

Misunderstanding syndicalism

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Misunderstanding syndicalism

TIM GOULET'S review of Ralph Darlington's *Radical Unionism* ("Syndicalism's lessons") makes a number of mistaken claims about revolutionary syndicalism, based on fundamental inadequacies in Darlington's book.

The claim that "syndicalist unions broke off from mainstream federations to form 'purely revolutionary' unions, cutting themselves off from the mass of workers" doesn't hold up, though it does conform to the Leninist orthodoxy of "Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder. There were many countries where the syndicalist unions were the majority—such as Portugal, Spain, Argentina, Uruguay, Peru and Brazil. Syndicalist unions in South Africa, such as the Industrial Workers of Africa (modeled on the Industrial Workers of the World), were the only unions that organized native African workers, who were excluded from the white craft unions.

At the time of the mass occupation of the factories in Italy in September 1920, the USI (Italian Syndicalist Union) was claiming 800,000 members, and the factory councils formed throughout Italy in those events were mostly organized by the USI. Moreover, it was the anarcho-syndicalists who initiated a militia movement ("arditti del popolo") to fight Mussolini's fascist squads. But the Communists didn't cooperate, and the Socialist Party capitulated to fascism.

Darlington makes the usual mistake of supposing the IWW went into decline with government repression in 1917. Actually the IWW continued to grow in the early 1920s, reaching its peak in 1923. The IWW mass unions were in industries where there either was no American Federation of Labor (AFL) union or a competing AFL union that was no larger than the IWW union. Moreover, in industries where IWW was a minority they often worked as a "dual card" pressure group within the AFL unions.

MOREOVER, THE claim that revolutionary syndicalism "rejects politics" contradicts the criticism that syndicalists have an unrealistic ideal of a highly politicized unionism that can play a revolutionary role. You need to make up your mind which criticism you want to make: Did syndicalists advocate a narrow focus on merely economic issues ("economism") or did they have unrealistic expectations of the political role unionism could play? These two traditional Leninist criticisms are logically inconsistent with each other.

In Spain at present, the two syndicalist unions, the CGT and CNT, often work to develop alliances with social movements (women's groups, ecologists, housing squatters) as in general strike mobilizations. The CGT has separate encuentros (meetings) for its women members to develop campaigns—as for example their current campaign for free abortion on demand, against the right-wing government's efforts to criminalize abortion. These are examples of how the unions do develop political strategy and focus.

Moreover, it was Marxism that historically proposed a division of labor, with "politics" being reserved for the party and the union relegated to "the economic sphere." In practice, this has always been used as an excuse by union leaders to avoid mass action around larger political questions. They will tell workers they need to vote for the party. This was the role the Communist Party played in demobilizing the population in France after the mass general strike in 1968.

The claim that syndicalists over-emphasize "spontaneity" is also at odds with the syndicalist emphasis on preparation and building the capacity of militants, as with the many dozens

of worker schools and cultural centers organized throughout working-class neighborhoods of Barcelona and Valencia in Spain in the 1930s.

There is also a mistaken conception offered of the revolutionary general strike. As Lucy Parsons said in her remarks to the founding convention of the IWW, the syndicalist conception is an “inside” strike—a generalized takeover of the means of production and all the capitalists’ assets.

The syndicalist idea is that having a grassroots worker mass movement in the workplaces provides a movement with the skills and position to carry out this generalized lockout of the bosses, and to carry on production to ensure that people’s needs are met. We have a vivid example of an expropriating general strike in the mass seizure of industry and farmland by the syndicalist unions in Spain in 1936. More than 18,000 companies and 14 million acres of farmland were expropriated, according to UPI reporter Burnet Bolleten.

The CNT movement of 1936—the majority labor organization in the country—also smashed up the army in many parts of the country and built its own proletarian army of about 100,000 to fight the fascists. This is clearly a demonstration of the possibility of a union movement playing a revolutionary role.

As Marx put it: “If the trades unions are required for the guerilla fights between capital and labor, they are still more important as organized agencies for superseding the very system of wages labor and capital rule.”

Tom Wetzel, Hayward, California

Confusion about political power

THANKS TO Brian Kelly (“Syndicalism and taking power”) for asking me to address the issue of political power in the Spanish Revolution. In a review of *Los anarquistas y el poder*—a book on this question by a participant in the CNT (Cesar Lorenzo), Spanish Marxist Fernando Claudin points to the key role of preparation.

As he says, the CNT militants at the local level moved to seize thousands of workplaces and urban buildings and millions of acres of farmland because members of the unions had debated and discussed this for decades. But he also points out that there had not been a corresponding consensus in the CNT movement on how to move to coordinate overall social power by the working class. Claudin is a Marxist, so he puts this by saying they didn’t discuss the need to create a “proletarian state.”

There were revolutionary syndicalist militants in the CNT who advocated for the unions taking power, through the creation of a system of revolutionary committees and worker delegate congresses. This included radicals like Buenaventura Durruti and Juan Garcia Oliver, and radical CNT journalists like Jaime Balius and Eduardo de Guzman.

But this is a case where the lack of clarity in anarchist writing about political power tended to trip up the militants in the CNT. In reality, the CNT unions did take power locally and in some regions, through union-created revolutionary committees that controlled whole cities like Hospitalet and Lleida, and the worker congress and Defense Committee in eastern Aragon—a working-class government of the CNT and UGT unions in that area.

This lack of clarity and consensus...and thus lack of preparation on this key point...led to hesitation that played into the hands of the advocates of the government collaboration being pushed by the Socialist and Communist Parties.

The problem here is not in revolutionary syndicalism, which, as the radical minority in the CNT said, implies the need for coordinated consolidation of working class power over the whole society.

In regard to the specific case of the gold reserves: If the gold reserves had been located in a CNT majority area, I believe that they would have been seized. But the CNT was a minority in Madrid, where the gold was located. The Socialist and Communist Parties, and their UGT union, were the dominant force there (not only in numbers but in arms). Anarchist militants in the CNT did actually develop a detailed plan to seize a "CNT share" of the gold (leaving a share for the UGT union).

Durruti was to lead an anarchist militia column to seize the gold in the night. The CNT railway union militants would have a train waiting to take the gold back to Barcelona. But the ever-wavering Diego Abad de Santillan got cold feet at the last minute and called it off. De Santillan was also one of the "anti-power" confusionists I referred to above.

The confusion about political power was one of the central themes in the attack on the government collaborationists in the CNT by the Friends of Durruti Group in 1937-38. The Friends of Durruti were an anarcho-syndicalist organization of about 5,000 CNT militants in Catalonia.

They advocated the taking of power by the unions through complete socialization of the economy by the unions (creating a society-wide coordination of social production), the building of the "free municipalities" (neighborhood assembly based district organizations proposed by the CNT program) and replacement of the government by a revolutionary committee (to coordinate social self-defense such as militia), elected by the worker assemblies, and accountable to worker congresses.

What we see here then is that there were different interpretations of the politics of revolutionary syndicalism in the CNT.

My own view is that political power—society-wide coordinated control—is something that has to be created by the mass organizations of the working class, and accountable directly through the assemblies in the workplaces and neighborhoods, and through systems of rank-and-file delegates directly accountable to the base. Creating a state bureaucratic structure that has management power over a state-owned economy will not give the working-class power, but will empower a bureaucratic class.

Tom Wetzel, Hayward, California

Boring from Within Won't Work

In their reply ("In the wrong place at the right time") to my attempts to defend revolutionary syndicalism, Joe Richard and Ty Carroll try to force the debate into an arbitrarily narrow set of choices.

The attack on "dual unionism" seems to be designed to rule out efforts at building new worker-controlled unions outside the bureaucratic framework of the AFL-CIO type unions.

The basic problem today is the glaring need to build a new kind of worker unionism that is directly controlled by the workers, is based on direct participation and practices of powerful disruptive action, recognizes the flat antagonism of interests between workers and the employers, builds solidarity in action between workers in different sectors, and builds solidarity with grassroots social movements and struggles outside the workplace. A workers movement of this kind

in the USA would have to be prepared to violate court injunctions and unjust laws that restrict worker action. To do this, alliances and mutual support need to be developed between unions and social movement organizations so that worker action has mass support.

A movement based on direct participation, collective decision-making, and direct action is essential to the process through which the working class develops the confidence, aspirations for change, organizing skills, and social cohesion to mount a fundamental challenge to the dominating classes. Some Marxists refer to this as the process of “class formation” — the working class “forming” itself into a social force for change. Marxists and syndicalists can agree that it’s necessary to encourage this process.

A basic problem with the inherited bureaucratic unionism of the AFL-CIO type is that it is a roadblock or barrier to this process. The inherited “international” unions are very far from being a worker controlled movement. To the degree there is democracy, it is at the local level. Some local unions have some democratic vitality and social movement relationships but some don’t even have meetings (like UNITE HERE Local 2 in San Francisco) or are staff-driven state-wide bureaucracies (like various SEIU fiefdoms). The “international unions” are dominated by highly paid executives and are largely beyond the ability of workers to control or participate in effectively. The bureaucratic layer have interests antagonistic to worker interests.

I’m not saying the officials never initiate struggles, which they do at times (as with Fight for 15). I’m saying that the bureaucracy tends to place limits on mass mobilization and disruptive action. They tend to favor compliance with the laws that cage us in. They do this because they want to avoid risks to the institutions that are the basis of their prestige and position. Their position emphasizes their role as negotiators and political operatives. Their ideology of “partnership” with employers favors a restraint on worker challenge to the system. The union bureaucracy is actually self-defeating because their tendency to reduce risk and contain struggle means that union membership will continue to decline.

This means that we need to figure out ways to build mass worker organizations that are not subject to this kind of bureaucratic control.

Since the ’30s American Leninists have almost invariably stuck to a “boring from within” approach. This has taken various forms. Sometimes this means taking jobs as organizers and influencing the bureaucratic machine from within. Others talk about “taking power” in the union apparatus by winning top offices. When Carroll and Richard talk about “challenging the leaders,” this suggests they think the problem is “bad leaders.” But the problem goes much deeper than that.

Since World War 2 unions have been based on a narrow approach where paid officials engage in “collective bargaining” to obtain contracts. These invariably have no-strike clauses, management rights clauses, and often have elaborate stepped grievance procedures that take beefs off the shop floor and into the hands of the professional staff. No-strike clauses limit worker action and bind our hands. Management rights clauses discourage a struggle over control in the workplace. This whole approach simply guarantees control of the union by professional “representatives”.

Very often leftists elected to paid union office have simply become little different than their predecessors over time. As Bob Fitch put it: The unions are like a “roach motel”: “The leftists go in but they don’t come out.”

Going forward, there is not necessarily a single route to a new worker-controlled, solidarity-based union movement. Carroll and Richard seem to mistakenly think I’m simply trying to tout membership in the Industrial Workers of the World. Although I support the organizing efforts

of Wobblies in recent years, I've never been a member of the IWW. Rather, I'm a member of Workers Solidarity Alliance — an educational and organizing group founded in the early '80s to promote revolutionary libertarian syndicalism.

Given that less than 7 percent of workers in the private sector are in unions, there is surely plenty of space for organizing new worker controlled unions. In Los Angeles, for example, there are half a million manufacturing workers and only 6 percent are unionized.

Of course there are some important sectors where the AFL-CIO type unions are still entrenched. WSA's position on organizing in that context is stated in our Where We Stand statement:

“We cannot hope to play a role in many worker struggles...if we remain aloof from them because they take place within the AFL-CIO or Change to Win unions. So long as workers struggles are organized through these unions, we participate in those unions and their struggles.”

But this means participation from the rank-and-file position, not as part of the paid staff.

In the '80s-90s period some of our members developed independent rank-and-file committees in the context of the New York area garment and textile unions and within SEIU 250 at St. Luke's hospital in San Francisco. Our members employed at the University of Tennessee succeeded in organizing an independent employees union there. At the time of the Hormel meatpacking strike in the '80s, we had members working in that industry. Due to widespread disgust at the UFCW “international union”, many meatpacking locals were not paying their “per capita” (dues). We supported the (ultimately unsuccessful) effort of the P-9 strikers to mobilize a “mass split” of packing house local unions from the UFCW.

When revolutionary syndicalists have developed a mass revolutionary union in a particular era and region, that then becomes an important organizing project that many militants may commit themselves to. But in the World War 1 era, which Carroll and Richard discuss, syndicalists in some countries were active in a variety of union organizations, based on diversity of situations.

Contrary to Carroll and Richard, there were revolutionary syndicalists in Italian unions in 1919-20 other than the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI). In the Turin branch of the FIOM metal workers union, the syndicalists of the Turin Libertarian Group worked in alliance with Antonio Gramsci's Marxist-syndicalist branch of the Socialist Party. They built a mass movement independent of FIOM through general assemblies and elected shop stewards. Eventually this movement took over the 40,000-member FIOM branch in Turin and re-structured it so that the shop stewards councils were the union. At that time Maurizio Garino, a member of the Turin Libertarian Group, was elected secretary of the FIOM branch.

As Gwyn Williams documents in *Proletarian Order*, the syndicalists were very much a factor in the mass factory occupations in Italy in 1920.

The FIOM was competing for members with USI which had 30,000 members in its metal workers union. The FIOM was pushing its demands through a slowdown. The syndicalists demanded that this be transformed into a factory takeover if the employers attempted a lockout. So the FIOM leaders were pushed into a major confrontation due to syndicalist pressure. Moreover, the occupations were supported by the railway union, which was under revolutionary syndicalist leadership. The bureaucrats of the Socialist Party's CGL did everything they could to back down the confrontation, to avoid the revolutionary transformation the syndicalists were pushing for.

During the World War 1 era in the USA, the IWW was an important organizing project, but syndicalist influence was present in other organizations. The left-wing of the Socialist Party was largely syndicalist in sympathies. At the time of the Seattle general strike in 1919, many left wing socialists were active in the AFL unions. As Harvey O'Connor points out in *Revolution in Seattle*, support for the idea of workers managing the industries was widespread.

The new Amalgamated Clothing Workers union was influenced by the syndicalism of many worker militants in that period. Thus the union adopted some elements of a syndicalist program, favoring worker management of industry. This led the Italian Syndicalist Federation — a group of influential organizers such as Carlo Tresca and Joe Ettor — to switch from the IWW to the ACWA. This also shows that Richard and Carroll are wrong in assuming that syndicalists in that period were only involved in building IWW unions.

But in the mid-'20s the officials of ACWA decided to take a more conciliatory line towards employers. They proceeded to ruthlessly expel syndicalists and Communists. This shows very well the reason why grassroots democratic control of a union is crucial if it is going to be a vehicle of worker struggle.

“Boring from within” practiced in USA by syndicalists and Communists in that era failed to work out a solution to that problem.

By the early '30s both the IWW and the Communists were subjecting the AFL top down unions to severe criticism. This helped to encourage a massive wave of new independent unions in 1933 to 1934. According to some estimates, there were 200,000 workers in independents organized by socialists and syndicalists and 150,000 workers in the Communist revolutionary unions of the Trade Union Unity League. Much of the mass upsurge of the early '30s thus took shape outside the control of the AFL bureaucrats. There was a real possibility for the emergence of a radical union federation to the left of the AFL. The creation of the CIO by Lewis and Hillman was a kind of containment operation. They set up CIO “internationals” with the usual AFL-style top down constitutions. But it took some time to contain the disruptive worker self-activity within a bureaucratic union framework.

The phrase “anarcho-syndicalism” actually originated in Russia. That's because many anarchists in the Russian revolution were anti-syndicalists who adhered to an insurrectionary anarchist concept of “propaganda by the deed.” In practice they tended to engage in small group expropriations, with the hope that this would lead “spontaneously” to the masses doing likewise. So the syndicalist anarchists, who rejected that approach, formed themselves into a separate political organization, Confederation of Russian Anarcho-Syndicalists (KRAS). KRAS was not a union but an organizing and publishing group. Their militants were active in various areas of democratic worker organizing such as the Petrograd factory committee movement and the grassroots soviet in Kronstadt. They also gained control of the Moscow sections of the Menshevik-created railway and baker's unions (as Emma Goldman describes in *My Disillusionment in Russia*).

In libertarian socialist circles, this practice is called “dual organizationalism”. This is the view that it is often useful to put together an organization of conscious revolutionary activists to assist in building mass organizations and in doing work of popular education.

There are a number of possibilities or avenues today for working towards worker-controlled, solidarity-based unionism in USA: new independent worker-controlled unions (IWW or not), independent worker committees or networks in unorganized workplaces or where the AFL-CIO type unions are entrenched, radical re-orientation of existing local unions where existing democracy makes this feasible.

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<socialistworker.org> (1), <socialistworker.org> (2), <ideasandaction.info> (3)
Tom Wetzel's collected contributions to a debate with *Socialist Worker* on syndicalism.
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