

# **THE UNION MAKES US STRONG?**

**SYNDICALISM: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**



**Anarchist Communist Federation (ACF)**



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The *ACF* has never, despite what some of our critics may have suggested, made our criticisms of syndicalism, including its anarcho variety, a “distinguishing characteristic” (see *Black Flag* Issue 211) of our politics. In a world-wide ‘labour movement’ dominated by social democratic ideas and practice and thoroughly integrated into capitalism, our focus of attack has not been on the relatively tiny syndicalist and ‘alternative’ union structures which exist. Rather, our arguments have been against trade unionism and for working class self-organised struggle.

However, anarcho-syndicalism remains the majority current within class struggle anarchism and is, despite various splits and feuds within its international organisations, in a state of resurgence. Now, therefore, is a good time to present a critical analysis of the theory and practice of syndicalism.

## **Theory and practice**

Rather than separate theory and practice we will attempt to show how the behaviour of various syndicalist movements has been informed by its theoretical foundations and the political influences acting upon it. Syndicalism has been accused of 'apoliticism' and, indeed, a certain anti-politicism has been a central feature of many syndicalist organisations. This is only half the story, however, and fails to take into consideration the fact that syndicalism has come under the influence of many political currents, not least anarchism, and that it should not be forgotten that these have included reformist socialism (particularly the French CGT), nationalism (notably the Italian UIL) and even monarchism (monarcho-syndicalism in turn of the century France)!

## **Origins**

First we must look at the origins of syndicalism. Syndi-

calism is simply the French word for “unionism”. It was the mass syndicat (or union) in France, the Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT), founded in 1895, which gave “syndicalism” the meaning it has today. The CGT was militant, de-centralised, initially sceptical of parliamentary participation and considered the workplace as the front-line of the class war. When such tactics developed in other countries, militants consciously used the term syndicalism to differentiate themselves from the openly reformist, social democratic Trade Unions. Syndicalist unions began to become a significant factor in the decade before the First World War, as both a reflection of the ongoing class struggle and as the result of the efforts of consciously ‘political’ minorities critical of ‘socialist’ parliamentarism. The early syndicalist movement was far from homogenous, politically or organisationally. In many countries the syndicalist movement developed through deliberate attempts to organise those workers who

had been ignored by the established social democratic unions, particularly the unskilled and immigrant workforces (the experience of the Industrial Workers of the World is a good example of this), whilst in other countries, syndicalist unions were craft or trade based and organised highly skilled artisans (e.g. the CGT in France).

## **Political minorities**

Amongst the political minorities attracted to the syndicalist method were the anarchists. Indeed, anarchists were amongst the earliest syndicalist organisers in many countries, notably in France, Spain and Argentina. The syndicalist movement was certainly attractive to many anarchists who, having seen their influence wane following the period of “propaganda by the deed” (the 1890s), saw in syndicalism’s combativity and distrust of parliamentary methods a ‘natural’ home for their politics. In some countries syndicalist unions were led by ideological anarchists and every-



where anarchist militants joined syndicalist organisations. Some anarchists, however, were uneasy about the identification of anarchism with unionism. Others questioned the syndicalist method itself. In Spain, where anarchism was to become closely identified with the syndicalist *Confederacion Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT), often furious polemics ensued throughout the 1890s and 1910s between those anarchists, such as the anarchist communists grouped around the *Tierra y Libertad* journal, who felt the syndicalist methods were inherently reformist and a step backwards and those who believed that syndicalism offered anarchism a vehicle for reaching the masses.

Amongst the clearest critics of the identification of anarchism with syndicalism was the Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta. In 1907, when syndicalism was drawing ever larger numbers of workers, including anarchist workers, to its ranks, Malatesta argued that, “*Syndicalism, in spite of the declarations of its most ar-*

*dent partisans, contains, by the very nature of its constitution, all the elements of degeneration which have corrupted the workers' movement in the past. In fact, being a movement which proposes to defend the present interests of the workers, it must necessarily adapt itself to the living conditions of the present” (Les Temps Nouveaux, 1907).*



Other anarchist militants held strong reservations about the syndicalist method. The French anarchist metalworker Benoit Liothier expressed the fear, held by many, that syndicalism would tend to economism and therefore to reformism. *“Syndicalism cannot be revolutionary if it cannot be political...whether we like it or not the economic struggle is tied to the political struggle.”* (Archives Departmentales de la Loire, 1914). Like many anarchists of his generation, however, Liothier eventually became a militant of the CGT.

That anarchists identified with syndicalism and were often at the forefront of syndicalist organisation is of little surprise. Emergent syndicalism appeared to offer tactics which related libertarian, direct-action orientated ideas to the every day struggle of the workers. Anarchist workers wanted to be where the conflict with the bosses (and, therefore, the state) was at its most acute and for anarchists to have dismissed syndicalism at this historical point would undoubtedly ha-

ve marginalised them further. For many anarchists the solution to any perceived problems within syndicalism could be solved by encouraging its tendency towards anti-politicism and its combative spirit. This meant a total engagement with syndicalist unionism and the birth of anarcho-syndicalism. Many of these people were dismissive of the idea of creating separate anarchist organisations and saw in the union the means and the end of the anarchist revolution.

Against this ‘fusion’ some anarchists argued for the maintenance of separate anarchist organisations which would be active both inside and outside the unions. Malatesta, amongst others, advocated such a tactic, as did the anarchists who became known as “Platformists” during the 1920s. A fear, which was well founded, was that anarcho-syndicalism would become dominated by the syndicalist part of the equation to the detriment of a clear revolutionary perspective which related to all aspects of working class life, not

just the factory or workshop.

## **Anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalism**

The relationship between the anarcho-syndicalists and the 'revolutionary' syndicalists varied from country to country. Many 'revolutionary' syndicalists rejected even the 'anti-political' politics of the anarchists and saw in syndicalism the form and the content of revolution. They created a syndicalist ideology, at the pinnacle of which was the union organised General Strike which would usher in the new society. For some syndicalists the General Strike assumed an almost mythical significance and replaced the idea of violent revolution, which was considered unrealistic. For 'revolutionary' syndicalist ideologues the union replaced the party and was identified with the class as a whole. A desire to organise all workers, regardless of political or religious belief, led to 'revolutionary' syndicalists attempting to marginalise anarcho-syndicalists in order to appeal to workers who actually remained tied to social

democracy.

Whilst this anti-politicism led many of the ‘revolutionary’ syndicalists to a pronounced anti-statism, it did not stop others from entering into alliances with ‘revolutionary’ parties and politicians. Although politics were unwelcome in the syndical organisation itself this did not mean that ‘revolutionary’ syndicalism was not involved in politics.

Whilst the Italian ‘revolutionary’ syndicalists flirting with extreme nationalism from 1914 onwards, demanding that Italy join the imperialist bloodbath (a demand totally opposed, to their great credit, by the anarcho-syndicalists of the Union Sindicale Italiana) is probably the most graphic example of syndicalist political alliances, many others existed.

In Norway the pre-war ‘Revolutionary’ syndicalist “fagopposisjon” (union opposition), for example, was closely identified with the left wing of social democra-

cy whilst in the United States the industrial unionist (the North American equivalent of syndicalist) *Industrial Workers of the World* were for the first three years of their existence (1905–1908) riven with open political rivalry between the *Socialist Party of America* and the *Socialist Labour Party*. In Ireland the syndicalistic *Irish Transport and General Workers Union* was led by people who had been or still were active members of socialist parties and Irish syndicalism, despite its militancy, rarely exhibited the anti-statism and anti-party sentiment of other syndicalist movements.

Often ‘revolutionary’ syndicalists appeared to be simply impatient with the stodgy Second International version of socialism that dominated the Left and were not against ‘revolutionary parties’ per se. The mass defection of ‘revolutionary’ syndicalists to Bolshevism in the period immediately following the Russian Revolution bears witness to this. Collaboration with the bourgeoisie was not confined to the nominally apoliti-

cal 'revolutionary' wing of syndicalism, however. An interesting example of anarcho-syndicalism being found on the wrong side of the class barricade, twenty years before the infamous CNT involvement in the Spanish government, is the experience of Mexico.

## **The Mexican Revolution – the Casa del Obrero Mundial**

During the first twenty years of the 20th century Mexico was engulfed in revolutionary turmoil. Various 'constitutionalist' (i.e. democratic) capitalist factions vied for power whilst attempting to overthrow the dictatorship of General Porfirio Diaz . Meanwhile the Agrarian (landless peasant) movement of Emiliano Zapata and the emerging urban working class attempted to defend their own interests amidst the chaos. The Agrarians engaged in guerrilla activity against the various 'revolutionary' governments with the aim of reclaiming and defending the land of the indigenous



population from the landowners. During the years 1906 to 1915 the *Partido Liberal Mexicano* (P.L.M.) played a leading in role in attempting to bring together Agrarian and proletarian revolt. Beginning from an advanced left liberal-democratic position the P.L.M., under the influence of the Magon brothers, developed into an anarchist communist organisation with its own guerrilla units involved in the expropriation of land in the Baja California region and leading strikes in Veracruz, amongst other areas. The P.L.M. called for “*Tierra y Libertad*” (Land and Freedom), the immediate expropriation of the landlords and bosses and the abolition of the state.

In 1912 the anarcho-syndicalist Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker) was formed and rapidly attracted the urban workers of Mexico City to its ranks. Yet, within three years the anarcho-syndicalists were organising Red Battalions to fight in defence of the Mexican state! Although the Casa emerged with a

typical anti-politicism and a desire to concentrate on economic struggle several factors led it to give support to one bourgeois faction, the Constitutionalist forces of Venustiano Carranza, against the Agrarians and their P.L.M. allies. Firstly, the anarcho-syndicalists viewed the industrial proletariat as the organised vanguard of the social revolution, in spite of the fact that they constituted a tiny minority of the Mexican working population. This vanguard, they argued, had to be developed and expanded as rapidly as possible and the anarcho-syndicalists sought what they hoped would be the best conditions for this. Secondly, the anarcho-syndicalists considered the Agrarian movement as an essentially reactionary one, committed to turning back the clock, and rejecting the 'advances' in technology and understanding that capitalism had brought. They pointed to the Zapatista's "religiosity" and general 'backwardness' as proof of their danger to the 'advanced' sections of the working class. Finally, and most

importantly, the anarcho-syndicalists believed that the progressive, democratic bourgeois state which was offering the Casa freedom to organise (and in fact was actually encouraging the Casa to organise!) should be defended against 'reaction', Agrarianist or anti-constitutionalist.

After the anarcho-syndicalist Red Battalions had played their part in 'saving' the Mexican state, the inevitable happened.

In the spring of 1916 the Constitutionalist government turned on the Casa, disbanded the Red Battalions and forcibly closed down the syndicates following the second of two General Strikes that year. The failure of the anarcho-syndicalists to recognise the class nature of the state, despite all their verbal anti-statism, had led them to take sides against genuinely revolutionary movements.

## **Bolshevisation and “the end of the mass syndicalism”**

Without doubt the high-point of syndicalism was the period between (roughly) 1895 and 1914. In this period the only current, in the workers movement on an international level, to offer an alternative to mainstream social democracy was syndicalism. It is of course possible to argue that much of syndicalism was in fact social democratic in content if not in form.

However, despite Leninist claims to the contrary, this was far from the end of the story and the revolutionary wave which engulfed the world following the 1917 Russian Revolution also saw a ‘revival’ of syndicalism following the four years of world war. Syndicalism now, however, had two new rivals, Bolshevism and council or left communism.

Bolshevism’s triumph in Russia sent shock waves throughout the workers movement. Social Democratic

parties everywhere developed would-be Bolshevik factions. These factions sooner or later split from the old parties and formed *Communist Parties* modelled on the Russian example. Many of the very earliest Communist Parties, however, emerged from the syndicalist, anarcho-syndicalist and anarchist movements. The *CGT* in France developed a powerful communist-syndicalist faction; the *IWW* in the United States was wracked by in-fighting between dyed-in-the-wool industrial unionists and budding Bolsheviks; many of Britain's foremost pre-war syndicalists such as Tom Mann quickly gravitated towards the embryonic Communist Party. Impressed by the dynamism of Bolshevism and its ostensible break with social democracy, former syndicalists constituted the early rank and file of such parties everywhere. Amongst anarchists also, Bolshevism possessed a magnet-like quality, not least because it was associated with the Soviets, the council organisations which seemed to offer an alternative to

state organisation.

## **The Workers Councils**

When news came through that everything in the Socialist Fatherland was not rosy and as Bolshevism attempted to create both a Third International of political parties and a Red Trade Union International under their strict control, dissension began to emerge. Many of the earliest critics of Moscow were not syndicalists however but Marxists previously involved with socialist political parties. These militants began to question the Trade Union and Parliamentary policy of the Bolsheviks and their closest impersonators. Groups such as the *Workers Socialist Federation* in Britain, the *Communist Workers Party of Germany* and similar 'left' communists (meaning 'left' of the Third International) saw in the experience of the revolutionary workers councils (or Soviets) in Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1919 the form, as they saw it, that the new struggles would take. After coming out against the Bolsheviks

and attempting to create their own International in 1921 (the original 4th International!) this political current became known as council communism. Council communist organisations only took anything approaching mass form in Germany although they also existed in countries such as Holland, France, Belgium and Britain.

At the same time the international syndicalist movement began to re-organise itself through the creation of the I.W.A. (*International Working Mens' Association*). In 1922 the syndicalist movement could still claim large unions such as the *Unione Sindicale Italiana* (500,000 members), the *Confederacao Geral do Trabalho in Portugal* (150,000) and the *Freie Arbeiter Union in Germany* (120,000). They were joined by the Spanish *Conferacion Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT) in 1923. By 1923, however, the Leninist/Stalinist ice-age was beginning and between that and the emergence of fascism, syndicalism was facing a difficult period, to

say the least. Within 10 years the only mass syndicalist union left was the *CNT*. The others were now reduced to groups of militants scattered in exile or living in a semi-underground condition. By 1936 all that was left were small propaganda groups in various countries, a few minority unions and the 2 million strong *CNT* about to play a historic role in the Spanish Civil War and Revolution.

## **The Spanish Revolution - The End of Anarchism?**

BY 1936 BOTH the anarchist and syndicalist movements found themselves, if not either in exile or underground, then as minority organisations. Victims of the twin assault of the capitalist state and Bolshevism, the *Industrial Workers of the World* had been reduced to a shadow of their former strength; the *International Working Men's Association's* largest affiliates, with the exception of the Spanish *CNT*, had been effectively



smashed by Fascism, marginalised or had retreated into open reformism (for example the *Swedish Workers Central organisation*).

The specific anarchist organisations still operating found their voices increasingly drowned out by the hollow noise of Stalinism and their marginalisation reflected the general political defeat of the working class during the inter-war years. So, when the Spanish Civil War and Revolution broke out in July 1936 all the hopes of libertarian revolutionaries became focused upon events in Spain and the actions taken by the Spanish working class.

The situation in Spain was exceptional in that organised Stalinism was marginal and exercised little influence amongst the working class up until 1936. Rather, anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists constituted the only credible alternative to the social democrats of the *Partido Socialista Obrero*. The PSO could combine revolutionary rhetoric with a wholly reformist and con-

stitutionalist practice and the division in Spanish working class politics could broadly be drawn as being between revolutionary libertarianism (the anarchists and the *CNT*) and reformist authoritarianism (the *PSO* and the *Union General de Trabadores*). When the reactionary military, led by General Franco, rose against the bourgeois republic on July 19th, 1936, the response of the government was inaction whilst the workers of the *CNT* were amongst the first to employ armed resistance.

In many important centres and in the countryside where the attempted coup had been defeated or the military had remained loyal to the Republic, the libertarian workers movement, which almost everywhere had taken the most important initiatives, was the master of the situation. The rank and file of the *CNT* and others, inspired by the potential for liberation, began to put a form of collectivisation of the factories and land into practice, which, given the cir-

cumstances, could only fall short of libertarian communism, but showed the creative and organisational potential of the working class.

However, by the end of the year representatives of the *CNT* had taken positions in the Republican Government and had effectively called off the class war in favour of 'anti-fascist unity' for the sake of victory in the war.

The formerly minuscule *Spanish Communist Party* had become a major governmental player, the collectives and the workers militia organisations began to come under attack and the revolution looked like being strangled at birth.

The response of those who wished to carry on with the revolution was the 'May Days' insurrection in Barcelona in 1937, itself the product of another provocation, this time by Stalinists, against *CNT* workers at the Telephone Exchange. Workers once again fought

for control of the streets only this time they found themselves undermined by the leadership of the *CNT*.

## **The Failure of the Anarchists**

The actions of the *CNT* in joining the Government, of betraying the revolution, are often flung in the face of anarchists by Leninists (who themselves wouldn't hesitate to join any government given half a chance). Usually this is given as evidence of the 'End of Anarchism' as a revolutionary theory/movement. Certainly, the Spanish experience does signify the end of a certain type of anarchism. But the blame for the class collaboration and betrayal really does not simply lie at the door of the *CNT*. After all, despite the union's long-standing relationship with anarchism, it remained a union whose structures had developed an autonomy of their own and a bureaucracy which had a life of its own, regardless of its democratic nature. The unions susceptibility to reformism and incorporation had been exposed during the 1920s when a tendency eme-

rged which opposed the influence of anarchism within the union. In 1931 this had resulted in a split, creating the moderate anarcho-syndicalist 'opposition unions'. Eventually, some of these 'moderate elements' formed a parliamentarist, reformist *Syndicalist Party*.

## **The FAI**

Partially In opposition to this tendency, and the earlier attempts during the 20s by Leninists to 'bolshevize' the union, the Spanish anarchists founded a specific anarchist organisation, the *Federacion Anarquista Iberica*, in 1927. The *FAI* was to work mainly inside the *CNT*, to reinforce its libertarian orientation, but existed as an organisation in its own right, with its own press and its own organisational culture. The *FAI* viewed the *CNT* as the main means towards the libertarian communist revolution and *Faistas* were commonly the most ardent *CNT* militants. By 1936 the *CNT* and *FAI* were, along with the *Libertarian Youth*, the component parts of what was collectively known as the libertarian

movement. The vast majority of the *FAI* defended the entry of the *CNT* into government, indeed, ‘anarchist’ Minister of Justice, Garcia Oliver was himself regarded as a particularly hard-line faista. Comparatively few anarchists rejected such collaboration and even fewer posed an alternative.



The most coherent of these were the group known as the *Friends of Durruti*, militants of both the *CNT* and *FAI*, who realised that the involvement of ‘anarchists’ in government had been an inexcusable mistake and that the revolution had in fact been



effectively curtailed by the forces which many thought would lead it. In their words; “*Democracy defeated the Spanish People, not Fascism*”. (see Stormy Petrel pamphlet Towards a Fresh Revolution’ for further writings by and about the Friends of Durruti).

We can conclude, with the *Friends of Durruti*, that apolitical anarchism failed in Spain, that is the belief that the State and political power can be ignored / circumnavigated rather than smashed and replaced with the power of the working class.

## World War 2 and After

The defeat of the Spanish revolution and the crushing of the *CNT* under the Franco dictatorship was closely followed by the Second World War and temporary eclipse of anarcho and revolutionary syndicalism. The depth of defeat felt by libertarian revolutionaries during this period was almost unfathomable. It led some leading anarcho-syndicalists such as Rudolf Rocker, into supporting the allies against Nazi Germany whilst many Spanish anarchists in exile actually fought for the allied armies in the, somewhat naive, hope that with the defeat of Italy and Germany, 'Fascist' Spain would be 'liberated'. Other anarcho-syndicalist militants conducted a fearless guerrilla campaign against the Franco regime, many paying with their lives. But, following the war, the syndicalist movement was more marginalised than ever. A social democratic consensus was taking shape in the Western World and the Cold War was at its height. Syndicalist and anarchist groups re-



mained tiny throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, mainly 'holders of the sacred flame' with only occasional impact within the class struggle. Things began to change with the upsurge in class struggle in Europe towards the end of the 1960s, particularly the events in France in 1968 and later in Italy. Slowly, the syndicalist organisations began to re-emerge as workers began showing an interest in alternatives to Stalinism and social democratic stodge. The death of Franco in 1976 and the 'democratisation' of Spain saw the accelerated development of the formerly illegal *CNT*. The *USI* was relaunched in Italy and towards the end of the 1970s the *I.W.A.* once more became a functioning International, albeit one mainly composed of propaganda groups.

## **Syndicalism Today**

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the so-called 'socialist' countries and the death-crisis of organised Stalinism, anarchist ideas and forms of organisation

have experienced a marked growth, not least in Eastern Europe where often the anarchists are the only 'left' current of any size. In Africa, the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, areas where there has been little previous libertarian tradition, anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist movements are emerging.

The revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalist current has seen the most rapid growth and even the *Industrial Workers of the World* are (modestly) expanding once again. This development is obviously welcome, as it reflects a re-awakening of revolutionary potential amongst the working class, but it is not without its problems. The question to be asked is "Is the syndicalist method the way forward?". Amongst the anarchists who have embraced syndicalism there are critical voices and some feel the need to develop new ways of organising and thinking. Some have realised the need to connect with other working class movements away from the existing structures, for example the activities

of the *USI* in the *COBAS* (committees of the base) in Italy. Some have seen a need to 'adapt' syndicalism to community and interest organisation. Others, however, have tended to defend a very traditional, workerist, vision of 'building the (anarcho) syndicalist union' as the answer to everything and reject criticism of the syndicalist method as 'Marxist' or anti-organisational.

## **Libertarian communist perspectives on anarcho-syndicalism and workers struggle organisations**

Criticism of syndicalist methods from anarchists, starting with Malatesta, has not been necessarily due to any anti-organisational tendency or sympathy with 'Marxism'. In Europe, the militants of the *Dielo Truda* group of Russian anarchists in exile began to question the identification of anarchism with syndicalism and the attitude towards syndicalism which libertarians

had historically taken. Their *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists* (1926) described “revolutionary syndicalism” as “only one of the forms of revolutionary class struggle” which, of itself contains no “determining theory”. They suggested that anarcho-syndicalism had failed to fully “anarchise” unionism and that a specific anarchist organisation was needed to do this. They also argued that such a specific anarchist organisation should attempt to “exercise theoretical influence on all trade unions” since “...if trade unionism does not find in anarchist theory a support in opportune times it will turn, whether we like it or not, to the ideology of a political statist party.” To a great extent the latter claim can be seen to be true when the evolution of unions such as the French CGT, or the exodus of syndicalist militants into Bolshevik parties, is taken into consideration.

The *Organisational Platform* did not however have a great deal to say about the function of syndicalism or

trade unionism for that matter. The experience of the council movement in Germany and the various ideas that came out of it appear to have passed them by.

Simultaneously, the Japanese anarchist communist theoretician Hatta Shuzo was arguing that syndicalism, being a reflection of the structure of industrial capitalism, ran the risk of replicating hierarchical social relations, particularly through a continued division of labour.

He argued that, because syndicalists called for the mines to be controlled by the miners, the steelworks to be controlled by the steelworkers etc. this division might end in the recreation of the state as arbiter between conflicting interests. As he put it: *“In a society which is based on the division of labour, those engaged in vital production (since it forms the basis of production) would have more power over the machinery of co-ordination than those engaged in other lines of production. There would therefore be a real danger of*

*the appearance of classes.*” (Collected Works: Anarchist Communism, Tokyo 1983)

The anarchist communists in Japan tended to favour a return to the land following a successful revolution, with industrial workers bringing their skills and technology back to their villages. In a predominantly rural society in an historical period where factory workers were generally still connected, through family, to the land, this perspective may have made some sense. Primitivists take note.

## **Working class self-organisation and permanent economic organisations**

Most (but, unfortunately, by no means all) anarcho-syndicalists would agree with the *ACF* that the existing Trade Unions are not vehicles for social revolution. Some may also agree that permanent economic organisations (i.e. unions) have a tendency to become integrated into the mechanisms of exploitation, throu-

gh their role as mediators or representatives, and to develop bureaucratic structures and modes of operation. However, they would argue that, because the anarcho-syndicalist union is simultaneously an economic and an 'ideological' organisation it is resistant to co-option and bureaucratisation.

The 'conscious' anarchists within the anarcho-syndicalist union are seen as the safeguard against the organisation "selling-out" and the non-hierarchical structure safeguards against a division between the rank and file and its delegates, preventing the development of a strata with separate interests from the rest of the membership.

Although this idea of the 'conscious' anarchist minority in the union has been common in the syndicalist movement it has also been rejected by many 'pure' syndicalists.



## Degeneration

However, we would argue that all unions, regardless of their initial political orientation (and that would include anarcho-communist) have a tendency to become inexorably dragged into a mediating role and to eventually become a break on autonomous class struggle. This integration into capitalism is indeed usu-



ally fought tooth and nail by revolutionary militants, often with temporary success. We believe that the historical experience of the workers movement bears this out.

How does this 'degeneration' happen? For one, anarcho-syndicalist unions, like all other unions, have to be able to get 'better deals' for workers in the here and now, otherwise they remain small, essentially political organisations. Whilst the anarcho-syndicalist union remains small and, importantly, unrecognised by the bosses, organising the most militant, class-conscious workers it can engage in 'wildcat' actions. It maintains a 'revolutionary spirit'. During periods of increased class struggle (which its activities may have contributed to) the union grows. If it can successfully lead strikes, occupations etc. to victory it will attract more members. It is faced with the position of having forced the bosses/management to recognise it, to mediate with it. If at this point the anarcho-syndicalist union

doesn't negotiate then it loses the confidence of its broader membership and so is forced to either become the recognised union body or back out of the situation. Since workers have to, at some point this side of the revolution, negotiate with their bosses, it is not surprising that anarcho-syndicalists take the former option. Once the period of intense struggle is over the anarcho-syndicalist union is faced with a choice of carrying out all the mundane, routine jobs that any other union has to, or of returning to being a marginal force in the workplace, leaving the way open to the reformist unions. If it chooses the latter it is no longer in fact a union but a (more or less) revolutionary group within the workplace. It can be said that the anarcho-syndicalist union remains revolutionary (i.e. a dynamic force in the class struggle) in as much as it doesn't act like a union.

This process is graphically exhibited in the development of the Dockworkers Co-ordination in Spain, the

Coordinadora, which emerged in the 1970s. Although this organisation was not specifically anarcho-syndicalist (or indeed syndicalist at all), it was based on an anti-bureaucratic, anti-party political, class based and highly 'democratic' structure which involved members of the *CNT*. Born in the struggles in the ports and in the wider Spanish working class, the Coordinadora, organising through mass assemblies, appeared to be an example of a permanent 'union' organisation which would not succumb to bureaucratisation, routinism and class-collaboration. For years the Coordinadora was involved in struggles which maintained its combative momentum and won the admiration of libertarian revolutionaries. With the slow wind-down of those struggles the organisation, however, became less and less dynamic and more and more like a traditional Trade Union, despite the heroic efforts of the anti-capitalist militants involved in it. The coordinadora is a perfect example of how bureaucracy is a

natural by-product of economic organisations in periods of 'defeat'.

## **The role of revolutionaries**

So, if we reject the idea of building 'alternative', syndicalist union structures, what does the *ACF* advocate when it comes to workplace organisation? In a sense this question is answered by the experience of the working class in struggle. In times of upheaval, industrial or communal, the working class has developed organisational forms with which to fight for its interests. The most obvious examples of this are the Soviets of the Russian revolution, the Councils of the German and Italian revolutions, the councils of the Hungarian revolution, the action committees in France in 1968, but there are countless others. The coordinating committees of French workers during the 1980s and 90s, the *COBAS* in Italy in the same period, strike committees amongst the Donbas miners in the Ukraine etc. These 'spontaneous' organisations of the wor-

king class can also become bureaucratized/degenerate (think of the fate of the Soviets in the 'Soviet' Union!) but, typically, they dissolve when the task they were created for is over.

## **Spontaneism**

Unlike some anarchists and 'councillists', who tend towards 'spontaneism' and the rejection of any organisation, we do see the need for organised intervention, in the workplace and community, by revolutionaries. In Britain, for example, the tactic by anarcho-syndicalists (Solidarity Federation) to set-up networks of militants in various industries is one we would support. Rather than being the foundation for an eventual 'general' union, however, we would see such co-ordinations as a means to building revolutionary workplace groups linking with militants locally and beyond. Such groups would produce propaganda, organise resistance groups, intervene in struggles and argue for self-organisation at all times. When struggles

break out these networks would co-ordinate action and promote the creation of strike and struggle committees outside of union control. When struggles end, these groups maintain an organised presence, bringing together militants in order to build for further struggles. Such groups would be linked, not by a union-type structure but organically with both the revolutionary organisation and the local libertarian movement. Increasing numbers of working class militants are looking for alternatives. Syndicalism appears as a 'ready-made' alternative to the Trade Unions.

## **Conclusion**

As we stated in Part 1, anarcho-syndicalism is in a state of resurgence on a world scale. With the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' (ie state capitalism in Unions and their Social Democratic/Leninist defenders. What our article has wished to do is promote a critical debate on whether the syndicalist (including anarcho-syndicalist) model is the way forward in the struggle.

We believe that it is not and that libertarians must give serious thought to the whole question of workplace organisation and beyond. We welcome further discussion in this area.

**source:**

**<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/anarchist-federation-the-union-makes-us-strong>**

**Déserteurs de tous les pays,  
unissez vous !**

**Дезертиры всех стран,  
соединяйтесь!**

**Дезертири всіх країн,  
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