal Commissions for suppressing colonial workers. The trade union bosses even appear on the Honours List. The Versailles Treaty, which made the present war inevitable, bears the signature of a Labour representative, G. N. Barnes of the Amalgamated Engineering Union. Even the conscientious objector finds himself confronted by a tribunal with its trade union representative. How ironical a jest that a labour leader should be an arbiter of conscience!

The State is nothing but the executive committee of the ruling class and no-one can save the workers and serve the employers. Yet a trade union leader, Ernest Bevin, acts as Minister of Labour to the capitalist government. Under his rule the fruits of fifty years of struggle have rapidly vanished. The Essential Works Order and like measures conscript the workers, prevent them from leaving their jobs for more lucrative employment or transfer them violently from their homes and fine and gaol them for “absenteeism”.

Still fatheads are found who murmur, “It’s just as well to have a few of our own men in the Government.”

Syndicalism has no friends in the Government!

2. Strike Action.

EVERY advance by trade unionists, or even by unorganised workers, has been gained by a strike or the threat of a strike, that is by the willingness to withdraw one's labour power. Even an individual threat to quit the job is an application of the strike weapon. Trade unions owe their birth and growth to the strike. Now they have abandoned it for parliamentary activity and class collaboration their spirit has perished though their form may linger on.

It is often said that Parliament and the Government have given higher wages or a shorter working day to the workers. This is only apparent. In 1919 the miners of Britain demanded higher wages and a national six hour day, demands they could have enforced, for British coal was in great demand, even at £6 a ton. The coal owners could not afford a stoppage. The miners were quieted by a Royal Commission and an Act of Parliament, which gave them a wages advance and a seven hour day, less than they might have enforced. (The miners of the North of England already worked less than the seven hour day.) But in 1921, when economic conditions were unfavourable and they miners' organisation weakened, the wage advances were lost. In 1926, after the miners had been defeated on the economic field, Parliament scrapped the seven hour day for an eight hour day.

Trade Boards usually "fix" wages at or below the market rate of labour. If the market falls, then the Trade Board rate is quite often dodged by workers, driven to accept a job below rates, and by employers, who "forget" to pay the proper rate of wages, and who only remember if an inspector calls, succumbing to amnesia a few weeks later. This is particularly true of the cheap clothing trade. An overstocked labour market and a weak economic organisation of the workers always mean lower wages.

THE LIGHTING STRIKE

However, the syndicalist defence of the strike weapon does not mean approval of the trade union method of striking, which usually fails. Syndicalism uses many variations of the strike, but it is possible here to mention only a few.

Perhaps the commonest syndicalist weapon is the *lighting strike*. Before a trade union strikes long negotiations take place, six months notice is given, and the strike is postponed a few months. Then when, and only when, the employer and the government have prepared huge reserves of commodities or transport, and have organised police and blacklegs, the strike takes place. Agreements are made in such a way as to ensure this by long period notices and district agreements. (The miners' district agreements have always been made to ensure a striking district being defeated by all the other districts.)

Of course, the labour leaders regard all such agreements as sacred, but if the workers are to win their blows must be sudden and in the unexpected place. Speed and surprise are essential to victory.

Almost equally important is the *guerrilla strike*; to wage a struggle in any section of an industry, in any locality or even in a single factory, wherever conditions may be temporarily favourable. But the highly centralised trade union movement cannot do this. Some industries, particularly engineering, vary in prosperity – aircraft may be booming, locomotive building declining – yet wage rates are determined by the condition of railway engineering. The lowest wage becomes the highest.

If the workers in a prosperous branch of industry see a chance to strike successfully, they must seek permission of the leaders at the national centre of the union. Of course, the leaders are not in sympathy, permission is refused, and the opportunity is lost.

The syndicalist method is not organisation from the top down but from the bottom upward. Each branch is allowed local autonomy, but all branches are federated into districts, all districts into a national federation of labour. This is federalism, the opposite of bureaucratic centralism.

Federalism also makes possible the sympathetic strike. Under centralism one union blacklegs another. When the iron moulders went on strike, trade union machinists and fitters continued work, helping to break the strike. When the London busmen struck in 1937, the tramwaymen and trolleybus workers, *members of the same union*, broke the strike.

Syndicalism federates the workers into one force, where each unit is ready to support the other. The preamble of the I.W.W. well said: “*An injury to one is the concern of all.*”

THE BOYCOTT

The *boycott* has been little used by unions, apart from the syndicalist unions of Spain and Scandinavia. Here is a mighty weapon, but one that does not cause the loss of wages of the common strike. It is of course best applied to those trades relying on the workers purchasing power. To support the claims of the employees the workers are organised to withdraw patronage of certain chain stores, cinemas, cafés, or branded goods.

The term “*boycott*” has lost much of its terror since the days when it was used by the Irish Land League. The League was the poor peasants defence against the landlord. When a landlord evicted a tenant farmer the League applied its boycott against the new tenant and the landlord. Domestic servants left their houses, their labourers their fields and cattle, the grocer, the butcher, and even the doctor refused to serve them.

The boycott was the most effective weapon ever used by the Irish peasantry. But the method can (in our complex economic society) even more effectively be used by the organised industrial workers.

“WORK TO RULE”

Many ingenious strike tactics have been invented by the French syndicalists. Of these the “*work to rule*” of the railwaymen (on a few occasions copied by the English railwaymen) is the best known. Thousands of laws and rules for running the railways are made by the directors and government. Of course most of them are unused and even unknown, their place being taken by common sense and daily experience of the job. When the French railwaymen were forbidden to strike their Anarchist fellow-workers were delighted to point out to them the absurdity of the law, so the Anarcho-syndicalists decided to carefully fulfil the law.

The railway laws were carried out just as the government said they ought to be. One French law demands the driver to make sure of the safety of the train before crossing a bridge. So express engine drivers stopped their trains at every bridge to consult the guard. The expresses were late.

A favourite rule of militant railwaymen was that which said that tickets must be examined on *both* sides. The rule says nothing of city rush hours. The results of “working to rule” were to tie up the railways, make the law look an ass, and win the railwaymen’s cause.

A somewhat similar Syndicalist tactic used on the continent was the “*good work strike*.” Workers building cheap working class houses would put their very best workmanship into the shoddy materials. Doors hung straight, windows opened, roofs were waterproof, and walls were perpendicular.

The most amusing case of this form of strike action is surely that of the accusation against the I.W.W. section operating in a salmon-canning plant. It was said that they stuck on cheap labels on the most expensive cuts of salmon. From the poor districts of the world came new orders for salmon and from the better-off bitter rebukes.

THE SOCIAL STRIKE

All Anarcho-Syndicalist strikes are not intended to protect some section of workers or raise wages by a few shillings. Some are intended to rally all the workers in defence of their class interests, and some transcend even class interests and defend humanity.

The *social strike* has been used against war, as in the Catalonian workers’ general strike against the Moroccan war in July, 1909, and in the German armament workers’ congress in Erfurt which decided to make no more war weapons to destroy men, but to compel their employers to convert their factories to produce useful commodities.

The resolution of the German workers was maintained for two years until broken by the orthodox trade unions. The Anarcho-Syndicalist workers of Sömmerda held out until their jobs were taken by members of the trade unions. Had the trade unions of the world supported and copied this brave action, Hitler and the Second World War would not have been.

Another good example of the social strike comes from Spain. Some years ago the Spanish government wished to build a women’s prison in Barcelona. The building workers of Catalonia refused to build it. In vain the government sought workers from other parts of Spain, the prison site remained untouched until foreign labour was imported.

3. The Social General Strike.

OWING to the many industrial battles fought by Syndicalists to gain an advance of wages or reduction of the working day, it is often forgotten that such temporary gains are not the ultimate aim of Syndicalism. Such fights are but skirmishes or means of training for the Last Battle – the Social General Strike and Workers' Control of Industry.

The Social General Strike should not be confused with the T.U.C. parody, the British General Strike of 1926. Before that strike, the employers and their government were given nine months notice; plenty of time to organise stocks, blacklegs, transport and special police, then *some* of the workers were asked to strike. Although a million others joined in, the strike was doomed to failure for it striking by the trade union method, the workers left the industries, mines, power, railways, food, and all the means of life in the hands of the enemy. On the other hand the workers left themselves unarmed and outside of the control of economic means by which society lives.

The Syndicalist General Strike is not a passive affair in which the workers remain at home or at the street corners and public libraries for three, six or nine months, returning defeated by starvation. The Syndicalist method is one by which the workers take possession of the Industry and economic services of society and run these as producers co-operatives, distributing the goods and services to the workers and blockading the ruling class and its lackeys. The Social General Strike has often been called, perhaps more correctly, the General Lock-Out of the employing class, for it is the employer and not the workers who, in this case, is on the wrong side of the factory gate.

Against this action we hear raised the Social Democratic wail "if you do that, the bosses will shoot and baton you." We reply, if you don't, they will shoot and baton (and *starve*) you, but with much greater success, as the history of passive starvation strikes shows. But in order to bash the workers, they must first start knocking about their own property, as they discovered in the 1937 automobile stay-in-strike in the U.S.A.

Further, let us never forget that it is the worker who makes the guns, shells, aeroplanes and tanks; it is the worker who produces the fuel and transports the means by which an army lives. Every soldier requires at least ten industrial workers to maintain his military value.

CAN IT BE DONE?

Still afraid, the political Socialist mumbles his fears. Let not the worker share his timidity. A fistful of experience is worth a bagful of theory, someone says, *The thing has been done!* In the summer of 1920 the Italian metal workers were presented with a notice of reduction of wages and a lock-out to enforce it. Instead of submitting to the lock-out they took possession of the engineering factories and locked-out the employers. The factories were barricaded and barbed, even electrified wire being used. Workers' militia were organised, and the weapons made in the armament works distributed while other factories quickly improvised arms.

Inevitably someone asked “but how are the stay-in strikers to be fed?” Nothing could have been simpler to the Italian workers of 1920. The millers ground the wheat and the peasant syndicates collected food for the strikes, and the food was delivered to the factories by the transport workers syndicate. In the same way the electrical power workers, the railmen and others supplied the other needs of the factories.

Much the same happened in France in 1936. Indeed the strikers there were even more widespread, even the shop girls of the fashion house (considered the most backward of workers) joined in by locking out the customers. And the bloodshed, the vast sea of gore predicted by the Socialist? None! The employing class prefers to shed the blood of *defenceless* workers.

In Italy, the government, the police, army and Fascisti were powerless. Here is the evidence of a well known bourgeois journalist George Seldes:

“Not a safe was cracked. Not a skull ... Commotion everywhere except in Italy.

“It is true that day by day more and more factories were being occupied by the workers. Soon 500,000 ‘strikers’ were at work building automobiles, steamships, forging tools, manufacturing a thousand useful things, but there was not a shop or factory owner there to boss them or to dictate letters in the vacant offices. Peace reigned.

“It was holiday. Crowds came in automobiles and wagons or walked by the thousands to see the great sight ... Tourists caught in the midst of the revolution, when their first fears were over, and not a rifle-shot disturbed the sunny calm, ventured out, too, and saw nothing unusual.

“For us of the press, it was a terrible disillusion. There was simply no story ... Sometimes a patrol of working-men would go by. The police let them alone even when they bore arms. There was much joyful singing.”

THE “JUNE DAYS” IN FRANCE

In the French stay-in strikes of 1936, we see the same lack of bloodshed. But it was not the peaceful nature of the French capitalist which was the cause of the peace. The French are among the most blood-thirsty and reckless of human life, of any of the capitalist species; the campaigns in the Rif and Syria and the actions of generals like “Butcher” Nivelle in 1917, prove that. Bloodshed was avoided because of the militant mood and the strong strategic position of the French workers.

Leon Blum, Prime Minister in 1936, stated, at the recent Riom trial, that no attempt was made to oust the workers from the factories, because of the danger to the State that such action would have brought. The French Government was helpless.

Not only are governments with their police and conscript armies helpless, but such bodies as the Fascist Militia looked like Boy Scouts in the face of a rising working class. I am aware of the lie spread by Socialists, Socialists of ALL brands, that in 1920 the Italian Fascisti turned the workers out of the factories and then marched on Rome and seized power.

Here are the facts. In the stay-in strike of 1920 Mussolini and his militia were so helpless as to be ignored. In order to gain popularity to be in the swim, he spoke, and, in his paper *Popolo d'Italia*, wrote in defence of the seizure of the factories. Of course, only in order to later betray them.

Only later when the workers had returned to the owners the possession of the factories, and turned to parliamentary methods, did the inevitable reaction and apathy give to Mussolini his

opportunity. The “March on Rome” and his coming to power followed in 1922. In order to maintain their lie, the Socialists (of ALL brands) not only twist the facts and invent actions, but jump history a couple of years.

In France much the same happened. There the workers, not *fully* class-conscious, had returned to power a “People’s Front” government, backed by a majority of Liberal, Socialist, and Communist M.P.s. The “People’s Front” immediately (in the name of Anti-fascism, as the Italian reaction did in the name of Fascism) began the re-conquest of all the gains of the strikes, until all were gone.

THE BALANCE SHEET

What successes and failures have we to record of these two great strikes?

In Italy, the metal-workers prevented a wage reduction, gained a wage increase and many lesser gains.

In France, the workers gained a wage increase, and 40 hour week, treble pay for overtime and holidays with pay.

In both cases these advantages were later lost because the workers, instead of continuing to look only to their own strength, looked to politicians to supplement their victory.

But, also, in both cases defeat came because the strikers returned to the employers the possession of industry in return for such concessions as wage increases. The propaganda of the Syndicalist minority had been only *partly successful*.

It is not the Syndicalist aim to return to the employing-class the means of production and distribution, but to retain them in the hands of the workers. Operating them by the principle of Workers’ Control of Industry. Distributing utilities to the workers according to their needs; abolishing the wages system. In short – our aim is the General Lock-Out of the Boss; the Expropriation of the Expropriators.

4. Workers' Control of Industry.

THIS issue of Workers' Control causes dismay to many, if not all Socialists and Communists. "How can the workers run industry?" they ask.

If the workers cannot run industry, we must examine the claims of the others, the capitalists and politicians. Let us take the capitalists first.

The capitalist is the owner, the shareholder, or at the least, the big shareholder. We shall see how necessary he is to industry. Most workers do not even know their employer, who he is, or where he is. Even when a man's name appears over a factory gate or on a commodity, the identity of the boss is still hidden, for usually the person who gave his name to the concern has long since been swamped by financial capital. The Angus Watson Packing Company, of "Skippers" and "Sailor Salmon" fame was once personally directed by Mr. Angus Watson himself. About twenty years ago new capital, mostly American, entered the firm and Angus Watson was given a nominal managerial job. After being treated like an office-boy, Watson retired protesting, but his name still appears on the products of "Angus Watson & Co., Ltd." So we might go on from one company to another; the real boss is unknown to the worker.

A couple of years ago, America gave us an amusing example of the absentee capitalist. A rich woman, who was very fond of her Pekinese dog, was afraid lest she die before the little pet. In order to provide its living in the case of her demise, she consulted her lawyer and stock-broker. The result was the transfer to the Pekinese of a big block of industrial shares! So, the Peke became a capitalist. A few years ago, the same thing occurred to a chimpanzee, and for all that it matters, all shareholders might be Pekinese and chimpanzees.

Once, discussing Workers' Control with a Communist metal machinist, I put the problem in this manner: let us suppose that your employers, the shareholders of the company, are holding their annual meeting in a big hotel. The Luftwaffe appears in the sky overhead, the hotel is bombed and the shareholders are blown to smithereens. Next morning, before going to work, the machinist reads the sad news. Would he, left with no employer to control the industry, forget his art of machinery or his knowledge of metallurgy? Would he be unable to read a micrometer or a blue-print? The machinist gave his answer in indignant tones.

GOVERNMENT BY AMATEURS

But while most Socialists will agree with our statement about the capitalist, they will yet not trust the industry to the workers. To them it is the politicians who must control industry. Let us see how the politician is indispensable to the production and distribution of wealth.

All industry requires specialisation, the division of labour. So modern industry develops technical problems, all of which no man may know. The problem of engineering may not be understood by the seaman, or the problem of the chemist may be unknown to the miner. But the politician claims to know everything!

The prospective Member of Parliament will go to a constituency of 100,000 or more inhabitants and present himself to busmen, railmen, weavers, cooks, teachers and a thousand other crafts, or occupations and claim to *represent* them all. If he is returned to Parliament he will vote on the working of the mines without having been down one, he may speak on shipping laws without having been to sea, he will speak and vote (and compel others to act on his opinion) on building, agriculture, woodworking, road making, medicinal practise, entertainment, education and a hundred other services, each one of which requires a lifetime of study and practice.

Not content with solving and problems of technique in his spare time at the House, he will interfere in everything else from birth control to telling us how to spend our Sunday evenings. On one odd afternoon each year, he will spend a few hours settling the affairs of India, a sub-continent inhabited by a mere 400 millions.

If one considers the composition of any House of Commons, it appears to be sheer impudence for them to interfere in technics, particularly the whole sphere of technics. The dominant social groups in any Parliament are lawyers, retired military and naval officers and directors of finance companies. Owing to the M.P.'s being drawn from mixed constituencies, without any regard to vocation, it is possible for a parliament to be composed of 615 ex-army officers or 615 lawyers.

If we consider the Cabinet, the picture is no less comical. A man is appointed as Minister of Agriculture, not because of any knowledge of farming, but because of political or business pull. At one time the conservative government appointed a Minister of Mines whose only qualification seemed to be that he was a fox-hunting squire. When he answered questions in the House, Labour Members responded by crying "Yoicks!" "tally-ho!" and other cries of the hunting field. When a Labour government was formed, however, an ex-tailor's cutter was appointed to the same ministry.

A NEW SOCIAL PRINCIPLE

Instead of the political or geographical method of organisation, the Syndicalist build on an industrial basis. Such a basis is now the foundation of the future society and the embryo of Workers' Control.

Under Workers' Control the mines would be run by minders and not by lawyer-politicians. The engineers would regulate the factories, the textile workers the mills, the railmen the railways and so on, throughout each industry and service.

Each industry would regulate its own affairs, each factory or mill its affairs. This is quite unlike the political organisation which claims the right to govern everything. Further, the political method is chiefly concerned with governing men, the industrial syndicate is for the administration of things.

Political parties can never lead us to Workers' Control, for by building parties we are erecting barriers in the way to that end; we are building something which we must later destroy. On the other hand by organising industrially now we are creating an organisation which can take over control of industry and which is not to be later destroyed, but developed.

At present the Syndicalist workers organise themselves at the point of production, seeking the unity of all workers in the factory or other undertaking, breaking down all craft union barriers, of age, sex, degree of skill, craft, black-coat, or black hands. United, the workers in each metal factory become federated to the district federation of engineers, while each district federation sends

its delegation to the National Federation of Metalworkers. This method is carried on throughout each industry and service; textiles, transport, power, farming, distribution, sanitation, etc. Then, all national industrial federations are linked together in the National Federation of Labour.

Here we have an organisation able to swing its forces to any part of the whole of industry, so that any section of workers on strike can receive the full support (industrial solidarity rather than just collections) of the rest of their fellow workers. How unlike trade unions, which have no real connection with one another, and collect tanners for strikers while they quite constitutionally black-leg on each other; railmen against busmen, engineers against boiler-makers, porters against loco-men.

With the triumph of the stay-in strike such organisations take over the control of industry. The factory branch manages the factory, while the district affairs of the industry are regulated by the district federation, the common problems of the industry by the national industrial federation, and the whole of the economy of the country is co-ordinated by the National Federation of Labour.

The greatest weakness of the trade union is its lack of an ultimate aim, a supreme reason for existence. At its best it struggles for a higher wage or a shorter working day. (At its present worst it gives up the struggle). But a struggling man usually has some aim. He intends to end the struggle victoriously by finally overcoming his enemy, not to keep the action going for ever and ever.

So, the ultimate aim of Syndicalism is not a wage increase, but Workers' Control of industry. Every action by the Syndicalist workers is a means to that end. Every strike is a training period, a skirmish before the Social General Strike.

5. A Spanish Lesson.

ONCE it was possible for the dyspeptic cynic to say, with some show of conviction, "All this is a beautiful dream, but it just isn't possible." We now have the example of the Spanish workers' collectives during the civil war of 1936–39. They proved the possibility and regenerative power of workers' control of industry.

Upon the outbreak of the Fascist rebellion, most of the Spanish capitalists and almost all the landowners took the side of Franco and deserted the industries in the large areas where the workers had triumphed. Many of the large industries were owned by foreign capital and in many of these too, the managers and directors fled.

Far from being paralysed, the industries received new vigour, for the workers and peasants immediately took over the administration of industry and agriculture. In the socialised enterprises, workers' committees were elected, unemployed set to work, services improved and dividends and sinecures abolished.

Barcelona with Catalonia, being the stronghold of Anarchism, naturally showed the greatest strides in the establishment of collectives. The Syndicates of Health, Water, Gas, Transport and Public Amusement were immediately successful in the direction of their undertakings. Five days after the insurrection the transport workers took over the British-owned transport system. Two days later all damage caused by the street fighting had been repaired. 657 unemployed were engaged an big salaries were abolished and used to pay pensions to workers over sixty.

Fares on many lines were reduced, traffic increased and the workshops modernised by the addition of new machinery. The tramways, buses, the two undergrounds and the two funicular railways were unified in one transport system.

After the triumph of the Franco reaction the British shareholders of the Barcelona transport company met in London and were assured, by their chairmen, of the splendid condition of the plant and satisfactory financial conditions and book-keeping after the workers' control.

COLLECTIVES EVERYWHERE

Throughout republican Spain the three main railways, belonging to three foreign companies, were unified under the joint control of the revolutionary union (C.N.T.) and the trade unions (U.G.T.).

The textile and wood industries were particularly successful, but even in smaller and less highly organised services success was achieved. Taxis carried the red and black flag of syndicalism, hotels and restaurants bore the initials C.N.T. and waiters and bootblacks with dignity refused tips. Small shop artisans united to form collectives, as in the case of the Optical Workers' Syndicate or certain hairdressers who pooled their resources in one up-to-date shop and greatly reduced their working hours.

THE FERTILE LAND

However it is agriculture which gives us the most inspiring examples of socialisation. Land socialisation began in Aragon, then spread to the Levante and Andalucia, Catalonia and Castile. The collectives were purely voluntary; any peasant who wished to remain outside was given his share of the newly acquired land.

Immediate technical advances were made. Modern machinery was acquired and stock improved, land was carefully selected to produce the most suitable crops. This led to a substantial increase of the harvest in spite of so many of the peasants being at the front. Even the *Daily Worker*, enemy of socialisation in the name of “democratic unity”, admitted that in the second year of war the harvest had increased by 30 per cent. in spite of loss of territory.

In the distribution of the fruits of labour, the principle “to each according to his needs” was applied. A couple with children received more than a childless household, a large family more than a smaller. In many villages the people learned to live well without the use of money. The sick and aged were cared for and mutual aid took the place of chill charity.

The Health Syndicate successfully undertook the organisation of medical service. Instead of individual payment the doctor was remunerated by the Collective and attended to all sick persons. Dispensaries and clinics were formed, even in remote villages where none had existed before.

The mansions of landowners were turned into schools, children’s homes and “Homes of Rest for the Aged”. Great steps in education were taken in the midst of a people, most of whom had never known its graces.

The fully story of the Spanish socialisation is yet to be written, but in spite of betrayal by politicians, sabotage by Communist armed hooligans and the victory of fascism, its memory will live in the minds of Spain’s toilers, to be their inspiration in a new Spanish revolution.

6. Revolution of Construction.

Syndicalism is a world movement. The extent and virility of the movement has been concealed from the British workers by the press, both “labour” and capitalist. The first weapon of capitalist propaganda against Anarchists and Syndicalists was raging abuse and downright lies, but the second weapon, press boycott, proved more effective. Almost all journalists and papers from extreme right to extreme left refuse to even mention Syndicalism.

Nevertheless the movement grows. In 1922 Syndicalist federations from all over the world sent their delegates to the World Congress at Berlin and formed the International Working Men’s Association.

Spain was represented by the C.N.T. (Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo), which during the civil war rose to a 2,500,000 membership and strongly influenced the Spanish trade unions and unorganised workers. From France came the delegates of the C.G.T.S.R. (Confédération Générale du Travail Syndicaliste Révolutionnaire) and from Italy the illegal Unione Sindicale Italiana. The powerful Mexican C.G.T. and the revolutionary unions of Argentine, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Paraguay, Uruguay and Peru became affiliated.

Lest we further the fable that Syndicalism is the product of Latin natural wickedness we must refer to the affiliations of the movements in Holland, Norway, Germany and Sweden. The Swedish syndicalist movement, Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation is particularly virile. The S.A.C. has two daily papers and many periodicals, while a special press and the Syndicalist Youth organisation cater for the young workers.

Further affiliations came from Austria, Bulgaria, Japan, Poland (a rapidly developing movement from about 1936 until the Russo-German alliance against Poland) and Portugal. In many of these countries the movement is now illegal but lives on. Syndicalism may prefer, but does not depend on, a legal existence. Unlike trade unions and labour parties it does not depend on bourgeois parliamentary institutions.

The best example of this is given by the Spanish C.N.T. Formed in 1910 the federation has been illegal most of its existence, suffering several long iron dictatorships and many bloody repressions. Yet the 1936 revolution found the C.N.T. stronger than ever. Now, in spite of the triumph of Franco, Spanish syndicalists fight on by sabotage and strike.

The International Working Men’s Association calls us to its ranks in the world struggle. Our task is hard, we do not disguise it, but our movement is worthy of the struggle.

The opponents of Anarchism tell us we cannot have Anarchism overnight. We know that well. Everything must be built up, but the time to start building is *now*. As previous societies decayed there developed within them the embryo of new forms of societies, so within capitalism we build the framework of socialism; the syndicates.

From every struggle and from our daily work we must learn how to run industries and services. We must develop the class-consciousness, the knowledge and self-confidence of the workers, until the embryonic society bursts the shell of capitalism. As the I.W.W. preamble puts it: “By organising industrially we are forming the new society within the shell of the old.”

The world is in flames. World capitalism has produced the world war. Navies are sunk, cities pounded into dust, millions of men, women, and children are blown to fragments or starved to death. The means of production and distribution are torn asunder and disease threatens to engulf the survivors.

Capitalism threatens to destroy society with itself, and the only force that can save humanity is the revolutionary workers' movement. The Anarchists call the workers to the Syndicalist revolution, *the Revolution of Construction*.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Tom Brown
Trade Unionism or Syndicalism?
1942

Retrieved on 4th October 2021 from libcom.org
A 1942 pamphlet by Tom Brown on trade unions, why they let us down, and why syndicalism is the best method for building a society of workers' control. It has been transcribed here with the typos and stylistic inconsistencies kept intact.

theanarchistlibrary.org