

A Century of the International Workers Association (IWA) 1922-2022

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Contents

Syndicalism and Anarcho-Syndicalism	3
Syndicalist Influence	4
The International Workers Association	6
Factors of Success and Failure	7
Contemporary Syndicalism and Class Composition	8

“The myth of Nin or Durruti is of no use to us at all, whereas their shortcomings and mistakes are useful, because they teach us something. The myths of yesterday are the chains of today; to reveal their errors allows us to advance beyond the point where they failed.”

Agustín Guillamón – The Theorisation of Historical Experiences

December 2022 marks the centenary of the International Workers Association (IWA). Founded by a range of ‘syndicalist’ unions as an alternative to the Communist International, the IWA once organised millions of workers. Syndicalist unions had been leading organisations in social revolts across Latin America and Europe. The Confederación Nacional Trabajadore (CNT) in particular was the vanguard organisation of the Spanish revolution where the limits of anarcho-syndicalism were put to the test.

Many material and political factors played into the rapid rise, and fall, of revolutionary syndicalism. Today, the IWA still exists, but is but a shell of its former self. The IWA and the history of syndicalism however remain important points of reference for the workers movement.

Syndicalism and Anarcho-Syndicalism

While ‘syndicalism’ is essentially synonymous with unionism, the term is usually employed in English to suggest a radical, ideological difference to standard economic unionism. Unions, at least theoretically, are bodies of workers united to fight for economic demands and for their common material interests. Syndicalism suggests that through the organisation of workers into *revolutionary* unions it is possible to overturn capitalism and establish a socialist society. Revolutionary unions are, in turn, distinguishable from political organisations motivated by specific ideologies, rather than material class interests. As the ‘union’ is a means to revolutionary ends, workers are better off using the economic fighting organisations of their class than political organisations like parties.

Syndicalists effectively reject the dichotomy between ‘political’ and ‘economic’ struggles, seeing them as one and the same to be fought by workers through unitary organisations. Scorning all alliances with middle class forces, syndicalists aim to make revolution based on the working classes’ productive capacity alone. While some syndicalists completely reject political organisation and parliament, others have embraced it in a limited scope believing it should only be used as a secondary tribune to the workers struggle waged on the shop floor.

Anarcho-syndicalism however, is the combination of anarchist goals with ‘syndicalism’, or organisation through unions as a means to achieve specially anarchist ends. Anarcho-syndicalists, unlike syndicalism more broadly, is explicitly federalist and emphasises horizontal organisation, delegation rather than representation, mass assemblies for decision making and limited tenure for the few required officials. Anarcho-syndicalists completely reject parliamentary politics and participation in state-sponsored institutions like works councils.

The first traces of syndicalist ideas were an organic outgrowth of the workers movement amongst the sections of the First International considered as the ‘Federalists’ like Eugene Varlin¹

¹ Eugene Varlin was an anarchist who served on the council of the Paris Commune, where he alone advocated seizing the national bank. He was executed following the crushing of the Commune.

and Jean Louis Pindy.² As early socialists, they developed their ideas regarding class struggle based on their practical experiences in the workplace and amongst workers societies rather than through the doctrines of particular intellectuals.

Over time, the ideas of workers self-management and struggle through unions coalesced into the more specific ideology of revolutionary unionism, directly in contrast to political socialism. To a degree, revolutionary syndicalism was a reaction to both the incorporation of both early socialist parties and trade unions incorporation into the state, political opportunism of left wing politicians and parties and bureaucratisation of workers organisations. Figures like Emile Pouget, Fernand Pelloutier, Armando Borghi, Bill Haywood, James Connolly, William Z Foster and Tom Mann amongst others were influential in developing a specifically syndicalist doctrine. Anarcho-syndicalism itself found particular clarity in Rudolf Rockers 1938 book ‘Anarcho-syndicalism; Theory and Practice.’

Though nominally a revolutionary ideology of the Left, syndicalism also suffered from right-wing deviations, particularly amongst its French and Italian adherents.³ The most left-wing variant of syndicalism, anarcho-syndicalism, managed to obtain particular dominance amongst the working class for a period in both Spain and Argentina. In every situation where syndicalism became a mass movement it was particularly adapted to national conditions and reflected the development of the local labour movement.

Syndicalist Influence

“Anarchist and syndicalist groups were the most consistently and totally revolutionary group on the left.”

Gwyn Williams – Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, Factory Councils and the Origins of Communism in Italy 1911-1921

From the 1890s through to the First World War, syndicalism was in many countries the dominant revolutionary movement. It is not outlandish to suggest that syndicalism, globally, was in this period more influential than Marxism. In America, Mexico, Ireland, Bulgaria and France syndicalist movements were powerful and shaped national politics. Syndicalist influence extended further still, with minor but not insignificant influence across most of Latin America. Nor was syndicalism alien to countries like England, Sweden, Australia, Germany, South Africa and even parts of Asia. The factors that contributed to syndicalist influence rapidly changed, but not before syndicalist movements mounted powerful challenges to capitalist rule in a number of countries.

Two of the most significant syndicalist movements with solid anarchist influence were in Argentina and Italy. In Argentina, the Regional Federation of Argentinian Workers (FORA) amassed in excess of 100,000 members and led several insurrectionary general strikes. In Italy, syndicalists were the largest and most powerful tendency during the ‘Biennio Rosso’ or ‘Two Red Years’ when workers occupied and ran factories in the country’s north. The nation teetered on the verge

² A cabinet-maker and also a Communist, Pindy articulated some of the first arguments for labour councils as the future governing bodies of societies and achieving their dominance by successive strikes and capacity building amongst workers.

³ The name of George Sorel for example is strongly associated with revolutionary syndicalism. A Frenchman, Sorel swung between left and right wing ideals while espousing a theory of violent direct action. He praised both Lenin and Mussolini as revolutionary.

of revolution, but inaction on the part of Italian socialists and its reformist unions ensured the state retained its rule.

Ironically, with the exception of Spain the high point of the majority of the syndicalist organisations was before the founding of the IWA. Furthermore, the syndicalist high point in general was not explicitly 'anarcho'-syndicalist, but reflected the variance in the tendency across national boundaries.

But it was the Spanish revolution that cemented 'anarcho-syndicalism' in the history books as a revolutionary tendency of significance. On the 19th of July, 1936 Spanish workers found themselves in control of much of the country after they responded in arms to an attempted fascist coup. With the effective collapse of the government, workers and peasants established a never seen before level of workers control of industry and collectivisation of the countryside. The anarcho-syndicalist Confederacion Trabajador Nacional (CNT), at least in Barcelona, found itself in a position of de facto control. However, the organisation abandoned the implementation of the long-held anarchist programme, only reaffirmed at a Congress months before. Instead the CNT-FAI collaborated with institutional capitalist forces.⁴ The Republican government was restored under the banner of collaborative 'anti-fascism' and the Popular Front. There can be no denying that the choice the Spanish working class faced was limited by an even more dire international situation than that which faced the Russian Revolution, but there can also be no excuses for its shortcomings.

The Spanish Revolution highlighted both the strengths and contradictions of anarcho-syndicalism. The Spanish experience affirmed the thesis that a union, in particular historical circumstances, could lay the basis for social revolution. Through everyday practice the Spanish proletariat had been conditioned to self-directed activity and needed no centralised orders to resist fascism nor to take production into its own hands. Collectivist ideals matched with the political and economic tasks required for a simultaneous civil war and transition towards socialism. Not only was industry overhauled, but so were many of the regressive and patriarchal practices of Spanish culture.

In contradiction, that the CNT affirmed and collaborated with the Spanish state reflects a certain political contradiction of the union form; even a nominally revolutionary trade union, if it is a mass organisation contains a number of political views. Not all of which affirm revolutionary positions. The syndicalist form did not solve the riddle of economic and political organisation.

The unions becoming the basis of social reorganisation also reflected other contradictions; some industries came under the central control of trade union bodies, while in others workshops belonged directly to the worker. Both factories and industries alike traded commodities along the lines of a collectivised form of capitalism. Reflection upon these flaws have often tended towards two opposite conclusions.

That workplace self-management is the very basis of socialism and represents workers emancipation, which naively ignores that there is no reason capital and commodity production cannot be collectively managed by workers without fundamentally altering the system. The other is that both workplace self-management and the trade union form are inherently unable to overcome capitalist social relations. In contradiction to this view, certain industries like the Barcelona

⁴ The recent works of Danny Evans, *Revolution and the State*, and Agustín Guillamón, *Insurrection*, have made significant advancement in proving that collaboration was not so wide spread nor accepted as previously thought. The Barcelona FAI, and certain sections of the CNT in particular undertook significant efforts to overcome the collaborative tendencies.

Woodworkers Union employed self-management through trade union bodies and argued for rapid socialisation. While the Spanish revolution, isolated in global capitalism and fighting fascism is hardly a clear test case, it is the one history bequeaths us.

The union form also reflected certain limitations to total social organisation. Unlike workers councils, union bodies represent only their own industry. The integration of the broader proletariat into a national class body was not achieved in Spain, hence there were political divisions amongst the militias and even in the workplaces. While Gaston Leval, a CNT economist produced a pamphlet 'Libertarian Socialism' suggesting how such organisation could be achieved his reflections remain speculative.⁵

The International Workers Association

The wave of worker revolts that ended the First World War culminated in the Russian Revolution. Bolshevism proved to be successful at establishing what was nominally a form of 'workers power.' Quite quickly, the doctrines of the Second International were abandoned and a new revolutionary Marxism was popularised. Bolshevism began to encroach upon syndicalism as the preeminent ideology amongst revolutionary workers across the globe. The foundation of the Communist International ('Comintern') weaved Marxist parties across the globe into a powerful network.

But the shift to Bolshevism also began to occur as the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, isolated and subjugated to foreign intervention and blockade, became apparent. Just as the Bolsheviks began to jail and execute other revolutionary tendencies, syndicalist delegates from across the world arrived in Russia for the first Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions.

The 'Profintern', or Red International of Labour Unions aimed to coordinate Communist activity in global trade unions. Revolutionary syndicalists were invited to attend and affiliate their unions, but Communists were also required to enter into existing reformist Trade Unions. In effect, forcing a 'dual carding' strategy on those who maintained the need for separate revolutionary unions. This, coupled with repression of their comrades made many syndicalists sceptical. Nonetheless, the German, Italian, Argentine, Spanish and American organisations decided to affiliate. A number of syndicalists were won over to joining their respective Communist Parties. But these parties rapidly adapted to the counter-revolution both in Russia and abroad, and the loss of syndicalist militants to counter-revolutionary parties could hardly be called a victory. By 1922 the syndicalists who stuck with their unions had already left the Profintern.

In the same year eleven revolutionary unions met in Germany and established the International Workers Association, with more affiliating the following year. At its height, the IWA represented millions of workers, but this was not to last. Throughout the 20s and 30s syndicalist unions were targeted and smashed by fascism. While members of these organisations played significant roles in anti-fascist struggle, most of the unions ceased to function.

By the 1950s, only one IWA affiliate actually organised workers on the shopfloor.⁶ The rest were effectively propaganda groups. When the Spanish dictator Franco died in the 70s the CNT

⁵ Libertarian Socialism is based on productive industrial data of France rather than Spain. Leval's book 'Collectives in the Spanish Revolution' remains essential reading on collective economy in revolutionary Spain.

⁶ The Swedish affiliate, the SAC.

was reorganised above ground and re-affiliated, bringing with it close to 200,000 members. However the CNT was to split in the new climate, with the new CGT section leaving the IWA.

Today, the IWA is but a shadow of a once significant movement. Most sections exist as propaganda groups, functioning essentially as advocates of the concept of anarcho-syndicalism. The exceptions being the CNT and the new Bangladeshi Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation (BASf), which has some presence organising tea workers.

Factors of Success and Failure

That revolutionary unionism was so relevant through the 1890-1920 period, yet suffered such a fall from grace reflects a number of factors both material and political. Working class organisation was an inevitable factor of capitalist development, as the material interests of the proletariat and bourgeois came into conflict. The early development of workers' economic societies and revolutionary socialist politics gave birth to trade unions and socialist parties alike. As capitalism spread across the globe it violently displaced significant portions of rural populations and herded them into cities where they became dependent on waged labour. In the brutal conditions of early capitalist accumulation proletarians found many ways to adapt; some drew revolutionary conclusions while others did not.

New social figures emerged, a small class of skilled labour whose self employment was undercut by the rapid development of mass industry and new productive techniques. As capital requires the constant redevelopment of production in order to both compete on the market and reduce its reliance on workers' labour this is a never-ending dynamic of capitalism. When the contradiction first became apparent many artisans decried its dehumanising effects and took up socialist conclusions; a far-cry from the contemporary attitudes of the self-employed class. Many of these first artisans were the basis of early socialist, and syndicalist, organisations.

At the same time the mass proletariat, chained to the factories and mines also arose; as it began to flex its muscles in resistance to capitalist exploitation these workers discovered their power in unity. The birth of unions was inevitable; the conclusions workers drew regarding their purpose however were not. As the first wave of unions in nations like England adapted to capitalism and restrained themselves to wage demands and improving their lot, more radical currents suggested that unions could simultaneously fight for better conditions and aim for the overthrow of capitalist society. It is no surprise then that revolutionary syndicalism was appealing to the proletariat. Workers' own experience taught them that strikes, sabotage and direct action were often more powerful than relying on politicians far removed from the workshop who often capitulated to bourgeois interests.

The lot of the global worker was not an abundant one. Commodities were expensive, the capitalist state was brazen in its punishment of the poor and social security nets did not exist. Proletarians were basically forced to struggle to ensure they could live with any sense of dignity. The project of incorporating the proletariat into the national state was not yet achieved in any meaningful sense. The bourgeois resisted it, the social democrats fought for it. In these early days of industrial capitalism the class-war was obvious. That allowing workers a better say might help to keep the peace was not an idea that had made its way into the heads of many politicians.

A further radicalising factor was the generational relationship of early proletarians. During the late 19th and early 20th century many workers had been forced from their traditional homes

and subsistence living by the development of market forces. The ex-peasantry had an inherent disdain for capitalist social relations that is far removed from the incorporation of the modern proletariat. The peasant turned proletariat was not socially conditioned to the life of hierarchical, bureaucratic industrial capitalism.

There can be no doubt syndicalism contained an element of reductive ‘economism.’ That is, economic struggle can at best resolve political questions, or at worst it can be effectively sidestepped. However, syndicalism was never such a crude caricature. Syndicalists came to various answers about how to incorporate the needs and organisation of the broader community and addressed political questions through their own, anti-parliamentary methodology. But tying any form of revolutionary organisation to workplace based organisation runs the risk of collapse with changes in capitalist composition.

After the First World War demolished vast industry, capitalism also changed productive techniques in massive realignment of industry. While management techniques like Taylorism, Fordism and the factory production line created an unskilled, mass proletariat it simultaneously demolished the power of the then-contemporary skilled labour movement and undercut a significant base of syndicalist organisation. The intervention of reactionary social movements in the wake of failed revolutions further consolidated capitalist rule and smashed labour organisation. In nations that did not fall to fascism, the Great Depression created a gigantic mass of unemployed and further decimated labour.

Simultaneously, Bolshevism overran syndicalism as the dominant ideology in the workers movement. With a singular international organisation dedicated to its proliferation and the resources of a gigantic, if poor, national state behind it the Comintern was resourced in a way the self funded workers movement of the IWA could not be. Syndicalism also struggled to adapt to an underground existence in many nations, and a fractured workers movement was not united enough within the union form to address many political questions of the day.

Finally, despite revolutionary ambitions, syndicalism struggled with the fundamental contradiction of all unions. The immediate ambitions of the labour movement, such as higher wages, health and safety and the struggle for political rights such as suffrage conditioned and limited aspirations. As non-revolutionary gains were achieved and the labour movement was integrated into the national project, the appeal of revolutionary unions became less and less apparent. Today, unions in general struggle to retain their relevance in many nations, integrated entirely into helping manage the capital-labour dynamic.

Contemporary Syndicalism and Class Composition

“We can, today, no more anticipate the concrete situation of a working class takeover – a revolution – than did the Spanish anarchists at their somewhat idyllic May 1936 congress.”

Loren Goldner – Revolution, Defeat and Theoretical Underdevelopment

Though syndicalism was not entirely destroyed, it never regained its once significant influence. The political and material realities are far divorced from the conditions that gave birth to syndicalism as a mass movement.

Following the Second World War the working class found itself on the front foot, with a degree of unity between unions and industry that reflected a tendency towards state-planning

of the economy. When social revolt erupted over numerous issues during the 60s and 70s, some union movements were challenged by their own workers for their integration with state power.

The period of industrial co-operation ended with the advent of neo-liberalism, and the shifting of capitalist production from Europe and America to Asia and Africa began to undermine unionism in the former nations. Since the 70s global production and constant capital has been constantly moved across national boundaries to find cheaper labour in the search to restore profitability. A far cry from the material basis of the internationalism of the early 20th century, when workers moved across boundaries to find employment and created a radical international network of industrial struggle. Today borders are jealously guarded and rhetoric against immigrants is used to undermine working class solidarity.⁷

The recomposition of the class and production has been coupled with increasing restrictions on labour organisation either through legal methods, the coercion of brute force, or state support for 'yellow' or collaborative unionism. Though unions are targeted for repression, their distance from everyday struggle, bureaucratisation of leadership and the lack of grassroots democracy means even many workers do not see unions as friends of their material interests.

Which leaves revolutionaries in a unique predicament. On the one hand we face the mammoth task of rebuilding working class power in a way that reflects the early tasks of the workers movement. This is in the face of congruent social crises, where climate change alone presents a limited time frame to avoid catastrophic results. But the material conditions we face are completely unlike those of the past. Contemporary anarcho-syndicalists like Solidarity Federation in the United Kingdom have attempted to reflect on this new reality in texts like their book 'Fighting for Ourselves'. However their arguments remain less convincing than the efforts of French syndicalists such as the Alliance Syndicaliste Revolutionnaire et Anarcho-syndicaliste (ASRAS) to modernise syndicalist strategy in the 70s.

Anarcho-syndicalism began from the right positions; the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves, the class war is the central dynamic of society, and seizing the means of production is fundamental to social reconstruction. But the collapsing of the political and economic into singular organisations, especially small propaganda groups proclaiming they are unions is unlikely to be the answer. The solutions to today's tasks will require complicated answers and necessarily require a degree of both theoretical and practical rupture with the dead movements of the past.

On the 100th anniversary of the International Workers Association, we can proclaim that the legacy of anarcho-syndicalism is an inspiration in the class struggle, but it is not the answer.

⁷ Not to suggest that similar rhetoric was not used in the past, only that the material reality around borders and production has changed.

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