

Fighting for ourselves

Anarcho-syndicalism and the Class Struggle

Solidarity Federation

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“Against the offensive of capital and politicians of all hues, all the revolutionary workers of the world must build a real International Association of Workers, in which, each member will know that the emancipation of the working class will only be possible when the workers themselves, in their capacities as producers, manage to prepare themselves in their economic organisations to take possession of the land and the factories and enable themselves to administer them jointly, in such a way that they will be able to continue production and social life.”

— Statutes of the International Workers Association (IWA-AIT)¹

“One must try to increase as much as possible the theoretical content of all our activities, but without the ‘dry and shrivelled doctrinalism’ which could destroy in part the great constructive action which our comrades are carrying forward in the relentless fight between the haves and the have nots. Our people stand for action on the march. It is while going forward that we overtake. Don’t hold them back, even to teach them ‘the most beautiful theories’...”

— Francisco Ascaso²

“The spirit of anarcho-syndicalism (...) is characterised by independence of action around a basic set of core principles; centred on freedom and solidarity. Anarcho-syndicalism has grown and developed through people taking action, having experiences, and learning from them (...) the idea is to contribute to new and more effective action, from which we can collectively bring about a better society more quickly. That is the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism.”

— Self Education Collective³

¹ IWA statutes, see: www.iwa-ait.org

² Quoted in Abel Paz, Durruti – the people armed.

³ Unit 24 of SelfEd – SolFed’s self-education course on anarcho-syndicalism. See: www.selfed.org.uk

Introduction

As we write this in 2012, capitalism is experiencing one of its periodic crises. In Britain, the depression is now longer than the so called Great Depression of the 1930s. The state is seizing the opportunity to tear up past working class gains across the board, from healthcare provision and reproductive rights, to unemployment, disability welfare and access to higher education, from job security to wages. This has provoked brief moments of intense, defensive struggles. In the winter of 2010 students took to the streets across the country against a tripling of tuition fees to £9,000 per year. The movement erupted in November with the trashing of the ruling Conservative Party HQ at Millbank, as thousands broke away from the official National Union of Students march. That spirit continued throughout the following few months, with rowdy demonstrations across the country. The state response was brutal, with riot police suppressing the protests and ‘kettling’ thousands for hours in freezing conditions. The rioting in central London was, at the time, the worst in a generation. But more was to come.

Meanwhile, the public sector unions slowly moved into action, calling a series of one day strikes. Unity lasted for just two days of action before unions started dropping out and signing deals with the government, and the tangible feeling of power and possibility has been steadily demobilised into one of inevitable defeat as workers are divided by those supposed to represent their interests.

In August 2011, riots once again broke out across the country. This time, they followed the police shooting, and subsequent cover up, of an unarmed man in Tottenham, north London. Hatred of the police proved a common bond. Rival gangs declared truces and over four days rioting and looting spread first across the capital, and then across the country. Rioters voiced anger at police brutality and harassment, political corruption and the rich, only for the government, media and much of the left to dismiss them as apolitical. The riots died down, but much of the underlying tension remains.

So then, we are living in times of unprecedented attacks on our living conditions on all fronts, of rising social tension and sometimes violent eruptions of class conflict. And yet if anything, the surprise is not that there have been riots and the odd strike, but that there have been so few. How are we to make sense of this? How are we to fight back, to take the initiative? Against this society, what do we want to put in its place? The 20th century discredited state socialism, and rightly so. But with it, a whole history of international class struggle, of revolutions and counter revolutions, victories and defeats, spontaneous uprisings and vast workers’ organisations has been eclipsed too. This pamphlet aims to recover some of that lost history, in order to set out a revolutionary strategy for the present conditions. We focus on the forgotten side of the historic workers’ movement, not in search of blueprints but inspiration. We draw that inspiration from those tendencies which focussed not on capturing state power through elections or insurrection in order to impose ‘socialism’ from above, but which took seriously the idea that ‘the emancipation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves’, posing working class direct action against the double yoke of capital and the state.

We focus on anarcho-syndicalism, the tradition we come from, but touch on numerous other lesser known radical currents along the way. We certainly don’t think we have all the answers, but we do think we’re at least asking the right kind of questions. How can we organise ourselves to both defend and advance our conditions? How can we oppose the attacks of both capital and the state, when dominant liberal and leftist approaches see the state as the protector of our ‘rights’ and push for participation in the parliamentary process? What kind of society are we fighting for, if not one ruled by the impersonal forces of capital and the violence and hierarchy of the state?

We see revolutionary theory as an aid to organising workers struggle and not, as is so often the case, as a means of dominating and controlling it, or of producing dense and enigmatic tomes to establish

one's credentials as a 'thinker'. As capitalism is dynamic so must be the methods we use as workers to fight it. It is only through our collective immersion in day-to-day struggles that we can adapt and change tactics to meet changing conditions. And as our tactics change and develop so must our ideas. Doing and thinking are but moments of the same process of organisation. It is through our involvement in our daily struggles that, as an anarcho-syndicalist union initiative, we are able to ensure that revolutionary theory keeps pace with practical realities and remains relevant to the workers' movement and to our everyday lives.

'Anarcho-syndicalism' is a term which trips awkwardly off the English speaking tongue, and tends to elicit either bafflement, or images of burly working men in some 19th century factory. In French, the term *syndicat*, in Spanish, *sindicato*, in Italian, *sindacato*, simply means 'union', an association of workers without any further connotations, which can be modified by adjectives, such as 'anarcho', much as we use adjectives to modify the word union in English – trade union, craft union, industrial union and so on. Perhaps a better translation would be 'anarcho-unionism'. But again, in the context of the United Kingdom, 'unionist' has British nationalist connotations completely at odds with the working class internationalism of the anarcho-syndicalist tradition. So we stick with the term, and unless otherwise specified we will use it interchangeably with 'revolutionary unionism' throughout this pamphlet (there are other advocates of revolutionary unions which we will also encounter along the way).

This pamphlet aims to shed light on both the forms and content of anarcho-syndicalist theory and practice, and in the process to dispel some of the more common myths and misapprehensions. It will explore how anarcho-syndicalist ideas have differed and adapted to meet changing conditions; outline the relationship with other traditions and anarcho-syndicalist criticisms of them. We will then bring things up to date with analysis of the post-WWII world and the conditions for organising today. We will set out our view as an organisation of what a new revolutionary unionism would look like, and outline practical steps and strategies to make it a reality. With the continued defeats workers are experiencing through the trade unions, a revolutionary alternative is needed more than ever. Indeed, we should not be asking the question 'how can a union be anti-capitalist and anti-state?', but rather, how can any union that is not so advance our class interests?, when those interests are inimical to those of capital and state.

The structure of the pamphlet is as follows: Chapter 1 introduces the mainstream workers' movement, specifically trade unions and workers' parties, in both their Marxist/Leninist and Labour Party forms. While these have their origins in the 19th century, they continue to dominate the workers' movement (such as it is) today. Therefore the analysis is not purely historical, but continues up to the present day. Chapter 2 then explores the radical currents in the 20th century workers' movement, long forgotten to most but still a point of reference for many discontented with the limits of the mainstream. This section explores council communism, a dissident Marxist tradition that still forms an important point of reference for many of those critical of the existing trade unions, as well as Marxists breaking with party politics. It also looks at both anarchist and syndicalist traditions, providing the context for Chapter 3.

With the scene then set, Chapter 3 will introduce anarcho-syndicalism as a fusion of the anarchist and syndicalist currents. We will see how this fusion took different forms in different places in response to different conditions, and explore some of the internal debates within the movement which remain relevant to our time. We will also look at the Spanish Revolution of 1936, which was both a high and low point for anarcho-syndicalism, and reflect on what went wrong and the implications for anarcho-syndicalist theory and practice. Finally, this chapter will draw on the historical discussion so far to set out the theoretical and practical basis of anarcho-syndicalism and its relation to other traditions. We will see that anarcho-syndicalism is a practice of trial and error around a political-economic core, combining the ideas and goals of anarchism with the organised labour strategy of syndicalism.

Given that the anarcho-syndicalist movement was all but wiped out by the combination of fascism, repression and total war from 1939 onwards, Chapter 4 will explore the changes in post-WWII capitalism and assess their implications for anarcho-syndicalist organising. Specifically, we will look at the post-War social democratic settlement, which sought to counter the threat of revolution and marginalise radical

currents by integrating the working class (via the trade unions) into capitalist society through a series of reforms. We will then look at how this settlement went into crisis from the end of the 1960s through the 1970s with a wave of workers' struggles against capitalism, the state and the trade unions. But we will see how these struggles were ultimately defeated, and gave way to the neoliberal counter revolution from the late 1970s, which has dominated global capitalism ever since.

Finally, Chapter 5 will draw on this analysis of contemporary conditions to assess the relevance of anarcho-syndicalism today. We will look at how to move from small political propaganda groups towards functioning revolutionary unions, explore the role of the revolutionary union, and its means of organising class conflicts within the wider working class. We will also look at how the everyday activities of the revolutionary union relate to the revolutionary struggle for social transformation, and explore the significance of the insurrectionary general strike in the overthrow of capital and state and their replacement by worldwide libertarian communism: a stateless society based on the principle 'from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs'. Against the fashionable and market driven disdain for anything 'old fashioned', we will show how anarcho-syndicalism represents a simple yet sophisticated and adaptable weapon for the working class today, and thus why we are proud to nail our colours, red and black, to the mast of the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers' Association (IWA).

The mainstream workers' movement

Introduction

This chapter will introduce the mainstream currents in the workers' movement, from their origins until today. This is done in three parts. First, we look at how trade unions began as a response by workers to the conditions of early capitalism. By forming *associations*, workers could get the strength in numbers to change the balance of power versus employers. But we will see how, alongside this, a *representative function* arose, where unions developed a life independent of their membership and began to operate over their heads, mediating and ultimately diminishing their power within the limits set down by capital and the state. We will also see how this led trade unions to see themselves as purely economic organisations, leaving 'politics' to separate party organisations. We will then look at the notionally 'revolutionary workers' parties' originating in Marxism and Leninism, and set out a critique of their inherent statism. Finally, we will retrace the history of the British Labour Party, dispelling some of the rose tinted nostalgia for this 'workers' party', which was always a party of the trade union bureaucrats and never of the workers themselves.

Trade unionism

Britain was the first industrialised country, and so it was here that the first working class developed. The Enclosure Acts from 1750 onwards evicted the peasantry from traditional common land and turned them into rural wage labourers or landless vagabonds. Meanwhile, the need for large numbers of workers to staff the burgeoning manufacturing industries created an intense wave of urbanisation. Rural migrants were joined by former craft workers thrown into unemployment by the competition of industry. The labouring population of town and country were completely dispossessed, having nothing to sell but their labour power. They were the first members of a class which today accounts for the majority of humanity – the proletariat.

At first, industrialisation was seen as the death knell for the power that producers, organised in craft guilds, had over production. The system of apprenticeships and monopolisation of specialist skills had given craft workers a degree of control over their work that automation was set to wipe out in the new deskilled, mechanised division of labour. However, the fear that workers would never again exercise collective power over the production process would prove to be premature. After a few decades, new forms of collective organisation began to emerge. As early as 1799 and 1825 Combination Acts were passed as capital sought to curtail emerging working class organisation.

These early unions were small and transient. Typically they tended to form for the purpose of organising a conflict with the bosses, dissolving some time later following the conclusion of the conflict in victory or defeat. This posed several problems for the union movement. Firstly, the division of workers at each firm into small and transient unions meant a strike at one firm could simply mean ruin and subsequent unemployment as rival firms took advantage. Secondly, the impermanence of these early unions meant they were largely reactive rather than proactive, being formed to counter specific conditions rather than fight for the general improvement of working class living standards, let alone holding aspirations of revolutionary social transformation. These pitfalls led to the growth of a burgeoning amalgamation movement.

The amalgamation movement saw smaller unions combining into larger, more permanent ones. Their increased resources meant paid organisers could be employed to further swell the membership, which was stabilised by the introduction of services such as unemployment and sickness benefits, which at that time were not provided by the state. But amalgamation also had unintended consequences. Unions went from being a means to organise class conflicts to becoming an end in themselves, as permanent representatives of workers, acting on their behalves and supposedly in their interests. It is this latter role which came to dominate the union movement and with which we are mostly familiar today in the shape of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) unions.

It is therefore possible to identify two distinct meanings bound up in the term ‘union’. The first is simply that of an association of workers, joining together for some common purpose (whatever that may be). In other words, the union is the means by which workers *relate to one another*. That relationship may be horizontal or hierarchical, usually voluntary but, as in the case of ‘closed shops’ where workers have to join the union, sometimes compulsory. Their association may be long-lasting as in today’s trade unionism, or more transient as in the early, pre-amalgamation unions. The purpose of their association may be simply economic – ‘bread and butter issues’ – or encompass wider social or political goals. We can call this *the associational function*. This function is a product of the reality of life under capitalism. Individually, workers are powerless. Collectively we have power. Workers needed to defend themselves against the opposing interests of the bosses and have historically organised themselves into combinations such as trade unions in order to do this, realising that workers’ strength lay in their association.

The second function, perhaps most familiar in the age of the ‘service provider’ union model, is that of the representation of workers vis-à-vis capital. This usually means management, but sometimes includes politicians and the state, should they decide to intervene in a dispute. We can call this function *the representative function*. The representative function carries with it certain assumptions. Firstly, it is premised on the legitimacy of the existence of social classes, between which it seeks to mediate. Secondly, in order to gain the right to negotiate on workers’ behalves, representative unions tend to jettison any explicit politics which could put off potential members, since size becomes the all important factor in determining their place in the TUC pecking order (in the UK, this has normally meant outsourcing ‘politics’ to the Labour Party).

Both of these functions have become closely intertwined in the course of the historical development of the trade union movement. It is worth quoting a substantial passage on one such example of this process, because it raises a number of issues which will come up again and again in this pamphlet:

“Much can be explained by John Turner’s experiences. From the time of the Harrow Road ‘riots’ in 1891 until its amalgamation with another small union in 1898 Turner had been (unpaid) president of the United Shop Assistants Union. On amalgamation the total membership of the union was approximately 700. Turner became paid national organiser and threw himself into a recruiting drive around the country. The membership grew rapidly as a result of prodigious efforts on his part. But his experiences in the ‘United’ Union had brought about a change of approach. Branches then had come into being as different work places had come into conflict with their employers and then faded away as victory or defeat seemed to make union membership less important or more dangerous. Now Turner, to ensure a stable membership, had introduced unemployment and sickness benefits and as a result had members ‘of a good type, paying what was, for those days, a fairly high contribution’. His policy worked, but he was now primarily organising a union whereas previously he had primarily been organising conflicts with employers.

“By 1907 the pressure had relaxed somewhat and Turner was a fairly comfortably off trades union official of some importance. By 1910 the Shop Assistants Union had a membership of 13,000 in the London area, making it the largest union in the district. In 1912 John Turner became president of the union. Although he called himself an anarchist until he died it did not show itself in his union activities. Heartbreaking experience as it might have been, the small

union before 1898 had been anarchistic, that after 1898 was no different to the other ‘new’ unions either in power distribution or policy. There were straws in the wind by 1906. The executive of the union was being seen in some quarters as a bureaucratic interference with local militancy and initiative. And complaints were to grow. By 1909 Turner was accused from one quarter of playing the ‘role of one of the most blatant reactionaries with which the Trades Union movement was ever cursed’.¹

Here we see precisely how the associational function of these small unions were supplemented by the representative function, and at what cost. The representative function is not as innocent as it first appears, as it has implications for the union as a whole. First, in order to represent workers vis-à-vis management, a union needs to maximise its membership in order to show to bosses it really is representative when it claims to speak for the workforce. The easiest, but not the only, way to achieve this is to employ full time officials out of the dues of the membership, as happened in John Turner’s case.

Second, such unions need to be able to deliver industrial peace in return for the satisfaction of demands, otherwise they would not be able to secure a seat at the negotiating table. This in turn tends to develop the union as a purely economic organisation, pushing politics out (typically to political parties), and leads to the creation of a bureaucracy with interests separate from the rank and file membership. That bureaucracy then becomes structurally dependent on their position as mediators between workers and capital and thus prone to reformism and class collaboration, regardless of the professed ideology of the bureaucrats.² In other words, a consequence of representing workers to capital is that *you also must represent capital to workers*, becoming a barrier to militant rank and file initiative.

The desire for economic representation makes perfect sense in the absence of a revolutionary perspective, just as the desire for political representation – i.e. suffrage – makes sense in the absence of an anti-parliamentary perspective. If you are not opposed to the capitalist system, representation within it is the most you can ask for. In this respect, the unions originally developed in this direction because this is what many of their members, who were not for the most part revolutionaries, wanted. But once a bureaucracy develops, what the members want becomes far less consequential, as they are no longer in control. Thus the unions in this country long ago accepted the legitimacy of the existence of social classes, between which they sought to mediate. They do not want to put an end to an exploitative social system but to get the best for workers within it, which in practice means collaborating with the bosses and the capitalist system. The class collaboration of the unions has led them to become more and more a part of the system. It means that they now not only fail to defend workers’ interests but often go firmly against them. Their priority is not fighting the class struggle but getting ‘recognition’ at any price (recognition from the bosses, of course, not the workers, i.e. recognition of their representative function to speak on workers’ behalfes).

Once associational and representative functions become intertwined, unpicking them becomes increasingly difficult. The union becomes backed by a powerful bureaucracy with vested interests in the status quo, and often the ability to expel unruly troublemakers. We have recently experienced opposition from branch union officials to even holding a members’ meeting in the course of a dispute!³ The energy it would take to reform or dislodge such bureaucracies, not just the elected officials but the structures themselves, is many times that required to simply bypass the bureaucracy and take action outside it. In 1969 the Donovan Report, which came out of the Royal Commission into the unions and was set up by a Labour government, found that 95% of post-war strikes were unofficial. This changed after the anti-strike legislation of the 1980s which forced unions to police their rank and file more thoroughly on pain of asset seizure, but it is a simple illustration of the ease with which action can be taken. Many, if

¹ John Quail, *The slow burning fuse*, p. 246–247.

² John Turner was one of the publishers of the agitational syndicalist paper ‘The voice of labour’ which advocated direct action and the general strike. However, his position as a bureaucrat undermined in practice the politics he espoused in theory.

³ See this blog by an anarcho-syndicalist in the PCS trade union: www.libcom.org

not most, of these unofficial strikes would have been organised in the workplace by rank and file union members and lay officials like shop stewards.

And this raises another problem. Militant workers, including those with socialist or anarchist leanings, find there is usually a shortage of willing shop stewards. And what better way to participate in the class struggle? Soon enough you get trained up in ‘rep work’, learning how to file grievances, do casework and navigate the complex industrial relations legislation. This is the terrain of representative functions, a million miles away from direct action.⁴ Opportunities might open up for facility time – paid time off work to carry out union responsibilities. Such an escape from the day job is welcome. Maybe a role opens up higher up the ladder, a regional convenor or a branch official. As another potential shop floor militant climbs the ladder into the bureaucracy, militancy and revolutionary aims and methods tend to get left behind, or are neutered by the bureaucrat’s role.

This is not, of course, the inevitable consequence of taking a shop steward position, and there are pros as well as cons. Taking on positions as stewards can give us greater access to the workplace making it easier to organise. It also puts us in touch with other militants who may share our aim in wanting to organise in the workplace. But without a clear alternative to the representative approach, it’s easy to become sucked in. The strategy of many state socialist groups is precisely for their members to climb this ladder. Anarcho-syndicalists need a clear strategy to avoid these pitfalls.

In the past the unions paid lip service to the emancipation of the working class and to ‘socialism’ (meaning the Labour Party). They don’t even pay lip service now. Today’s TUC unions are the product of over a century of bureaucratisation. Associational and representative functions are now so blurred as to be indistinguishable. Indeed, you join a union in order to be represented. They have become vast corporations in their own right, complete with head offices, highly paid executive boards, legal departments and hundreds of wage labourers in their employ. The TUC for the most part still backs the Labour Party, despite it abandoning any pretence of being a workers’ party. Some Socialists have repeatedly tried to form a new one to replace it. Either way, politics is pushed out of the unions and into the parliamentary arena, a clear separation of the economic and the political. All the time we hear workers and leftists accusing the trade union leaders of ‘selling out’ and being bureaucratic. This is, of course, true, but anarcho-syndicalists view this as inevitable in organisations which collaborate with capitalism and the state rather than seek to destroy them.

How does this play out in practice? Let us start by looking at the basic building block of any union – the branch. The first thing to note is that the vast majority of branches exist and function away from the workplace, the seat of struggle. Rather than the branch proactively organising in the workplace, activists or workers with specific grievances find the onus on them to initiate contact and maintain channels of communication. This they only do on rare occasions and it is safe to say that most workers only attend branch meetings on a handful of occasions throughout their working lives, if at all. Indeed, internal union surveys show that at any given point only 5% of union members attend branch meetings. Nor is it necessarily the case that even those who attend on a regular basis have much in common. Many unions organise meetings on the basis of where members live. These meetings can consist of groups of people who may not work in the same workplace or even the same industry, the only thing in common being that they happen to belong to the same union. This type of meeting can even be reduced to members just turning up to pay dues.

Even in those few unions that do organise on an industrial basis – one workplace, one union – and thus don’t divide the workforce, union meetings are still dominated, not by workplace matters, but internal union business. The staple diet of such meetings is endless correspondence, various motions, countless elections and nominations for committees, conferences and union positions. What is rarely acknowledged is that these decisions are taken by a tiny minority of members. As decisions are taken further up the union ladder, tens of people acting for hundreds eventually becomes hundreds acting for

⁴ This is not to say a shop steward position cannot sometimes be used to further a direct action based organising strategy, e.g. by using a union recognition agreement as legal cover to hold workplace meetings which organise unofficial, on the job action.

millions. The culmination of this charade is the block vote where union leaders cast votes on behalf of hundreds of thousands of members on policies, and for people, that the overwhelming majority of members will never have heard of let alone voted for. The trade unions may still have millions of members between them, but in day to day union business it is a minority of officials and activists that speaks for them.

We should also dispel the idea that all branch activists are also involved in the workplace struggle against the bosses. For a start, in many unions branch secretaries are required to be on full time release, and so never see the workplace. And even when they are not officially full time, they can end up sitting on so many committees and holding so many positions they do not have the time for something as mundane as work. Then there are those who are active in the union but have no base in the workplace. These people can even be on the so called 'left' of the union and will argue for all sorts of motions to be passed from 'troops out' to freeing Palestine, but do little to organise in the workplace. Indeed it could be argued that unions act as a check on militancy, even at branch level. How often do angry workers turn to the branch for support and advice over incidents that have happened at work, only to have all that anger deflected away from taking effective action by branch officials promising to 'get something done' by contacting head office or bringing in a full timer? As British syndicalist, Tom Brown, put it in 1943:

"Centralisation takes control too far away from the place of struggle to be effective on the workers' side in that fight. Most disputes arise in the factory, bus garage or mine. According to trade union procedure the dispute must be reported to the district office of the union, (and in some cases to an area office) then to head office, then back again, then the complicated "machinery for avoiding disputes" devised by trade union 'leaders' and the employers' lawyers is set in its ball passing motion, until everyone forgets the original cause of all this passing up and down. The worker is not allowed any direct approach to, or control of the problem.

"We are reminded of the memoirs of a certain court photographer who was making a picture of the old Emperor of Austria [and wanted him] to turn his head a little to the left. Of course he could not speak to an emperor, so he put his request to a captain of the court guard, who spoke to his colonel, who spoke to a count, the count passed the request to a duke and he had a word with an archduke who begged his Imperial Majesty to turn his head a little to the left. The old chap turned his head and said "Is that sufficient?" and the message trickled back to the photographer via archduke, duke, count, colonel and captain. The humble thanks travelled back by the same road. The steps of trade union communication are just so fixed."⁵

Despite their failings, branch meetings do at least retain some links with the workforce they represent. Once we move above branch level, we enter that strange world of the full time union official whose working life consists of endless meetings with other union officials, management and union activists. The only time these people come across ordinary union members is when they are called in, often by management, to 'resolve' a problem. The higher up the union structure, the more remote they become, reaching a pinnacle of detachment with union leaders, who only come across ordinary working class people on a day to day basis when they have a friendly chat with their chauffeur or the office cleaner.

It is safe to say that the unions exist in the main outside the workplace with the bulk of union activity taking place above the members' heads. The ordinary member's commitment is limited to paying subs, with the expectation of some level of support should trouble arise. Outside national struggles and strike ballots there is little encouragement to see the union as anything more than an insurance scheme, perhaps requiring support itself.

These tendencies towards bureaucracy and the development of institutional interests separate from the workers themselves are natural developments of the representative function. However, they are also

⁵ Tom Brown, Principles of syndicalism: www.libcom.org

increasingly enforced by law. In the UK, industrial action is only lawful if it is preceded by a properly conducted ballot, employers are given sufficient notice, and a host of legal technicalities are followed. Unions are legally liable for damages arising from unlawful action, and consequently become even more conservative in authorising ballots and calling off industrial action at any hint of a legal challenge. The problems with trade unions don't start with the law, but union legislation has further crippled effective workplace organisation whilst strengthening the bureaucratic tendencies that had already developed.

So, given that the unions organise away from the point of struggle, let us turn to their aims and how they set about achieving them. The main aim of any union is to maintain its power within the wider trade union movement, and also to exert pressure and maintain influence on the state, management, and society as a whole. They seek to do this in various ways, one of the most important being maintaining as high a membership as possible. This is of prime importance, not least in the TUC pecking order. This has now reached the point where it seems to matter little how remote or inactive that membership is, just as long as the dues are coming in and membership figures are up. Of all the areas in which the unions seek to have influence, by far the most important is their dealings with management, for it is from this area that all their power flows. They *must* retain the right to negotiate wages and conditions with management. Indeed, a 'consultation' role in cuts has often been championed as a victory for the union, even while it's a defeat for the workers. The 2009 postal dispute is one of the more high profile recent examples.⁶

It is by having the power to negotiate on behalf of workers that the trade unions retain their influence within the workplace and ultimately attract and retain members. *This representative function is fundamental to the existence of trade unions.* In turn it is having that control and influence in the workplace that they are of use to the boss class. The unions offer stability in the workplace, they channel workers' anger, shape and influence their demands and, if need be, police the workforce. Perhaps this is best summed up by a quote from the boss class itself: when asked by a reporter why his multinational had recognised unions in South Africa, a manager replied "have you ever tried negotiating with a football field full of militant angry workers?" It was this threat of an uncontrollable militant workforce that first persuaded the bosses of the need to accept reformist unions, seeing them as a way to control the workforce. As that threat of militancy has receded, the trade unions have become increasingly sidelined, finding themselves social partners with bosses increasingly unwilling to play the game.

'Revolutionary' workers' parties

The idea of a workers' political party goes a long way back. Perhaps the most famous and influential example would be the 1848 Manifesto of the Communist Party, more commonly known as the Communist Manifesto, which even before the days of universal suffrage declared that "the first step in the revolution by the working class, is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling as to win the battle of democracy."⁷ While Marx's ideas subsequently developed (particularly following the Paris Commune of 1871), what remained constant throughout what became known as 'Marxism' was the centrality of the 'need' for a workers' political party. This organisational form reflected the political content of mainstream Marxism, which is concerned with the capture and use of state power to transform society. One of the great legacies of the 20th century is the strong association of communism with state power, and totalitarian bureaucratic state power at that. Whilst most Marxists distance themselves from the horrors of

⁶ The CWU union called off planned Christmas strikes – the most powerful weapon in the postal workers' arsenal – for 'meaningful negotiations' prompted by unspecified concessions. The talks, of course, had to be kept secret from the membership. Three months of silence and demobilisation later, and the CWU recommended acceptance of an almost identical deal involving 40,000 job losses. The 'victory' was that the CWU would be 'consulted' on these cuts. Demoralised by three months of silence and having squandered building momentum in the pre-Christmas strikes, posties voted to accept the deal, though it was widely seen as a 'sell out'.

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The communist manifesto: www.marxists.org

Stalinism, few reject the idea that revolution entails the capture of state power or the conviction that the Party is the organisational form to do it.

For Lenin, the working class on its own could only achieve “trade union consciousness”, i.e. a consciousness of everyday economic life and bread and butter struggles.⁸ But to become revolutionary, it required the intervention of intellectuals and the leadership of a vanguard party. Inscribed in Marxist theory and practice is this separation between the economic organisations of the working class (trade unions) and the political one (the Party). And this separation is not neutral, but hierarchical: the party leads the class, the political trumps the economic. Leon Trotsky expresses this very clearly:

“Only on the basis of a study of political processes in the masses themselves, can we understand the role of parties and leaders, whom we least of all are inclined to ignore. They constitute not an independent, but nevertheless a very important, element in the process. Without a guiding organisation, the energy of the masses would dissipate like steam not enclosed in a piston-box. But nevertheless what moves things is not the piston or the box, but the steam.”⁹

Trotsky thinks he is giving credit to the working class, and stressing the lack of separation between the party and the class. In fact, his metaphor says far more than he intends. Steam is the unthinking product of applying heat to water, a mere expression of natural, physical laws. The intelligence in his metaphor is that of the engineers who design and operate the piston box which captures and directs the energy of the unthinking mass within it. It is correct that the Party can only ride to power on the back of the workers. What is not correct is that we have any need for them to do so, or that this advances the creation of a free communist society. Trotsky’s view was shared even by left wing Marxists (‘left communists’), such as Amadeo Bordiga, whose opposition to the class collaboration of the Bolsheviks ‘united front’ strategy reaffirmed that ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ really meant the dictatorship of the Communist Party: “Political power cannot be seized, organised, and operated except through a political party.”¹⁰

This idea of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’ is central to Marxist theory. Much confusion arises from the word ‘dictatorship’, which today conjures up images of repressive, unelected regimes. This is not *necessarily* what is meant (although it’s hard to ignore that wherever the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ was established in the 20th century ended up looking a lot like... a dictatorship). Bearing in mind suffrage had barely extended beyond male property owners in the 19th century, Marx saw any state as a dictatorship of the ruling class (anarcho-syndicalists agree on this point). In capitalism the state is a dictatorship of the capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – and this is the case whether or not the state in question holds free and fair elections or respects human rights. If we accept this to be true then any revolution would necessarily involve the proletariat establishing its own dictatorship.

The *form* this dictatorship takes is one of the divisions within Marxism. More reformist, gradualist, social democratic currents subscribe to something like the vision of the *Manifesto*, aiming to ‘win the battle of democracy’. In this analysis, the state is a dictatorship of capital because it is controlled by capitalist parties. Therefore, if a workers’ party obtains power, the state will serve the interests of the workers. The state is seen as a relatively neutral instrument which serves the interests of whichever class’ representatives control it:

“[I]t follows that every class which is struggling for mastery, even when its domination, as is the case with the proletariat, postulates the abolition of the old form of society in its entirety and of domination itself, *must first conquer for itself political power* in order to represent its interest in turn as the general interest.”¹¹

⁸ Vladimir Illych Lenin, What is to be done?: www.marxists.org

⁹ Leon Trotsky, The history of the Russian revolution: www.marxists.org

¹⁰ Amadeo Bordiga, Theses on the role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution: www.libcom.org

¹¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German ideology: www.marxists.org (the quoted passage appears as an added note in margin of the original manuscript).

This is, of course, where we part company with Marx. The idea was that since the state was part of the ‘political superstructure’ built upon the ‘economic base’, a ‘workers state’ would necessarily ‘wither away’ once it had centralised all the means of production within itself. By uniting the working class with the means of production and thus eliminating the ‘economic base’ of the state in private property it renders itself obsolete. In practice, centralising all property in the state means the state becomes the sole capitalist and employer.

It is easy to go reading through the works of Lenin and pulling out quotes showing an authoritarian politics that prefigures the police state he ultimately helped create. ‘*What is to be done?*’, written in 1905 to address the problems of organising under the repressive Tsarist regime, is a favourite for this kind of criticism. But this is too easy. Rather, we should criticise Lenin at his most libertarian and his most radical. The most significant text here is ‘*State and revolution*’, written in 1917, between the February and October revolutions in Russia. In this text, Lenin emphatically rejects the ‘opportunist’ idea that the existing state can simply be taken over and made to serve the interests of the proletariat. Rather, he insists it must be “abolished.”¹² This has even led some to suggest he was flirting with anarchism.

But a closer reading shows no such thing, as Lenin himself was keen to stress. In place of the existing state, Lenin had taken up the slogan ‘all power to the soviets’, which was popular with Russian workers (and anarchists) at the time. The soviets were councils of workers and political party delegates which had first emerged in the Revolution of 1905. For Lenin, linking this to Marx’s rethinking of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ following the Paris Commune, the soviets were the form of the ‘workers state’, through which the proletariat would exercise its dictatorship. So, why would anarcho-syndicalists take issue with this? On closer examination, Lenin’s views are far less radical and libertarian than they first appear.

Crucially, Lenin retains the fundamentally bourgeois conception of politics as a competition for power between political parties. His ‘innovation’ was to transpose this power struggle from the bourgeois forum of parliamentary politics, to the revolutionary proletarian forum provided by the soviets. But this change in venue does not change the fundamental problem of equating the interests of a class with those of its supposed representatives. Indeed, Leon Trotsky sees the proletariat and the Communist Party as indistinguishable, writing that “the revolution in the course of a few months placed the proletariat and the Communist Party in power.”¹³ Which was it? History reveals it was the Communist Party which established its rule *over* the proletariat.

Remember that Lenin had not rejected the idea of the vanguard party. He had not rejected the idea of ‘politics’ as a struggle for state power between competing parties. And so his party competed for power in the Soviets. Enjoying genuine popularity in many places, they consolidated their majority by becoming representatives rather than delegates. Where they could not secure majorities, they did what all politicians do if they can get away with it, and gerrymandered and manipulated their majorities. Once majorities were secured, the soviets were sidelined or suppressed, as the Communist Party formed a government. And indeed this government was a dictatorship in the more familiar sense, complete with a secret police which began rounding up revolutionaries, from anarchists to rival socialists. The brutal suppression of the Kronstadt Commune is only the most iconic event of this counter-revolution.¹⁴

Even at its most radical, Leninism maintains the separation of the economic struggles of the ‘masses’ from the political party who leads them, and maintains that revolution is a question of *first* the Party seizing state power, before using that power – those secret police and standing armies – to impose ‘communism’ from above in the form of economic and social diktats.¹⁵ By contrast, the soviet/council system poses economic delegates against political representatives; bottom-up, direct democracy against top-down decrees; the free federation of workers against the dictatorship of the proletariat. Against the nationalisation of all property in the ‘workers state’, it poses the expropriation of social wealth to serve

¹² Vladimir Illych Lenin, *State and revolution*: www.marxists.org

¹³ Leon Trotsky, *The history of the Russian revolution*: www.marxists.org

¹⁴ For a good introductory account, see Ida Mett, *The Kronstadt uprising of 1921*: www.libcom.org

¹⁵ See Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and workers’ control – state and counter-revolution*: www.libcom.org

human needs, without a ‘transitional phase’ of a dictatorial state which we’re promised will ‘wither away.’ To conceive of soviets as a state is to strip them of their revolutionary character and transform them into a mere alternative means of electing a government to run the state apparatus. Hence Rudolf Rocker writes:

“The council system brooks no dictatorships as it proceeds from totally different assumptions. In it is embodied the will from below, the creative energy of the toiling masses. In dictatorship, however, only lives barren compulsion from above, which will suffer no creative activity and proclaims blind submission as the highest laws for all. The two cannot exist together. In Russia dictatorship proved victorious. Hence there are no more soviets there. All that is left of them is the name and a gruesome caricature of its original meaning.”¹⁶

Despite the collapse of the USSR and its allied bloc, which for a long time provided moral (and sometimes material) support to much of the statist left, ‘revolutionary’ workers’ parties are still very much the staple of leftist organisation. These latter day Leninists are most likely to be found in anything resembling a popular movement, where they’ll promptly form a ‘coalition’ and appoint themselves leaders. Calling for ‘unity’ behind their leadership (often, rival ‘coalitions’ each calling for ‘unity’ and decrying the actions of the other), they tend to smother any grassroots initiative with a stifling routine of marches (a great recruiting ground) and diversions into parliamentary politics. The examples are too numerous to list here. But whilst we can complain about the antics of the Left, ultimately their ability to control movements rests in the weakness of a libertarian, direct action culture within the wider working class which would render such manoeuvres transparent and ineffective.

However, whilst making ample reference to Lenin and Trotsky, in practice the current array of state socialists fall short even of those flawed figures. Today, most of the ‘revolutionary’ parties serve as little more than the extra-parliamentary wing of the Labour Party, urging ‘vote for Labour without illusions’ like clockwork every election. In 2010, this followed just four months after the very same ‘revolutionary’ party had co-organised a ‘Rage Against Labour’ march against the Labour Party Conference in Brighton! We imagine even Lenin would blush at such naked opportunism. There are exceptions with those socialists who seek to found an alternative Labour Party, although this pretty much adds up to the same thing. Revolutionary rhetoric serves as a mask for reformist practice. And so we come to the Labour party.

The Labour party

Unlike the Communist and Socialist Parties of the mainstream Marxist position, the Labour Party (and many of its equivalents around the world) has never claimed to be revolutionary. To criticise it for failing to be so would therefore miss the point. However, the Labour Party, as its name would infer, has long purported to represent the interests of the working class. This pretence only finally expired with the rise of ‘New Labour’, although many on the left still cling forlornly to its corpse. Others, having been kicked out of the party for being too left wing, have resolved to form a new workers’ party to serve the purpose the old one did before its recent neoliberal turn. What both of these perspectives share is the assumption that the Labour Party ever was an asset for the working class. Rose tinted spectacles aside, this premise cannot be sustained.

The Labour Party was founded in 1906 with the election of 29 MPs from the Labour Representation Committee, made up mainly of trade union officials with support from socialist groups. The immediate trigger for this was the ruling in the 1901 Taff Vale case which had made trade unions liable for loss of profits during strike action. The ruling was reversed by the Liberal-Labour supported Trades Disputes Act in 1906.

¹⁶ Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-syndicalism: www.libcom.org

The honeymoon was short lived. There was a rising wave of class conflicts in 1910–1914, as discontent with both union bureaucracies and Labour MPs spread amongst the more combative sections of the working class. Historian Bob Holton writes that for many militant workers “the clear-cut non-parliamentary message of syndicalism proved more attractive, since it avoided the problems of political incorporation which increasingly beset the Labour Party in parliament” (we will discuss British syndicalism in the following chapter). Indeed, in 1912 the Liberal cabinet minister, Lloyd George, declared the parliamentary socialists “the best policemen for the syndicalist.”¹⁷

Having opted to support the First World War, therefore sending millions of workers to die for their bosses, Labour’s first taste of real political power came during the war when they were rewarded with a part in a coalition government. They further underlined their ruling class politics by opposing the upsurge in workers’ militancy that wartime austerity helped ferment. As strikes spread, particularly on ‘Red Clydeside’, Labour responded by helping break them. As socialists and anarchists were imprisoned for refusing to sign up, Labour rallied to “Win the War” and sought to expel pacifist/anti-war elements from within its ranks.

The first two majority Labour governments were no better. When J. H. Thomas, union leader and MP, “was appointed to the Colonial Office (...) he introduced himself to his departmental heads with the statement: ‘I’m here to see there is no mucking about with the British Empire.’” Their first term only lasted 10 months, but on top of their enthusiastic imperialism they managed to oppose strikes by dockers, London tramway workers, and railway workers, invoking the 1920 Emergency Powers Act against the latter two, threatening to declare a state of emergency. In 1926, and back in opposition, the party feared the general strike would lead to revolutionary events and scrambled to prevent it. Three years later they again formed a minority government with a promise to lower rampant unemployment. Within two years it had more than doubled.¹⁸

From its very inception ‘working class political representation’ acted like every other capitalist political party – at best simply overseeing the misery caused by the capitalist economy, and at worst actively repressing working class self-organisation. In other words, Labour has acted for the bosses and against the working class.

The single most cited ‘achievement’ of the Labour Party is the ‘foundation’ of the welfare state in 1948 (in reality, this was an expansion of the limited welfare state introduced by the Liberals in 1912). Universal healthcare and unemployed benefits certainly represent gains for the working class insofar as they are paid for by the bosses. But why were they introduced? The foundations for the welfare state were laid by the 1942 cross party Beveridge Report, which recommended the measures later implemented by Clement Attlee’s Labour government when they came to power in 1945. Wary of the worldwide revolutionary wave which followed the end of the First World War, there was a cross party consensus that war weary workers would need to be given incentives not to turn their discontent, or even their guns, on the government. The Tory Quintin Hogg summed up the prevailing mood in 1943 when he said “we must give them reform or they will give us revolution.” Following the war, a wave of squatting by homeless workers swept disused military bases and ‘bombed out’ residential areas. With the threat of revolution seeming to lurk behind these actions, the welfare state was a reform needed as much by the ruling class as the workers.

But even this self-interest was not enough. The second strand of the cross party consensus was that a welfare state served ‘the national interest’ of building profitable British industry by shifting the cost of maintaining the workforce from private businesses on to the state via national insurance payments deducted from workers’ wages.¹⁹ It is ironic that ‘Labour’s greatest achievement’ was supported by a cross party consensus which would have almost certainly seen the recommendations of the Beveridge report implemented regardless of who won the 1945 general election. Certainly, the fact it was political

¹⁷ Quoted in Bob Holton, *British syndicalism 1900–1914, myths and realities*, p.36.

¹⁸ *Subversion, Labouring in vain — a critical history of the Labour Party*: libcom.org

¹⁹ To what extent it did so will be taken up in chapter 4; successful post-war wage struggles ultimately shifted the costs on to the bosses, which is part of why they came to hate the welfare state.

‘representatives of the working class’ overseeing its introduction seems of little importance when they were implementing ruling class consensus. In any event, without the tangible threat of working class unrest, that consensus would never have been acted on. So let us fast forward to the 1970s to see how ‘working class political representation’ dealt with significant working class struggle.

The 1970s was a decade of major industrial unrest, as inflation hit double figures and wages failed to keep pace with the spiralling cost of living. Legislation limiting pay rises was proving unpopular and unenforceable in the face of widespread unofficial action outside of the control of the TUC unions and their Labour Party associates. Consequently, Labour turned to the TUC to implement ‘voluntary’ pay freezes, with partial success as unions policed their angry membership. The crisis deepened and by 1976 Britain went to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for emergency assistance. This came with the usual strings attached – austerity measures and public service cuts which the Labour government was only too keen to implement. The confrontation between the working class and their ‘political representatives’ came to a head in 1978–79 in the so called winter of discontent.²⁰ As strike waves brought the country to a standstill Labour became unelectable. They wouldn’t taste power again until their ‘New Labour’ rebranding, having jettisoned any pretence of advancing working class interests (a claim by this point thoroughly discredited by their record in office and in opposition).

From its very beginnings the political representation of the working class has never served the working class. It cannot. As even Lenin recognised, the state serves capitalism and cannot be made to serve the interests of the proletariat. This does not only apply to the Labour Party, but all political parties. Consider the German Green Party, who once in government sent riot police against protesters trying to stop nuclear waste being transported through their communities – precisely the kind of green activism they had once supported. In 2001 they supported the invasion of Afghanistan as part of a coalition government. In Ireland too, the Green Party went from vocal supporters of the ‘Shell to Sea’ movement against the Corrib gas project to actually implementing it. Green minister Eamon Ryan was put in charge of the project, the Greens having dropped their election promises in order to enter a coalition government. On that note, the Liberal Democrat’s rapid u-turn on tuition fees in 2010, from a promise to abolish them to trebling them once in government, provides a recent illustration of this dynamic (and one which fuelled the student protests and riots across the country). In 2011 in Lewisham, one self-described ‘socialist’, the Labour Councillor Mike Harris even defended his making “democratic socialist cuts” (which are apparently better than nasty ‘Tory cuts’).

We are reminded of the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin’s sardonic remark, that “when the people are being beaten with a stick, they are not much happier if it is called ‘the People’s Stick’...” Party politics aims at capturing the state, but when you capture the state, the state also captures you.

Summary

We have seen that while trade unions have their roots in working class associations, they have become increasingly dominated by their representative functions. This has led to the development of powerful, paid bureaucracies who collaborate with bosses and the state, putting their own needs above those of the membership. The result is often an inability to even win basic defensive struggles, and frequent interference with rank and file initiative and militancy. But while the trade unions at least have their roots in working class associations, the so called ‘workers parties’ do not. Leninist parties, even at their most radical, remain fixed on the capture of state power for themselves in order to implement ‘socialism’ by diktat. The Labour Party meanwhile was founded by trade union bureaucrats and has always played an anti-working class role. This is because of the nature of political parties, which have to compete for state power. The prize means getting to manage capitalism, which pits the party against the working class. All these mainstream ideologies of the workers’ movement effect a separation of the economic and the political. ‘Politics’ is seen as the business of the party, its venue the state (normally through

²⁰ See 1978–1979: Winter of Discontent: www.libcom.org

engagement in the parliamentary process). ‘Economic’ issues are seen as the domain of trade unions. This dual system of political and economic representation of the working class ends up acting against the working class. We need to look elsewhere for inspiration.

Further reading

Units 1–3 of the SelfEd history of anarcho-syndicalism cover the origins of capitalism and the early workers’ movement. Our critique of the trade unions stems mainly from our collective experiences with the trade unions within the Solidarity Federation and its predecessors the Direct Action Movement (DAM) and the Syndicalist Workers’ Federation (SWF). Consequently there is little to recommend by way of reading. We have drawn heavily on the 1991 DAM pamphlet ‘*Winning the class war*’, which remains a worthwhile read. The basic argument set out there has been updated and expanded here to feed into the discussions in the rest of this pamphlet. In terms of Marxism and Leninism, Maurice Brinton’s ‘*The Bolsheviks and workers control*’ remains a classic account of the counter revolutionary role played by Lenin’s Bolsheviks in sidelining workers’ self-organisation in the factory committees and soviets, and ultimately replacing them with party dictatorship. Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s ‘*Obsolete Communism – the left wing alternative*’ also contains a critical account of mainstream Marxist theory and practice. The author, a prominent anarchist in the events of May 1968 in France (see Chapter 4) has, funnily enough, subsequently become a Green MEP. In terms of critical accounts of the Labour Party, the SolFed’s predecessor the Syndicalist Workers Federation wrote a three part account of ‘*How Labour governed 1945–51*’.²¹

²¹ Syndicalist Workers Federation, *How Labour governed 1945–51*: libcom.org

Radical currents in the workers' movement

Introduction

This chapter will introduce three radical currents from the historical workers' movement. First we will look at anarchism, the name given to the anti-state socialists in the European workers' movement of the 19th and 20th centuries. Anarchism, as a political doctrine, opposed itself to all statist politics, whether parliamentary or 'revolutionary', instead placing its emphasis on human capacities for voluntary co-operation, mutual aid and working class direct action. Second, we will encounter syndicalism. Emerging in France, the syndicalist movement of rank and file controlled, radical unions spread to many countries taking new forms in different conditions. We will focus on the French CGT, the North American IWW and the syndicalist currents in the workers' movement in Britain. In all cases, working class direct action was the watchword of the syndicalists who, often under anarchist influence, formed unions based on the shared economic interests of workers. Finally, we will look at council communism, a radical Marxist current which broke with orthodoxies such as the necessity of the Party and the capture of state power. The council communists drew some very similar conclusions to many anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, but we will also explore some important differences.

Socialism without the state: Anarchism

Anarchism has its origins in the working class and socialist movements of Europe in the 19th century.¹ It was a major force in the 'First International', an alliance of socialist organisations and unions which existed between 1864 and 1876. When that organisation split between pro-state socialists (who became known as Marxists and associated with the colour red) and anti-state socialists (who became known as anarchists and associated with the colour black), the German statesman Otto von Bismarck remarked that "Crowned heads, wealth and privilege may well tremble should ever again the Black and Red unite!"

Anarchism, covering all the anti-state socialists, took numerous forms. It is often said the three main currents are mutualism (associated with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon), collectivism (associated with Mikhail Bakunin) and communism (associated with Errico Malatesta and Peter Kropotkin). In reality, there was considerable overlap and evolution, as ideas developed in conjunction with the movement. The ideas of mutualism, a self-managed market economy probably had their greatest influence on the co-operative movement. Anarchist collectivism proposed expropriation of private property to be owned communally and operated under worker self-management, with money abolished and replaced by some form of labour notes, essentially IOUs for work done. Collectivism was a significant influence on Spanish anarcho-syndicalism in the 1920s and 30s although its modern influence has waned.

The third school, that to which the anarcho-syndicalist IWA belongs, is anarchist or libertarian communism. The origins of anarchist communism are most often credited to 'the anarchist Prince' Peter Kropotkin, although he was largely taking up and elaborating ideas that originated in the Italian

¹ Efforts are often made to find 'anarchism' in figures as diverse as the 6th century BC Chinese mystic Lao-Tse, ultra-individualist Ayn Rand, and even leaders of states such as Reagan and Thatcher. Peter Marshall's liberal history of anarchism, 'Demanding the impossible', is amongst the worst offenders here as a consequence of stripping away the socialist opposition to private property, like a good liberal, and reducing anarchism to mere 'anti-state' sentiment, so vague even heads of state can share it. There certainly are libertarian and anti-state ideas and movements throughout history, but labelling these 'anarchist' is anachronistic.

section of the First International. Like collectivism, anarchist communism is for worker self-management and the abolition of private property, but goes further in advocating the abolition of market exchange and money to be replaced by production and distribution according to the principle of ‘from each according to ability, to each according to needs.’

In all its incarnations, anarchism was never simply ‘anti-state’, but has always been the anti-state wing of the socialist movement. Anarchist collectivism was firmly in the camp of the class struggle, as its leading proponent Mikhail Bakunin was a prominent member of the First International, and had great influence on the more libertarian sections (which later fed into the development of anarcho-syndicalism).

In the case of anarchist communism, however, there was sometimes less emphasis on the class struggle and more on the human capacity for mutual aid and voluntary co-operation, which Kropotkin had set out at length as an important factor of evolution.² Thus, anarchist communism often had a more humanist bent and the tradition put varying emphasis on the class struggle as either a progressive or regressive force:

“[T]he theoreticians of anarcho-communism (Peter Kropotkin, Errico Malatesta, and others) maintained that the roots of social development lie in progress of the ethical concepts of humanity; that capitalism is a regressive system since it undermines the intrinsic social nature of humanity based on mutual aid; and that the division of humanity into warring classes plays a reactionary role, retarding the self-realization of the human personality”³

For this reason, early anarchist communism did not focus primarily on the labour movement. In 1907, there was an important debate between Pierre Monatte and Errico Malatesta at the International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam. Monatte argued for a neutral syndicalism that was not political, and not even anarchist, on the grounds that workers’ economic conditions gave them “identical interests”, so that political “differences of opinion, often subtle and artificial, fall into the background in the syndicate, enabling agreement.”⁴ In contrast, Malatesta had argued that:

“The basic error of Monatte and of all revolutionary syndicalists, in my opinion, derives from an overly simplistic conception of class struggle. It is a conception whereby the economic interests of all workers – the working class – are held to be equal (...) The reality is very different, in my view (...) there are therefore no classes, in the proper sense of the term, because there are no class interests. There exists competition and struggle within the working ‘class’, just as there does amongst the bourgeoisie.”⁵

Monatte and Malatesta agreed that syndicalism was an economic movement, but for Malatesta this wasn’t sufficient, and must be supplemented by separate anarchist political organisations. This separation was most clearly articulated in his 1925 article *Syndicalism and anarchism*.⁶ In it, he makes the case for syndicalist unions which unite all workers on an economic basis, and separate political, anarchist organisations of varying kinds which operate both inside and outside the unions. Malatesta by no means denied the importance of the labour movement. On the contrary, he insisted that “everyone, or almost everyone, is in agreement on the usefulness and the need for the anarchists to take an active part in the labour movement and to be its supporters and promoters.”

² Peter Kropotkin, Mutual aid: a factor of evolution: www.libcom.org

³ Vadim Damier, Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th Century: www.libcom.org/20th-century-vadim-damier

⁴ Quoted in Maurizio Antonioli (ed), The International Anarchist Congress of Amsterdam (1907), p.113.

⁵ Quoted in Maurizio Antonioli (ed), The International Anarchist Congress of Amsterdam (1907), p.123. Malatesta’s analysis is astute in that workers’ economic positions alone cannot be assumed sufficient to create unity in struggle, let alone libertarian communism. Simply recruiting all the workers into one organisation doesn’t dissolve the hierarchies and ideological conflicts among them, nor necessarily make for common struggle.

⁶ The following quotes and paraphrased argument is drawn from Errico Malatesta’s 1925 *Syndicalism and anarchism*: www.marxists.org

Syndicalist unions, he argued, were often founded on anarchist principles. However, they either proved ineffective and thus remained small, barely functioning as unions at all, or they won their initial battles, and these victories attracted more workers into their ranks, which enabled them to win more battles and attract more workers and so on. The problem with this, Malatesta diagnosed, was that there was no reason to think these workers, who were attracted by the union's success in winning gains for workers, shared the anarchist principles upon which the union was founded.

“For a union to serve its own ends and at the same time act as a means of education and ground for propaganda aimed at radical social change, it needs to gather together all workers – or at least those workers who look to an improvement of their conditions – and to be able to put up some resistance to the bosses. Can it possibly wait for all the workers to become anarchists before inviting them to organise themselves and before admitting them into the organisation?”

Thus he held that “syndicalism (by which I mean the practical variety and not the theoretical sort, which everyone tailors to their own shape) is by nature reformist” and that “pure anarchism cannot be a practical solution while people are forced to deal with bosses and with authority.” For that reason he argued for a separation of the necessarily reformist, economic, syndicalist unions from the various political anarchist organisations which should propagandise revolutionary anarchist ideas within them. For Malatesta, the role of anarchists was not to make the unions more anarchist, but to argue within them for anarchist tactics while keeping them open to all workers who wanted to fight to improve their conditions, regardless of political affiliation. Meanwhile, the anarchists should also fight within the union to keep it neutral from political parties. “If the survival of the organisation and the needs and wishes of the organised make it really necessary to compromise and enter into muddled negotiations with authority and the employers, so be it. But let it be the responsibility of others, not the anarchists.”

For Malatesta, therefore, any concession or negotiation under capitalism was reformist, and so it was important for anarchists to remain “pure”, leaving this dirty business to others. This approach would become known as ‘dual organisationalism’, a current of anarchism that holds that mass, class organisations such as unions need a specific political organisation operating within them. But not all dual organisationalists think alike. While Malatesta saw the role of anarchists as keeping themselves pure on political lines and keeping unions organised along economic lines, independent of political ideas, others sought to use political organisation as a means to politicise economic associations – to ‘anarchise’ syndicalist unions.

This brings us to the *‘Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists.’* This text was published in 1926 by the Dielo Truda group, who were anarchists in exile after the Communist Party consolidation of power in the young and misnamed Soviet Union. Drawing on their experiences of the struggle against both capitalism and Bolshevism, they set out a template for anarchist organisation which remains influential among anarchists today.

First of all, the Platform firmly espouses anarchist communism as its goal, and situates this firmly within the class struggle. The document outlines the necessity for violent social revolution and the anarchist opposition to all states including democratic ones. In terms of their attitude to unions, syndicalist and mainstream, the Platform argues that they can have no ideology of their own and therefore any union “always reflects the ideologies of a range of political groupings, notably of those most intensively at work within its ranks.”⁷ The necessity is therefore for anarchists to organise themselves politically and work intensely both inside the unions to ‘anarchise’ them and outside them to exert a similar influence in other spheres. Thus, the Platform is supportive of anarcho-syndicalism as “a step forward”, but argues that syndicalist unions only become or remain anarcho-syndicalist because of the vigorous

⁷ Dielo Truda, The organisational platform of the libertarian communists, part 3: libcom.org

political organisation of anarchists within their ranks to keep them that way, and “to prevent any slide towards opportunism.”⁸

Thus ‘platformists’, as those influenced by the Platform are colloquially known, are also dual organisationists. But rather than keeping the economic organisation apolitical, the task of the political organisation is to politicise it with anarchism. There are four famous organisational principles set out to define the basis of the political organisation which should carry out this task: theoretical unity; tactical unity; collective responsibility and federalism.⁹ The Platform wagers that thusly organised, anarchists will be able to out organise state socialist parties within the trade unions, soviets and other organs of the working class, and so ensure the working class movement develops in an anarchist direction and the revolution develops in the direction of libertarian communism and not state socialism.

The advocacy of a tight, unified and disciplined political organisation reminded many anarchists at the time of a political party, and the authors of the Platform were labelled ‘anarcho-Bolshevik’ in some quarters. This criticism strikes us as unfair. If one wants to organise an anarchist political organisation, the principles set out in the Platform make perfect sense in terms of combining unity of action with internal democracy and thus combining effective political organisation with anarchist principles. From an anarcho-syndicalist point of view the problems lie elsewhere. For instance, in the next section we will see how the slide of certain syndicalist unions into reformism was not because of the lack of political organisation within their ranks, but rather a function of the very ‘apolitical’ nature the Platform affirms.

Thus platformists can also be anarcho-syndicalists, but anarcho-syndicalists are not necessarily platformists. Certainly to anarcho-syndicalist eyes, the Platform places too much emphasis on the ability of political organisations to combat the material contradictions which arise from unions organising under capitalism, principally the development and domination of the representative function over the associational one. As anarcho-syndicalists, we of course believe these contradictions can be successfully navigated in a way consistent with our revolutionary principles. But before we can elaborate, we must first examine some of these contradictions in the case of syndicalism, from which anarcho-syndicalism has evolved.

Unions without bureaucrats: Syndicalism

The workers’ movement in France had faced severe repression in the aftermath of the 1871 Paris Commune. Radical tendencies were forced underground, and it was in this period that the stereotype of the anarchist bomb thrower emerged, as some anarchists turned away from the labour movement towards ‘propaganda by the deed’: assassinations and bombings against the rich. However, by the late 19th century, there was something of a regrouping of the workers’ movement with the development of an anarchist influenced form of trade unionism – revolutionary syndicalism. Rudolf Rocker writes that this tendency “developed quite spontaneously within the French working class as a reaction against political Socialism, the cleavages in which for a long time permitted no unified trade union movement.”¹⁰

This movement had its origins in a coming together of existing unions and the ‘*bourses du travail*’, mutual aid schemes including “job placement, unemployment benefits, relocation aid, and aid for those injured on the job”, as well as cultural, educational and propaganda services and some of the union functions of organising strikes.¹¹ Anarchist involvement was significant in the bourses and, as Rocker notes, the anarchist message of class unity gained popularity in the face of a political socialist movement wrought with sectarian divisions. French revolutionary syndicalism proposed this unity be brought about through a general union for workers. That union was the CGT (General Confederation of Labour), founded in 1895. In its early days, the union was under heavy anarchist influence, and elected a series

⁸ Dielo Truda, The organisational platform of the libertarian communists, part 3: libcom.org

⁹ Dielo Truda, The organisational platform of the libertarian communists, part 5: libcom.org

¹⁰ Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-syndicalism: libcom.org

¹¹ Fernand Pelloutier, History of the bourses du travail: libcom.org

of anarchist and non-party socialist general secretaries, including Victor Griffuelhes. Paul Mason writes that:

“In the space of a decade Griffuelhes had created a superbly effective form of trade unionism; with minimal dues-paying and bureaucracy the militant workers could, every so often, unleash a lean, mean striking machine. What is more, they did it not just in an atmosphere of repression but of stolid refusal to negotiate; only in the years 1905 and 1906 did the number of strikes ended by negotiation rise above 10%. Nine out of ten strikes finished without any formal contract across the table: either you lost and went back to work or, as with Haviland, the boss opened the factory gates and upped the wages. Sixty percent ended this way, with victory to the unions.”¹²

By its very nature as a general union, the CGT was open to all workers. Consequently “the CGT was not composed exclusively of revolutionary trade unions, certainly half of its members were of reformist tendency and had only joined the CGT because they recognised that the dependence of the trade unions on the political parties was a misfortune for the movement.”¹³ If we ask why reformists were relatively weak, we need only note the ruling class’ preference for repression and refusal to negotiate, which limited the space for reformist unionism and class collaboration. Social partnership takes two, and the bosses weren’t playing... at first at least.

As a result, revolutionary ideas held great sway within the ranks of the CGT. These were most clearly articulated in the Charter of Amiens in 1906, and in the writings of its leading theoretician, Emile Pouget (to which we will return in the following chapter). The Amiens Charter was a clear statement of the CGT’s revolutionary syndicalism.¹⁴ The Charter espoused a revolutionary programme, but also enshrined “political neutrality”, understood as standing outside all political schools and parties but not opposed to them, leaving political party allegiance (or lack of) to the conscience of individual members. “The Charter served to minimize political dissension in the unions, which were to focus attention exclusively on the economic struggle.”¹⁵ Against the political parties, the CGT defined itself as an economic organisation which grouped “together all workers conscious of the fight to be carried out for the disappearance of wage labour and of employers.” In doing so, it made the ‘revolutionary’ in ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ a matter of internal democracy. So long as revolutionaries formed a majority, the union espoused a revolutionary perspective and pursued uncompromising class conflict and social change via direct action methods.

But in the early 20th century, bosses and the state began to react to the gains of the CGT with a more conciliatory attitude. This increased the space for reformists to operate, as class collaboration could be seen to bear fruit. By 1909, the growth of the union had put the revolutionaries in the minority (the CGT grew from 100,000 members in 1902 to 700,000 in 1912, out of a population of 7 million). Victor Griffuelhes resigned as general secretary amidst machinations against him, and Émile Pouget left the union, disillusioned. The slide into class collaboration, reformism and bureaucratisation was crowned by the CGT’s support for the national war effort in 1914. This was the most decisive break with its revolutionary, internationalist origins. Although revolutionaries remained inside the CGT to try and pursue an anti-militarist agenda, following the First World War it increasingly fell under the sway of political parties, leading to a series of splits as revolutionaries and others left the organisation. The CGT still exists today, and even maintains elements of the Amiens Charter in the constitutions of many of its member unions. But in practice it has become almost indistinguishable from other modern trade union federations, with all the pitfalls that implies

¹² Paul Mason, *Live working or die fighting*, p.124.

¹³ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism*: libcom.org

¹⁴ CGT, *The charter of Amiens*: www.marxists.org

¹⁵ Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, *The rise and fall of revolutionary syndicalism*, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds) *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.3.

As the CGT grew, syndicalist ideas were also taking root amongst the working class in North America. The IWW was founded in 1905 amidst violent class conflict. “Few strikes took place without loss of life. The resulting bitterness had made the prospect of fundamental change appealing to most workers.”¹⁶ Much like the CGT, it espoused a revolutionary intent and oriented itself to the whole working class, not just particular crafts or trades. They called this model ‘industrial unionism’, where all the workers in one industry, whatever their job, belonged to the same industrial union, and in turn these industrial unions all belonged to the ‘One Big Union’ of the IWW. At the time only a minority of workers were organised, and the IWW set out to ‘organise the unorganised’. From its very beginnings, the IWW was also a racially mixed union at a time of widespread segregation. ‘Big Bill’ Haywood issued a statement of intent at the founding conference, declaring that “we are here today to confederate the workers...into a working class movement that shall have for its purpose the emancipation of the working class from the slave bondage of capitalism.”¹⁷

On the participants at the founding conference, historian Patrick Renshaw writes that they were not representative of the working class as a whole, but rather the radical elements of it.

“Most of them came from unions that, for one reason or another, were at loggerheads with the AF of L [American Federation of Labour]. They were all radicals, and most of the leading personalities had been influenced by socialism of varying kinds, though this was often overlaid with syndicalism or anarchism. They shared a common conviction that the craft form of unionism, represented by the AF of L, should be replaced by industrial organisation.”¹⁸

Consequently, the IWW represented an uneasy truce between militant unionists, anarchists, syndicalists and party socialists, with Marxism a major influence (much of their famous preamble paraphrases passages from Marx¹⁹).

“Tensions between revolutionaries and reformers manifested itself in countless disagreements over tactics. The most bitter of these within the ranks of the IWW itself involved those who urged the IWW to have a political arm and those who argued that the basic power of workers was at the point of production.”²⁰

The basic fault line was between those who wished for the IWW to be an economic organisation linked to a separate political wing, and those who argued for direct industrial action as the means of social and political change. The most notable of the former tendency was Daniel DeLeon of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), who wanted the IWW’s industrial muscle to back the party’s electoral ambitions. Opposing this view were the various shades of direct actionists, who argued that the political aims of the union, enshrined in the preamble as including “the abolition of the wage system”, were best pursued on the industrial front and thus that the IWW was both a political and an economic organisation at the same time.²¹ This battle was settled in favour of the direct actionists in 1908, with the expulsion of the DeLeonists. Subsequently, the IWW engaged in a series of high profile free speech fights, confirming this attitude to pursuing political and social goals through direct action rather than recourse to party politics.

The Wobblies, as they were known, grew in size and reputation off the back of several high profile struggles, most notably the aforementioned free speech fights and the 1912 Lawrence textile strike, where the IWW had only a few hundred members but exerted great influence. But they found that

¹⁶ Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.3.

¹⁷ Quoted in Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: the story of the IWW and syndicalism in the United States*, p.46.

¹⁸ Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: the story of the IWW and syndicalism in the United States*, p.47.

¹⁹ IWW, Preamble to the IWW constitution: www.iww.org

²⁰ Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.5.

²¹ Many of the anarchists described this as ‘anti-political’, equating politics with party politics and the state. We use the term in a more everyday sense, that someone who is an anarchist has political beliefs.

membership tended to swell dramatically with struggles, and then ebb away. It's been said that "many a worker who did not carry the red membership card or had kept up dues payments was still to be counted a Wobbly."²² The IWW was opposed on principle to the kind of incentives for member retention pursued by more mainstream unions, such as health or insurance benefits, and instead opted to deploy a job delegate system. This entailed travelling organisers authorised to collect dues and form union locals amongst the highly mobile, casual workforce of the early 20th century United States. Consequently, "a local could exist in the hat or satchel of a mobile delegate."²³

This was an innovative model and one which refused to succumb to the temptation to stabilise membership against the ebbs and flows of struggle with a host of member services. But it also brings to the fore a dual meaning of the term 'One Big Union'. On the one hand, this meant 'One Big Union' as opposed to 'many sectional unions'. This conception was perfectly compatible with the ever shifting membership of the IWW, and in fact made sense as casual workers could simply transfer from one industrial union to another within the IWW if they changed industries. However, the other interpretation was that 'One Big Union' meant all, or at least a substantial proportion of, workers needed to be brought into the ranks of the union for the purposes of a revolutionary general strike and the transition to industrial democracy:

"[The] industrial unions would fight for gains within the existing system until the IWW was strong enough to call a general strike that would bring all economic activity to a standstill. The condition for returning to work would be the substitution of industrial unions for all business enterprises and governmental agencies. The means of production would then be run by the unions to satisfy social needs rather than private profit."²⁴

The extent to which this was a literal aspiration or a revolutionary myth varies with the Wobbly. Some 'Wobs' were unaware of the revolutionary aspect of the IWW when they joined,²⁵ and the reality is that both interpretations coexisted within the IWW.²⁶ What is clear is that the US government took the revolutionary threat of the IWW seriously enough to launch a brutal wave of repression. Between 1916 and 1918, dues paying membership soared from 60,000 to 100,000, with influence extending far further than those numbers alone. This also gave the Wobblies a significant cultural influence on the wider working class. In 1917, using damage to war production as the pretext, over 150 leading Wobblies were arrested, tried on spurious charges and given long prison sentences. Union halls were raided by armed vigilantes and shoot outs ensued. Of course, only the Wobblies were arrested and sentenced to long jail terms, or simply lynched, as in the case of Wesley Everest.²⁷ The repression broke the IWW as a serious force, and the apparent 'success' of the Communist Party in Russia led to a resurgent Communist influence which eventually split the declining organisation in two in 1924.

After a period of two rival IWWs (who at times fought in the streets for control of the HQ), the much weakened official IWW continued through the 1920s and 30s under increased anarchist influence, but as an increasingly fragmented and marginal force (though as late as 1936, the IWW on the Philadelphia

²² Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.9.

²³ Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.8.

²⁴ Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.3.

²⁵ For instance, see Fred Hansen's recollections: "I didn't know about the revolutionary part at first, but as soon as I got in the organisation, I started reading an awful lot – not only IWW literature, but the communist literature, the anarchist literature, anybody's literature." In Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.189.

²⁶ A recent series of pieces in the IWW's *Industrial Worker* argues there's at least four interpretations of the term 'One Big Union', some of which complement and some of which contradict one another: 1) every worker or most workers join the IWW; 2) a vision of a universalism/libertarian socialist principles for the IWW; 3) a vision of a new society (where unions run things instead of states, not unlike Marx's comment about replacing governance of people with administration of things); and 4) a vision for revolutionary change (the class united). See libcom.org

²⁷ 1919: The murder of Wesley Everest: libcom.org

docks had the power to prevent a ship leaving with munitions for the Spanish fascists²⁸). It survived through the post-war period and remains active today.²⁹

Finally, we turn to British syndicalism. The British context was somewhat different to elsewhere as, by the early 20th century, Britain had a mature industrial economy and a well established trade union movement which was soon to gain a parliamentary wing through the Labour Party. Consequently, the influence of French revolutionary syndicalism and American industrial unionism led to a different kind of syndicalist movement. Whereas French and American syndicalists (and others) had to endure harsh repression, in Britain radical workers faced a different problem:

“Instead of undue repression, it was increasingly agreed [by the ruling class] that trade union demands could be more effectively diffused by bargaining and in particular by utilising union officials as a mediating influence between labour and capital.”³⁰

Thus British syndicalism emerged as a rank and file reaction against the recuperation of the existing labour movement into a mediating, representative role. In a sense, it was a rebellion of the associational function of unions against the representative one. Its idea of unionism was ‘the workers united’ as opposed to the bureaucratic apparatus of paid officials, legalism and so on, which mediated this collective power. It was also fuelled by the failings of the trade unions and the parliamentary socialists to defend workers’ living conditions, as falling real wages, increasing unemployment, and deskilling squeezed the working class. The great strategic debate in British syndicalism was between ‘dual unionism’ – setting up independent revolutionary unions like in France or America – and ‘boring from within’ – building a rank and file movement which could take independent action as well as push to reform the existing bureaucratic unions in a syndicalist direction. In Britain, probably in large part because trade union membership was so much higher than elsewhere, the latter tendency won out.³¹

This tendency was exemplified by the prominent organiser Tom Mann, who had played a leading role in the 1889 London Dock strike. Mann had emigrated to Australia to pursue electoral projects but became disillusioned with the Labour Party and what he saw as the corrupting effects of government, as well as the sectional and divisive nature of the existing trade unions. He saw industrial unionism as the answer. In 1910 he visited French syndicalists and returned to England a convert. However, rather than set up new revolutionary unions, Mann proposed to reform the existing ones from within:

“I was thoroughly convinced that the economic struggle would ultimately be conducted through the trade unions; (...) that however reactionary the unions might be at the hour, the only sensible policy would be to recognise them as the proper channels through which, sooner or later, the working class would have to function. So we declined to be identified with any policy that aimed at injuring the unions, but on the contrary, worked with might and main within their ranks to throw them on the right lines.”³²

Consequently, syndicalism in Britain did not take the form of separate revolutionary unions, but a radical rank and file presence in the existing trade unions. Numerically, syndicalists were a small

²⁸ Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas, and Deborah Shaffer (eds), *Solidarity forever: an oral history of the IWW*, p.179.

²⁹ See www.marxists.org for a timeline up to 1983. The IWW has recently enjoyed something of a resurgence, most notably with the Starbucks Workers Union. As a living organisation in much changed circumstances, this is omitted from the analysis here. Many of the debates and contradictions of old live on. However, the contemporary debate of most interest to anarcho-syndicalists is that around the notion of ‘direct unionism’, which advocates a form of direct action unionism rather than reliance on representation and contracts. See libcom.org for a developing archive. See also the *Recomposition* blog, which contains much of the ‘direct unionism’ material as well as accounts of contemporary workplace activity along direct action lines: libcom.org

³⁰ Bob Holton, *British syndicalism 1900 – 1914, myths and realities*, p.32.

³¹ However, there were attempts to form independent syndicalist unions in Britain before WWII. Some of these are documented in ‘First Flight’ by Albert Meltzer and ‘Dare to be a Daniel’ by Wilf McCartney, both published by the Kate Sharpley Library. The shop stewards’ committees in Clydeside during WWI had their roots in this agitation.

³² Quoted in Joseph White, *Syndicalism in a mature industrial setting: the case of Britain*, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.103.

minority, but the great labour unrest of 1910–1914 created an unparalleled platform for their ideas, and their influence, particularly via the shop stewards’ movement, extended far beyond their own ranks. Indeed:

“The facts that neither syndicalists nor syndicalism caused the labour unrest, and that in any event there just were not all that many syndicalists in Britain, (...) have forced historians to make the awkward but perhaps unavoidable distinction between syndicalism proper, of which there was little, and a syndicalist mood and atmosphere, for which a stronger case can be made.”³³

Consequently, British syndicalism was less a coherent, organised force than a loose network of different tendencies (anarcho-syndicalists, militant shop stewards, socialists...) whose influence extended far beyond its limited numbers. The only formally organised groups were small propaganda groups like the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL). As a result, British syndicalism operated more as a culture of direct action amongst the working class than an organised alternative to the TUC unions. Indeed, as Mann’s quote suggests, there was often a surprisingly pro-TUC attitude insofar as syndicalists felt they could fill the unions with militant workers and reform them in a syndicalist, industrial unionist direction.³⁴ This proved naïve, and alongside repression (most famously in the Syndicalist Trials),³⁵ “as important as the attack, isolation and defeat of syndicalism, was the fact that it was also partially co-opted.”³⁶ As some trade unions merged into industrial ones, syndicalists became sucked into union reform activities which took their energies away from the shop floor. In this process, much of the radical political content was lost in favour of changes to the organisational structure of the unions.

The syndicalist movement took different forms under different conditions. Everywhere it was more than just a union but also a wider culture within the working class; “many workers regarded themselves as members without paying dues.”³⁷ Everywhere it was characterised by an advocacy of class militancy, unity and direct action. The main strategic divide was between ‘dual unionism’ and ‘bor-ing from within’, with the latter approach being favoured where unionisation levels were already high through the established trade unions. Interestingly, in light of the renewed wave of casualisation under neoliberalism:

“[I]n the occupational composition of syndicalist movements two categories of workers were strongly represented. To the first category belonged casual, seasonal or project labourers, whose working lives were characterised by forms of discontinuity: by episodic work periods, by frequent changes of employer, and often of work site and sometimes of geographic locale as well.”³⁸

The second category is the structurally powerful miners and industrial workers, who perhaps make up the more enduring stereotype of union militancy. But it seems important today to note that syndicalism once thrived amongst casualised workers as well as more stable workforces.

In terms of the political content of syndicalism, Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe write:

“The ultimate ends of the syndicalist agenda were undeniably political: the abolition of the capitalist economic and political system, the establishment of a collectivist society structured on labour’s economic associations, and the transfer of decision making and administration to the producers.”

³³ Joseph White, *Syndicalism in a mature industrial setting: the case of Britain*, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.104.

³⁴ The 1912 pamphlet ‘The Miners’ Next Step’ is one of the most famous examples of this union reform agenda, although it went largely unrealised. It also advocated use of parliament, but making MPs recallable by the unions, a novel compromise between anti-parliamentarism and parliamentary socialism. See libcom.org

³⁵ 1912: the syndicalist trials: libcom.org

³⁶ Joseph White, *Syndicalism in a mature industrial setting: the case of Britain*, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.115.

³⁷ Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, *The rise and fall of revolutionary syndicalism*, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.6.

³⁸ Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, *The rise and fall of revolutionary syndicalism*, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.7.

While many trade unions pay lip service to these same goals, what distinguishes syndicalism is its direct action methods, highly democratic structures and minimal bureaucracy. And yet, these political goals were to be pursued by purely economic or ‘apolitical’ organisations. In many cases, were they not smashed, this opened the door to creeping reformism, co-option by political parties or the existing trade unions, and/or outright class collaboration. The CGT’s degeneration from a fighting workers’ association to a recruiting sergeant for imperialist war is the most striking example.³⁹ This tendency would seem to confirm Malatesta’s scepticism. But as we will see, this is only partly the case. Despite its shortcomings, the syndicalist tradition is a rich and diverse one, to which anarcho-syndicalism belongs and owes much. We will pick this up in the following chapter.

Marxism without a Party? Council communism

Council communism emerged in the early 20th century as a dissident current within Marxism, particularly in the Netherlands and Germany. Contrary to what the name might suggest, what distinguishes council communism from other traditions is not advocacy of workers’ councils. Anarchists, syndicalists, anarcho-syndicalists and even Leninists favour a council system in some form. Rather, the ‘council’ serves to distinguish the council communists from the party communists on a question central to Marxist revolutionary theory: who should exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat, the Communist Party or the workers’ councils?

“State socialism is not control of the means of production by the workers, but control by the organs of the state. If it is democratic at the same time, this means that workers themselves may select their masters. By contrast direct control of production by workers means that the employees direct the enterprises and construct the higher and central organisations from below. This is what is called the system of workers councils.”⁴⁰

This is not to say the council communists abandoned political parties altogether. The most important of these was the German Communist Workers’ Party (KAPD), formed in 1920 when they were expelled from the Communist Party.⁴¹ The KAPD styled itself as a different kind of political party, which would not seek power but serve as the bearer of ‘communist consciousness’, in parallel to the factory organisations of the General Workers’ Union of Germany (AAUD), which had been formed by workers breaking with the trade unions during unofficial strikes.⁴² The AAUD itself adopted a revolutionary programme, including a hostility to political parties, with the exception of the KAPD.⁴³ The KAPD and the AAUD therefore formed the political and economic wings of the council communist movement respectively:

“The idea behind the relationship of the KAPD to the AAUD was that the factory organisations, operating as workers’ councils for the social [re]organisation of production following the revolution, were to form the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat. However they could only fulfil this function in so far as those participating in them had a revolutionary and

³⁹ There is also the infamous case of the Casa del Obrero Mundial in Mexico which, during the Mexican Revolution, sided with the liberal government against Zapata’s insurgent peasants only to be repressed by the government once the peasant uprising was under control (see John M. Hart, *Revolutionary syndicalism in Mexico* in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*), and the aforementioned partial co-option of British syndicalism into a trade union reform movement.

⁴⁰ Anton Pannekoek, *Letter on workers’ councils*: www.marxists.org

⁴¹ Council communists love acronyms. We will only touch on the main ones here, but see the further reading for more detailed accounts.

⁴² The German word ‘union’ (Ger: ‘union’) has nothing to do with the word ‘trade union’ (Ger: ‘Gewerkschaft’). Both the council communist unions and the anarcho-syndicalist FAUD used the word ‘union’ in part to distinguish their revolutionary organisations from the mainstream trade unions.

⁴³ Program of the AAUD: www.marxists.org

political conception of their tasks and functions – a communist consciousness. In so far as this was not the case – the KAPD was conceived of as the separate organisation of conscious communists, whose role was to promote communist perspectives and goals, through its own independent activity and influence within the factory organisations.”⁴⁴

A co-thinker and sometime member of the KAPD was the Dutch Marxist, Anton Pannekoek. His book ‘Workers’ Councils’ remains one of the most widely read council communist texts, and was recently republished by anarchist publishers AK Press. Pannekoek acknowledges that the self-organised activity he advocates is indeed direct action. For Pannekoek, direct action takes place against both capital and the trade unions. In his view, the bureaucratic and inertial nature of the trade unions is a function simply of their size:

“[T]he increase in the number of workers, the urgent necessity of association, make the trade unions giant organisations, needing an ever-increasing staff of officials and leaders. These develop into a bureaucracy administering all business, a ruling power over the members, because all the power factors are in their hands.”⁴⁵

He is explicitly referring to the trade unions rather than syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist unions, and his criticisms would not seem to apply so much to the latter, which typically sought to prevent bureaucracies emerging by rejecting paid officials, and making all positions into mandated recallable delegates. In fact Pannekoek praises the IWW, although hoping it is a ‘transitional form’ that will become unnecessary as workers begin to take direct action spontaneously.⁴⁶

In place of trade union organisation, Pannekoek advocated spontaneous direct action, with workers forming and disbanding strike committees and factory councils as the struggle dictated. But in the tradition of deterministic Marxism, he linked this faith in spontaneity somewhat mechanically to the predicted ever deepening crises of capitalism:

“The depressing tendencies grow stronger under big capitalism and so the resistance of the workers must grow stronger, too. Economic crises grow more and more destructive and undermine apparently secured progress. The exploitation is intensified to retard the lowering of the profit rate for rapidly increasing capital. So again and again the workers are provoked to resistance.”⁴⁷

Pannekoek does not reject organisation; in fact, he stresses the “fight of the workers against capital is not possible without organisation.” However, “organisation springs up spontaneously, immediately”, not in the form of a new trade union but through forms such as strike committees.⁴⁸ This reliance on spontaneity and intermittent workplace organisation is one of the main differences with the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, which we will explore in detail in the following chapter. However, Pannekoek’s analysis is problematic. If the strike committee is formed spontaneously, that implies the strike itself... just happened. There may well be examples of such spontaneous strikes, but recent history does not support the idea that capitalist attacks make for spontaneous resistance. Rather, numerous factors come into play, such as the confidence and morale of the workers involved, their experiences of past struggles, the level of organisation on the shop floor, and so on. The workplace organisation of the AAUD was formed not to wage these everyday struggles, but to push for communism. Everyday struggles were left as a matter of spontaneity.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Dave Graham, *An introduction to left communism in Germany from 1914 to 1923*: libcom.org

⁴⁵ Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ councils*, p.60.

⁴⁶ Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ councils*, p.65–66.

⁴⁷ Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ councils*, p.61.

⁴⁸ Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ councils*, p.62.

⁴⁹ In Pannekoek’s defence, it’s worth noting that he was writing at a time (1936) where revolutions had been breaking out in recent memory in numerous countries, and it may be unfair to generalise his writings from that specific context to the present day conditions. Pannekoek likely had the AAUD in mind when writing ‘Workers’ councils’.

Nonetheless, the council communism of the KAPD/AAUD drew strong criticism from the party communists. Amadeo Bordiga wrote that “The declaration of the ‘Left’ Communists of Germany (KAPD) at their founding congress in April, that they were founding a party, but ‘not a party in the traditional sense of the word’, is an ideological surrender to these reactionary views of syndicalism and industrialism.”⁵⁰ In a sense, Bordiga is right. However, from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective, a rejection of revolution as party dictatorship, and an emphasis on the revolutionary power of workers organised at the point of production is not a retreat, but a significant advance on mainstream Marxism. And if Bordiga thought the KAPD and AAUD were surrendering to syndicalism, the founding of the AAUD-E soon after went one step further.

Otto Rühle was expelled from the KAPD in October 1920, and took with him some sections of the party, which merged into the AAUD forming the AAUD-E (the ‘E’ standing for ‘unitary’). Its programme espoused hostility to parliament, political parties and trade unions, banned paid officials, and advocated the international expropriation of capitalists to be managed by workers’ councils.⁵¹ Whereas the KAPD/AAUD had split the councillist movement into political and economic organisations, the AAUD-E sought to serve as a unitary organisation, one which merged the party into the factory organisation and organised at the point of production. Rühle was the leading theoretician of this tendency. His 1920 text *‘the revolution is not a party affair’* attracted the ire of Lenin, and set out an account of the revolutionary union as he saw it:

“This General Workers’ Union is taking root in the factories, building itself up in branches of industry from the base up, federally at the base, and through revolutionary shop stewards at the top. It exerts pressure from the base up, from the working masses. It is built according to their needs; it is the flesh and blood of the proletariat; the force that motivates it is the action of the masses; its soul is the burning breath of the revolution. It is not the creation of some leaders; it is not a subtly altered construction. It is neither a political party with parliamentary chatter and paid hacks, nor a trade union. It is the revolutionary proletariat.”⁵²

While the influence of syndicalism is clear, there are a number of important differences. Firstly, the councillist unions rejected everyday struggles, leaving these to either reformist unions or spontaneous action by workers. This can be seen as a product of the time – revolution seemed on the horizon, so all their energies were directed at that goal – but the reliance on spontaneity is distinct from the syndicalist stress on agitation and organisation. Similarly, workers’ struggles were only seen as being ‘political’ on a mass scale, with widespread strikes and the possibility of revolution. The meaning of ‘politics’ for anarcho-syndicalists will be taken up in the next chapter. The move away from party politics to the shop floor also brought with it a very crude workerism, rejecting struggles outside the factories, with Rühle writing that “whenever the worker is seen outside the factory, he is a petty bourgeois.”⁵³ This contrasts sharply with the wider cultural, educational and social elements of the syndicalist tradition.

Second, the council communists saw their revolutionary unions as transitional organisations to be formed on the eve of revolution to make the final push for workers’ councils and communism. This was pursued by either maintaining the dual (political) party/(economic) union organisation from mainstream Marxism, or in the case of the AAUD-E, by a merger of party and factory organisation into a ‘unitary’ political economic organisation. It was implicit that when the prospects of revolution receded, these organisations should disband and revert to more traditional Marxist forms. Indeed, the membership of the councillist groups dwindled from hundreds of thousands around 1920 to just hundreds by 1923.⁵⁴ Similarly, the struggle up to that point was to be pursued by a more traditional reformist union-

⁵⁰ Amadeo Bordiga, *Theses on the role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution*: libcom.org

⁵¹ *Guidelines of the AAUD-E*: libcom.org

⁵² Otto Rühle, *The revolution is not a party affair*: libcom.org

⁵³ Otto Rühle, *From the bourgeois to the proletarian revolution*: libcom.org

⁵⁴ Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier, *The communist left in Germany 1918–1921 (appendix)*: libcom.org

revolutionary party pairing, with the party propagandising against the limits of reformist unionism and for workers' councils.

Summary

In this chapter we have encountered three radical currents in the workers' movement: anarchism, the anti-state wing of socialism; syndicalism, a direct action union movement; and council communism, a dissident Marxist tradition which arrived at some similar political and organisational conclusions to anarchism and syndicalism. Broadly speaking, anarchism constitutes a political current, whereas syndicalism addresses itself to workers' shared economic interests. The latter sometimes left the door open for a creeping representative function and recuperation by the state. But that's not to say syndicalist currents, such as the IWW direct actionists, have not sought to make the political content more explicit, particularly in favouring unions as workers' associations for direct action as opposed to representation. In a similar vein, council communism broke with the Marxist orthodoxy separating economic trade unions from the political party and formed revolutionary unions. These also refused a representative role, insisting only workers' councils could express the interests of the working class. However, these were seen as a temporary formation on the eve of revolution, rather than the long term organising force within the working class favoured by syndicalism.

Further reading

On anarchism, the *Anarchist FAQ* is the first port of call. It's a huge, encyclopaedic account of the numerous strands of anarchism and their relation to other currents, and debunks a lot of common myths. The first volume is available in print, edited by Iain McKay, and the web version is regularly updated. *'No Gods No Masters'* by Daniel Guerin is also a highly regarded anthology. Units 5–12 of the SelfEd history of anarcho-syndicalism cover the early history of syndicalism (including anarcho-syndicalism) around the world. In terms of syndicalism, there are several recommended books. Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe's edited volume *'Revolutionary Syndicalism'* is highly informative, as is Bob Holton's *'British Syndicalism 1900–1914'*. *'The Slow Burning Fuse'* by John Quail also covers much of early British anarchism and syndicalism. In terms of council communism, there are several introductions available online which give an overview. *'An introduction to left communism in Germany from 1914 to 1923'* by Dave Graham is available on libcom.org and provides a good introduction.⁵⁵ *'The communist left in Germany 1918–1921'* by Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier is also available in full online and provides a detailed account.⁵⁶ Anton Pannekoek's *'Workers' councils'* was recently republished by AK Press, with an introduction by Noam Chomsky, and remains one of the clearest statements of council communism. Mark Shipway's *'Anti-parliamentary communism – the movement for workers' councils in Britain 1917–1945'* covers British councillist tendencies, with some overlap with syndicalism and the shop stewards' movement.

⁵⁵ Dave Graham, *An introduction to left communism in Germany 1914–1923*: libcom.org

⁵⁶ Gilles Dauvé and Denis Authier, *The communist left in Germany 1918–1921*: libcom.org

Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century

Introduction

In this chapter we will introduce anarcho-syndicalism as a synthesis of the anarchist politics and syndicalist methods we encountered in the previous chapter. This will be explored through the theory of Émile Pouget, the Argentine FORA (Argentine Regional Workers' Federation), the German FAUD (Free Workers' Union of Germany) and the Spanish CNT (National Confederation of Labour). While the mainstream workers' movement is separated into political (party) and economic (trade union) wings, anarcho-syndicalism's revolutionary unions are at the same time political and economic organisations. In countries where reformist trade unionism was not well established (such as Spain) this revolutionary current sometimes became the mainstream. Where trade unions were stronger (such as Germany), anarcho-syndicalism constituted a revolutionary alternative to the mainstream workers' movement. This chapter will also show how this synthesis of anarchism and syndicalism has taken different forms in response to different conditions, but always rejected the division of the workers' movement into economic and political wings, and rejected representation in favour of associations for direct action.

The emergence of anarcho-syndicalism

Anarcho-syndicalism, as a coherent idea, emerged from the actual practices of anarchists and syndicalists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The ideas of anarcho-syndicalism were first developed within the French CGT. However, as we have seen, the CGT never itself embraced anarcho-syndicalism but maintained an attitude of political neutrality (in principle, if not always in practice, with both parliamentary and anti-parliamentary tendencies). Thus, in tracing the evolution of anarcho-syndicalism, Rudolf Rocker writes that within the CGT, “the revolutionary wing, which had the most energetic and active elements in organised labour on its side and had at its command, moreover, the best intellectual forces in the organisation, gave to the CGT its characteristic stamp, and it was they, exclusively, who determined the development of the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.”¹ Amongst the leading members of this tendency was Émile Pouget, the vice-secretary of the union from 1901 to 1908.

Pouget wrote a number of influential pamphlets including *'Direct Action'* and *'Sabotage'*, as well as a fictionalised (to avoid the censors) manifesto of revolutionary anarchism entitled 'How we shall bring about the revolution' written in 1909 with Émile Pataud. Pouget never saw his ideas realised fully within the CGT and left the union movement after it was captured by reformists. But they were taken up enthusiastically by others elsewhere. For that reason, they are worth exploring further. In the opening passage of the pamphlet 'Direct Action', Pouget sets out the definition which all anarcho-syndicalism goes by:

“Direct action is the symbol of revolutionary unionism in action. This formula is representative of the twofold battle against exploitation and oppression. It proclaims, with inherent clarity, the direction and orientation of the working class's endeavours in its relentless attack upon capitalism. Direct action is a notion of such clarity, of such self-evident transparency, that merely to speak the words defines and explains them. It means that the working class,

¹ Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-syndicalism: libcom.org

in constant rebellion against the existing state of affairs, expects nothing from outside people, powers or forces, but rather creates its own conditions of struggle and looks to itself for its means of action. It means that, against the existing society which recognises only the citizen, rises the producer. And that that producer, having grasped that any social grouping models itself upon its system of production, intends to attack directly the capitalist mode of production in order to transform it, by eliminating the employer and thereby achieving sovereignty in the workshop – the essential condition for the enjoyment of real freedom.’²

Considering these words were penned over a century ago, we can make only minor criticisms. The emphasis on *producers* rather than the working class in a more general sense could be seen to treat work as the exclusive site of struggle and thus exclude the unemployed, housewives and others (although as we will see, the subsequent anarcho-syndicalist movement did make attempts, with varying success, to organise these groups too). The rise of mass media and subsequently of publicity stunts by various campaigners and activists has mystified the once self-evident clarity of direct action with images of men dressed as superheroes and imaginative lobbies of parliament. Pouget would have had no time for such nonsense, insisting that “direct action thus implies that the working class subscribes to notions of freedom and autonomy instead of genuflecting before the principle of authority.”³ For Pouget parliament and democracy were just the latest form of this principle of authority which must be overthrown, not petitioned or participated in. In ‘Sabotage’, he sets out a communist analysis of wage labour which could have been lifted from Marx (distinguishing between labour and labour power, for instance⁴), but couples this analysis of exploitation with that of oppression, insisting on the inseparability of such economic and political struggles and their unity through working class direct action. Pouget also deals with the criticism that fighting for concessions under capitalism is either reformist or utopian, by arguing that what is revolutionary about working class direct action is that it links the means and ends of the revolutionary union whilst waging the everyday struggle:

“This task of laying the groundwork for the future is, thanks to direct action, in no way at odds with the day to day struggle. The tactical superiority of direct action rests precisely in its unparalleled plasticity: organisations actively engaged in the practice are not required to confine themselves to beatific waiting for the advent of social changes. They live in the present with all possible combativity, sacrificing neither the present to the future, nor the future to the present. It follows from this, from this capacity for facing up simultaneously to the demands of the moment and those of the future and from this compatibility in the two-pronged task to be carried forward, that the ideal for which they strive, far from being overshadowed or neglected, is thereby clarified, defined and made more discernible.

“Which is why it is both inane and false to describe revolutionaries drawing their inspiration from direct action methods as “advocates of all-or-nothing”. True, they are advocates of wresting EVERYTHING from the bourgeoisie! But, until such time as they will have amassed sufficient strength to carry through this task of general expropriation, they do not rest upon their laurels and miss no chance to win partial improvements which, being achieved at some cost to capitalist privileges, represent a sort of partial expropriation and pave the way to more comprehensive demands. From which it is plain that direct action is the plain and simple fleshing-out of the spirit of revolt: it fleshes out the class struggle, shifting it from the realm of theory and abstraction into the realm of practice and accomplishment. As a result, direct action is the class struggle lived on a daily basis, an ongoing attack upon capitalism.”⁵

² Émile Pouget, Direct action: libcom.org

³ Émile Pouget, Direct action: libcom.org

⁴ Émile Pouget, Sabotage: libcom.org

⁵ Émile Pouget, Direct action: libcom.org

For Pouget, this was to culminate in the insurrectionary general strike. He held that the revolution could not be planned, but would develop organically from the overlapping partial struggles of workers. Thus the general strike would come about through a generalisation of these escalating struggles, which the revolutionary union sought to organise:

“The stoppage of work, which on the previous day had been spontaneous, and was due to the accident of personal initiative and impulse, now became regularised and generalised in a methodical way, that showed the influence of the union decisions.”⁶

But this generalisation of the strike, if successful, would pit the workers’ hunger against the capitalists’ deep pockets. So once the strike was generalised and developed, the revolutionary union would seek to organise expropriations, where workers take over production of goods and services and self-manage them on the basis of needs. So, while up to this point, the revolutionary union had been an organising force made up of “an active minority”, it would now throw its ranks open to all, and use its federal structure as the basis for administering the newly expropriated social production. Thus, while it “had been, in the past, an organisation for fighting (...) [now] it was to be transformed into a social organism”.⁷ By throwing open its ranks, the revolutionary union would transform itself from a revolutionary minority of class conscious workers fighting against capitalism, into a federal structure for the self-management of the new society. As to the nature of that society, Pataud and Pouget did not see a contradiction between collectivism and communism. Rather, they saw it as inevitable that “pure communism” would only emerge in fits and starts, and since people had to eat in the meantime, something like collectivism could be employed for “luxury items” wherever scarcity meant that free distribution according to needs was not possible.⁸ But from the start of expropriation, necessary goods and services – food, water and so on – were to be provided free on the production of a union card (with the union now transformed from a fighting organisation to an administrative one open to all workers). Pouget’s brand of anarcho-syndicalism would prove influential on the Spanish CNT. But first, let’s look at the lesser known FORA of Argentina.

The FORA was founded in 1904 out of a merger of existing unions on an explicitly anarcho-communist basis. However, contrary to Pouget’s vision, they saw the revolutionary union as a necessary product of capitalism, and thus did not think it should become the structure of the new society:

“We must not forget that a union is merely an economic by-product of the capitalist system, born from the needs of this epoch. To preserve it after the revolution would imply preserving the capitalist system that gave rise to it. We, as anarchists accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and we try to ensure that they should approximate as closely to our revolutionary ideals. We recommend the widest possible study of the economic philosophical principles of anarchist communism. This education, going on from concentrating on achieving the eight-hour day will emancipate us from mental slavery and consequently lead to the hoped-for social revolution.”⁹

The FORA had its roots in the immigrant community, which contained many European radicals in exile, including veterans of the Paris Commune. Thus, as resident aliens without the right to vote, party politics was not an option for many of its founders, even if they’d been that way inclined. This may help account for the FORA’s overtly anti-state communist ideology, as opposed to the ‘political

⁶ Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the revolution*, p.18. Note the original French ‘syndicat’ is translated here simply as ‘union’ as opposed to ‘trade union’ in the English printed edition, since they are clearly talking about the revolutionary union and not ordinary trade unions.

⁷ Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the revolution*, p.63.

⁸ Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the revolution*, p.134–5.

⁹ The FORA’s founding pact of solidarity, quoted in *Revolutionary unionism in Latin America – the FORA in Argentina*:libcom.org

neutrality' more common amongst syndicalist unions at the time. In these two aspects, its anarchist communist ideology and its insistence the union should not form the basis of the post-capitalist society, the FORA is often contrasted with the Spanish CNT (who were closer to Pouget's approach). There are certainly differences between the two, stemming from the differences in context, as well as differing theoretical conceptions of anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary social change. For instance, while the CNT advocated industrial unionism, the "FORA took a stand against industrial (sectoral) forms of organization, considering that they imitated capitalism."¹⁰ In part because the FORA did not aim to form the structure of the new society, it formed a *regional* federation optimised for its agitational and organisational activities, as opposed to an *industrial* federation which could form the nucleus of a structure of social administration during the insurrectionary general strike.

FORA's theoreticians developed a critique of European revolutionary syndicalism which they considered overly Marxist, of European anarcho-syndicalism, which they saw as trying in vain to reconcile revolutionary syndicalism with anarchism, and also of separate anarchist political organisations as proposed by Malatesta and the Platform. The "FORA countered this by advancing a model of an 'anarchist organization of workers,' structured like a syndicate but not limiting itself to strictly economic problems but also taking up issues of solidarity, mutual aid, and anarchist communism."¹¹ Thus, the FORA developed the most overtly ideological brand of anarcho-syndicalism, and it proved highly effective. With a membership of between 40,000 and 100,000 throughout the 1920s, they managed to win six hour work days through a series of local and regional general strikes.

The FORA's stance, that imitating capitalism's structure with an industrial union would lead to imitating capitalist relations after the revolution, was related to its conception of libertarian communism. This is worth examining, because it was partly at the root of an important split. Industrialisation was in its relatively early stages in Argentina at the dawn of the 20th century, and people had living memory of their ties to the land. Whilst these had been semi-feudal and hardly desirable conditions, they were still considered favourably by many compared with the horrors of modern industry and its giant sweatshops. The FORA critiqued the Marxist view that capitalist industrialisation was progressive as it developed the capacity for material abundance which made communism possible. They warned that imitating the structures of capitalism, whether its political state or its economic division of labour, would lead to just another version of capitalism, as had happened with the Communist Party in Russia.

Instead, the FORA theoreticians turned to the anarchist communist, Peter Kropotkin, for inspiration. They argued history was not driven by inexorable economic laws, but also by ideas and ethical concepts (a critique later taken up by the German anarcho-syndicalist, Rudolf Rocker, in the first chapter of his '*Nationalism and culture*'). Consequently, rejecting the progressive nature of industry, they favoured a more agrarian communism based on the free commune and small scale production. One of their leading theoreticians, Emilio López Arango, wrote that rather than being the inheritor of the earth following on from capitalist industrialisation, the working class was rather:

"[D]estined to become the wall which would stem the tide of industrial imperialism. Only by creating ethical values which would enable the proletariat to understand social problems independently from bourgeois civilization would it be possible to arrive at an indestructible basis for an anti-capitalist and anti-Marxist revolution – a revolution which would do away with the regime of large-scale industry and financial, industrial, and commercial trusts."¹²

This anti-industrialism led to a split in 1915. At the 9th Congress of the FORA, its commitment to anarchism was overturned in favour of a 'neutral' syndicalist stance. The anarchist unions immediately convened an emergency Congress and reverted to their anarchist communist position. There were now two FORAs. The anarcho-syndicalist one joined the IWA at its founding in 1922, while the more

¹⁰ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.82.

¹¹ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.103.

¹² Quoted in Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.102–103.

moderate split, known as the 'FORA IX' (which wasn't communist and favoured industrial unionism), merged into the Union Sindical Argentina in the same year, and then later into the Argentinean CGT. The FORA IX's slide into reformism and class collaboration can be measured by the fact the FORA continued to face harsh repression, whilst its more moderate splits were relatively unimpeded (the CGT ended up as part of the Peronist corporatist settlement in the 1950s, when the Ministry of Labour made it the mandatory union for workers).¹³

Before we turn to the most famous anarcho-syndicalist organisation, the CNT, we will consider one more of the lesser known anarcho-syndicalist unions of the 20th century, the FAUD of Germany. Germany faced very different conditions to Argentina. There was already an established trade union movement several million strong, and outside of this was only the small Free Association of German Trade Unions (FVdG), a decentralised federation whose membership typically hovered around 6,000 nationally, and had peaked at 18,000 in 1901. The FVdG was originally the economic wing of the Social Democratic Party (SDP), but as this party gained power and revealed its reformist, class collaborationist nature, the FVdG increasingly adopted an anti-parliamentary stance and advocated socialism by means of the general strike rather than parliament led reforms. The years of World War I saw rising discontent amongst German workers at war discipline in production and austerity in living standards. This regime was being managed by the mainstream trade unions (Gewerkschaften), and led to increasing dissent amongst the workers in their ranks. The Russian Revolution of 1917 was taken by many as the signal that international revolution was imminent, and this sparked an upsurge in militancy.

During 1918–19, there was a near revolution in Germany. Workers occupied factories in some regions, forming factory councils to manage them; "the influence of the syndicalists rose quickly after the armed suppression of a general strike in the Ruhr in April 1919."¹⁴ Indeed, "disappointed with the 'old union', the workers withheld membership dues, symbolically burned union cards, and urged entry into the FVdG."¹⁵ In December 1919, the FVdG, together with several breakaways from the mainstream unions and some anarchists, formed the Free Workers' Union of Germany (FAUD). The shift from 'gewerkschaft' (trade union) to 'union' (association of workers) signified the shift to anarcho-syndicalism. In 1920, there were open, civil war type battles in the industrialised Ruhr region. In the 'Red Army of the Ruhr', 45% of the soldiers were FAUD members.¹⁶ The FAUD, numbering some 112,000, called in vain for a general strike to turn back the tide of counter revolution, which was seeing revolutionaries extrajudicially murdered by the social democratic SPD government in league with the Freikorps, right wing militias of demobilised troops. The counter revolution most famously claimed the lives of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht of the Communist Party.

At the FAUD's founding congress, the organisation had near unanimously adopted Rudolf Rocker's 'declaration of the principles of syndicalism.'¹⁷ Rocker was a communist anarchist who put an emphasis on both union action by workers and cultural change. A year later the FAUD appended 'anarcho-syndicalist' to their name, confirming this orientation. However, "the ebb of the revolutionary wave and government repressions led to a rapid decrease in the membership of the organization", dwindling from over 100,000 to under 70,000 by 1922.¹⁸ As part of its cultural activities, the FAUD also formed women's leagues in order to discuss the situation of working class women. These peaked at around 1,000 members and declined through the 1920s. The FAUD's membership as a whole continued to decline through the 1920s as the Weimar Republic established itself. Membership stabilised around 25,000, higher than any of its pre-war, pre-revolution predecessors. The FAUD's emphasis on political and cultural organising

¹³ See Revolutionary unionism in Latin America – the FORA in Argentina: libcom.org

¹⁴ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.49.

¹⁵ Hans Manfred Bock, *Anarchosyndicalism in the German labour movement: a distinctive minority tradition in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.59.

¹⁶ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.50.

¹⁷ Hans Manfred Bock, *Anarchosyndicalism in the German labour movement: a distinctive minority tradition in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), Revolutionary syndicalism*, p. 72–73.

¹⁸ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.50–51.

also meant that, despite its decline, “the FAUD remained relatively the strongest element within the anti-authoritarian camp of the Weimar Republic.”¹⁹ Summarising the FAUD’s brand of anarcho-syndicalism, Vadim Damier writes that:

“According to the notion of the German anarcho-syndicalists, in the course of a victorious general strike it was appropriate to carry out the expropriation of private property, enterprises, food stores, real estate, etc. The management of enterprises was to be transferred into the hands of Councils of workers and employees [office workers]; the management of dwellings into the hands of Councils of tenants. Delegates from enterprises and districts would constitute a Commune. Money and the system of commodity production (for sale) was slated to be abolished.”²⁰

The possibility of implementing this receded as the revolution was crushed by the combined forces of the Social Democrats and the Freikorps, who handled their dirty work. The Social Democrats legalised the factory councils in 1920, causing the FAUD to boycott them, as they turned from revolutionary organs into organs of class collaboration (similar institutions – works councils – were adopted across Europe after World War II). The fact the working class largely remained behind the Social Democrats in doing both of these things can’t be ignored either, and would seem to reflect the lack of anti-parliamentary agitation and organisation amongst the class prior to the war and revolution. The FAUD’s council model of social revolution meant they often worked alongside the council communist organisations, particularly in several armed uprisings in 1920 and 1921. But they remained critical towards the AAUD’s subjugation to the tutelage of the KAPD. When the AAUD-E rejected political parties, they were invited as observers to FAUD conferences. But despite some overlap of membership, there remained important differences over the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, and the role of revolutionary unions.

The FORA and the FAUD were not of course the only anarcho-syndicalist organisations of the 20th century. But these examples help to show how anarcho-syndicalism has taken different forms in different places in response to different conditions. Having surveyed the FORA and the FAUD, we can now turn to look at their more famous sister section in the International Workers Association, the CNT.

The CNT in the Spanish (counter) revolution

It is ironic that the CNT is the most famous, indeed often taken as the definitive, anarcho-syndicalist organisation. Yet, when compared to the FORA, the FAUD and others, it was perhaps the least successful in synthesising anarchism and syndicalism into a coherent whole. That is not to say it was not anarcho-syndicalist – what else do you call a syndicalist union with an anarchist programme that organises for anarchist revolution? Rather, the two tendencies antagonistically battled it out within the organisation, and the CNT as a whole was thus a contradictory amalgamation of syndicalist union and anarchist organisation. It was simultaneously non-ideological and libertarian communist, revolutionary and reformist, collectivist and communist, with different tendencies winning out at different times under different conditions. Founded in 1910 by a merger of existing unions, roughly on the model of the French CGT, from the start the CNT was under heavy anarchist influence and rejected ‘neutrality’ for a libertarian communist programme. Two decades of agitation culminated in the revolutionary events of 1936.

The libertarian Marxist, Guy Debord, no fan of anarchism, writes that “in 1936, anarchism in fact led a social revolution, the most advanced model of proletarian power in all time” – high praise indeed. However, he continues to summarise the paradox of the Spanish revolution:

¹⁹ Hans Manfred Bock, *Anarchosyndicalism in the German labour movement: a distinctive minority tradition* in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.63.

²⁰ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.68.

“[T]he organized anarchist movement showed itself unable to extend the demi-victories of the revolution, or even to defend them. Its known leaders became ministers and hostages of the bourgeois state which destroyed the revolution only to lose the civil war.”²¹

Even for disinterested students of history, this would pose a conundrum. For anarcho-syndicalists even more so: is this where our efforts lead, to inevitable counter revolution? Clearly, we don't think so, but this puzzle cannot go unaddressed. The explanations are often unsatisfactory. On the one hand, sympathisers often dismiss the CNT's turn to class collaboration as either a product of extraordinary circumstances, or mistakes. But the extraordinary circumstances of social revolution were after all the CNT's declared goal. And the mere concept of an anarchist Minister of Justice, never mind its actual existence, requires a more convincing explanation than the mistakes of individuals.

But on the other hand, critics of anarcho-syndicalism tend to find in the complex events of Spain the confirmation of their own particular ideology. So we are told that this is what happens when you lack a vanguard party, or this is what happens when you make a revolution in the wrong period of history, or that this confirms that any union is by its very nature destined to side with the state against the working class. This last claim is the most common anarchist criticism of anarcho-syndicalism, so it's worth looking at why it doesn't hold up. For one thing, we've already seen examples of anarcho-syndicalist unions which didn't do this in the FORA and the FAUD. But also, the claim doesn't tell us what about the CNT's very nature supposedly doomed it.²² There certainly were tendencies towards class collaboration in the CNT before 1936, but these were not the sole source of the collaboration with the Popular Front government. Additionally, when we look closely, mistakes do appear to play a role, but one which poses as many questions as answers.

None of this is to say that even if everything had gone perfectly, the revolution in Spain could have established durable libertarian communism. *Even if* Franco's fascists and the bourgeois republic had been defeated, there would have likely been a foreign intervention by the imperialist powers. By this time, fascism had already crushed the IWA in Italy and Germany, British workers had been pegged back by the manoeuvrings of the TUC and Labour Party in the 1926 General Strike, and the CGT in France was by now thoroughly collaborationist and bureaucratised, and the anarcho-syndicalist movement small. *Even if* the Spanish proletariat had defeated imperialist intervention, it would have stood alone in a world on the brink of total war.²³ It's impossible to see how 'libertarian communism in one country' could have triumphed. However, this recourse to 'objective conditions' only explains the failure of the revolution in a general sense. It doesn't explain why it ultimately failed *the way it did*, and why the CNT collaborated with the bourgeois state.

On the 17th of July 1936, General Franco staged a military coup. The coup had been long expected, and in fact came largely as a result of the militancy of the working class and peasantry in general, and of the CNT in particular. The CNT had been pursuing a strategy of 'revolutionary gymnastics', launching a wave of militant strikes, occupations and insurrections which had rendered the state relatively powerless to enforce the rule of the propertied class. Increasingly, the ruling class turned away from republican democracy towards monarchy, church and military, as sources of authority to discipline the labouring classes, a peculiarly Spanish variant of fascism. So when rumours of the impending coup spread, the CNT was at the forefront of organising resistance, or rather social revolution, as they saw the choice as one between fascism and libertarian communism. On the docks, CNT unions requisitioned arms shipments, and their militants disarmed police of their firearms in the weeks leading up to the coup,

²¹ Guy Debord, *Society of the spectacle*, thesis 94: libcom.org

²² This argument is often advanced by those influenced by council communism, seemingly unaware that the council communist critique was aimed at the German trade unions (*Gewerkschaften*), and not the various revolutionary unions (anarcho-syndicalist FAUD, council communist AAUD, AAUD-E...). For example, Anton Pannekoek dedicates a section of his book 'Workers' councils' to a scathing critique of trade unionism, and then praises the North American IWW just a few pages later.

²³ Although we can't, of course, know how a more successful revolution may have changed that course of history. Such counterfactual speculations are of limited value, but the point of the isolation of the revolution stands.

stockpiling them for arming the workers. When the coup came, the CNT called a general strike and the fascist forces were met on the streets by armed workers, with CNT militants on the front lines.

Years of direct action, coupled with libertarian communist propaganda, meant when the opportunity arose, workers and peasants didn't hesitate to take over the factories and fields and start running them on the basis of needs. In much of the countryside and many of the cities, production was restarted under workers' control along libertarian communist lines, with free access (sometimes on production of a union card along the lines Pouget had advocated). Other factories and firms were run on a collectivist basis, or where money and markets still existed as a sort of "self-management straddling capitalism and socialism, which we maintain would not have occurred had the revolution been able to extend itself fully", as participant, Gaston Leval, put it.²⁴ Whether this reflected collectivist ideology within the CNT, or the limits of trying to implement 'communism in one region', or whether the former was merely a rationalisation of the latter, are questions to be taken up another time. But that millions of workers and peasants took part in the most sweeping social revolution in history is not in doubt. There is also no doubt that the CNT initially played the revolutionary role ascribed to it by anarcho-syndicalist theory. Indeed, without the CNT, there would have been no revolution.

When the dust settled following the street fighting on the 19th July 1936, Franco's forces controlled about half the country, whereas the other half was controlled by the insurgent workers and peasants. Indeed:

"[T]he regional government of Catalonia (the Generalitat) headed by Luis Companys controlled only its own building. Local administrations were either removed or neutralized. The army and police were either disbanded or destroyed. Barcelona was controlled by workers' militias, primarily anarcho-syndicalist in composition."²⁵

Thus in Barcelona, the CNT's heartland, events transpired which help us untangle the perplexing series of events which followed. Catalan President Luis Companys recognised his position of weakness, having virtually no forces at his disposal, while workers were in control of the streets and busy expropriating the fields, factories and workplaces across Catalonia and beyond. He invited the CNT to a meeting and told them the following:

"First of all, I must acknowledge that the CNT and FAI [anarchists within the CNT] have never been treated as merited their true importance. You have always been harshly persecuted. Even I, who had been your ally, was forced by political realities to oppose and persecute you, much as it pained me. Today you are masters of the city and Catalonia. You alone defeated the fascists, although I hope you will not take offense if I point out that you received some help from Guards, Mozos [Catalan police] and men loyal to my party. (...) But the truth is that, harshly oppressed until two days ago, you have defeated the fascist soldiers. Knowing what and who you are, I can only employ the most sincere language. You've won. Everything is in your power. If you do not want or need me as President of Catalonia, tell me now, so that I can become another soldier in the battle against fascism."²⁶

The heavily armed CNT-FAI delegation stood before the President of Catalonia and heard him effectively beg their mercy. Companys had one proposal: a collaboration against fascism with the republican political parties, whose leaders he had gathered in an adjoining room.

"The anarcho-syndicalists, who now enjoyed a dominant influence among the workers of Catalonia, were confronted by a decision about what to do with this power: whether to destroy it, take it into their own hands, or hand it over to others."²⁷

²⁴ Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish revolution*: libcom.org

²⁵ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.123.

²⁶ Quoted in Abel Paz, *Durruti in the Spanish revolution*, p.457.

²⁷ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.123.

How did the CNT snatch defeat from the jaws of victory? As they saw it, they faced a stark choice: either the CNT took power in an oxymoronic ‘anarchist dictatorship’, or the CNT shared power with the bourgeois political forces via Companys’ proposal for an anti-fascist popular front.

“Within the CNT there had long existed a belief that a genuine social revolution would be possible only when the CNT represented an overwhelming majority of the workers in the whole of Spain.”²⁸

Even in its Catalan heartland, the CNT only accounted for less than half of the working class. Having made access to collectivised services like transport conditional on a union card, they faced an impasse. As they saw it, they could either substitute themselves for the working class as a whole and take power as the CNT, without having gathered all the workers and peasants in their ranks (they rightly saw this ‘anarchist dictatorship’ as substitutionism, repeating the errors of the Russian Revolution, where the Communist Party did just that). Or they could join Companys’ popular front.

While the workers were busy forming neighbourhood and factory committees, often jointly with workers in the socialist UGT, the third option of a council system had already been ruled out in the inter-war years. While the German anarcho-syndicalists, as well as the Russian syndicalist GP Maximov, had both supported the workers’ councils in their respective revolutions, and indeed a “system of free councils” is enshrined in the statutes of the IWA, the CNT had reflected on the failings of the Russian and German revolutions. They concluded that, in part at least, these failings were down to the ability of political parties to infiltrate and manipulate the councils (as the Communist Party did in Russia). Their alternative was the kind of model Émile Pouget had outlined, where the union would throw open its ranks to the class during the revolution, but thereby exclude professional revolutionaries and other non-working class or peasant forces from influencing the course of the revolution. Therefore, having ruled out the option of a council system, and fearful of repeating the path of the Russian Communist Party in taking power on behalf of the working class, by a process of elimination the CNT was left with class collaboration through the popular front.

This was probably the worst option. At least taking power would have meant the possibility of a Pouget type scenario, where any worker or peasant could just join the union and have control of it through the rank and file assemblies, as the CNT was far more member controlled than the centralised, hierarchic Russian Communist Party. No sooner had the CNT-FAI delegation left Companys’ office than he set about working towards the popular front. Thus, collaboration fast became a *fait accompli*, with the CNT’s lay activists outmanoeuvred by experienced politicians as the CNT entered the unfamiliar world of representative politics it had so long opposed. While the CNT unions had the possibility of recalling their delegates and thus stopping the decision to collaborate, those who were so inclined were talked out of it by others in the union.

“The activists of the CNT did not risk taking the path of independent revolutionary action, dreading the prospect of war on three fronts: against the fascists, the government, and possibly foreign interventionists. In other words, the majority of the activists believed it was premature to talk about social revolution on a country-wide scale, while libertarian communism in Catalonia alone was inevitably doomed.”²⁹

This leaves one more dilemma. Fast forward 10 months, and the CNT, as part of the Catalan government, opposed its own armed rank and file in the ‘May days’. How had an anarcho-syndicalist union, where delegates aren’t meant to have any power over the members in assembly, ever developed to the point where this was possible? The answer to this lies in the contradictory nature of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism.

²⁸ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.124.

²⁹ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.130.

“One must also take note of the fact that the CNT had always harboured reformist tendencies which from time to time took control of the organization. Thus, Pestaña and Piero, who headed the CNT at the end of the 1920’s and the beginning of the 1930’s, supported close contacts with republican political organizations, and in 1931–1932 became the leaders of a reformist group, the “Treintistas.” A significant part of this fraction quit the CNT, but returned to it in 1936. However, besides the “Treintistas” there remained a substantial number of “pure” syndicalists in the union federation as well as members who were simply pragmatically inclined. To a certain extent, this was a consequence of the contradictory organizational vision of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism, which tried to combine anarchist goals and social ideals with the revolutionary syndicalist principle of trade unions being open “to all workers,” independently of their convictions. The membership of the CNT were far from being made up entirely of conscious anarchists; this was particularly true of those who had joined during the period of the Republic (from 1931 on). These partisans of a pragmatic approach could be relied upon by those activists and members of the executive organs of the CNT who preferred to avoid risky, “extremist” decisions.”³⁰

Thus, the CNT had never really moved away from the French CGT’s model of ‘neutral’ economic unionism, but had nonetheless tried to bolt anarchist politics on the top. To prevent the tendency of neutral syndicalism towards reformism which, in crude terms, derives from lots of reformist members plus internal democracy, the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) had been formed in 1927. The FAI served as a counter weight to the reformist political factions within the CNT such as Angel Pestaña and the other ‘Trientistas’ (‘the Thirty’). But what this meant was recreating the split between the political and the economic. However, here the split was not between a union and a party, rather it was a vertical split between the economically recruited rank and file and the political factions vying for control at the top. The internal split between the economic and the political created a space in which a creeping representative function began to develop, with competing tendencies elected to run the union on the members’ behalf (though there were no paid officials, and they were still subject to mandates and recall).

The reformists had from time to time taken control of the CNT, so can’t simply be dismissed as an insignificant minority. They clearly had a base in the unions which they could rely on for support. The CNT was trying to have its cake and eat it: it wanted a membership recruited on a non-ideological basis, but it didn’t want that to result in the election of reformists to key positions, or to otherwise compromise the CNT’s anarchist ideology.³¹ The vertical split between the political and the economic, though well intentioned as an attempt to maintain revolutionary anarchist politics with a ‘neutral syndicalist’ organisational model, carried within it the seeds of bureaucratisation. It did so because it created a cleavage between an ideological leadership and the rank and file (of which at least a substantial minority’s, and sometimes a majority’s, views were at variance with that leadership). The booming membership growth under the Republic exacerbated this dynamic, though for most of that time the main reformists were outside the CNT. But the problem didn’t go away with the expulsion of ‘the Thirty’ in 1931. On hearing of a secret meeting between reformists in the CNT and the Catalan government in 1934, CNT militant, Buenaventura Durruti, wrote:

“Why did we fight ‘the Thirty’ if we’re also practicing ‘thirty-ism’? Isn’t it a form of ‘thirty-ism’ to complain to Companys about the fact that we’re persecuted? What’s the difference

³⁰ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.126.

³¹ More precisely, ‘the CNT’ didn’t want this because it wasn’t a unitary whole. There were competing visions of what the CNT should be and this was the de facto compromise between the competing tendencies. Durruti commented that: “Some think the organisation is simply a vehicle for defending their economic interests. Others see it as an organisation that works with the anarchists for social transformation. Of course it makes sense that it’s so difficult for the straight union activists and anarchists to get along.” Indeed, Francisco Ascaso, referring to the ‘straight union activists’ of the Thirty, commented that “all organisations tow a great deal of dead weight behind them, and that is something the CNT cannot avoid.” Abel Paz, Durruti in the Spanish revolution, p.381 and p.288 respectively.

between Companys, Casares Quiroga, and Maura? Aren't they all bourgeois? They persecute us. Yes, of course they do. We're a threat to the system they represent. If we don't want them to harass us, then we should just submit to their laws, integrate ourselves into their system, and bureaucratise ourselves to the marrow. Then we can become perfect traitors to the working class, like the Socialists and everyone else who lives at the workers' expense. They won't bother us if we do that. But do we really want to become *that*?³²

We can therefore conclude the tendency was a structural one rather than being attributable to individual reformist leaders. While the FAI and other revolutionaries succeeded in combating the reformists, the unintended consequence of this was to create a separation between the ideological leadership and the rank and file which, with collaboration with state power, was turned against that rank and file when the leadership failed them and they were making the revolution. And this raises one final point. Ultimately, both the FAI and other political groups, such as the Friends of Durruti, proved impotent, despite their significant efforts, to prevent the CNT's slide from revolutionary force to a counter revolutionary one. This reflects the fact that the tendency towards bureaucratisation and collaboration was a product of the, albeit modified, neutral syndicalist model the CNT had adopted. The very particular conditions of pre-1936 Spain had prevented this tendency manifesting more strongly earlier, though there had been signs such as 'the Thirty'. For example, it was the state which rebuffed the overtures of the reformists, who subsequently drew Durruti's above quoted ire.

Yet, neither does this make the case for political organisation to supplement union organisation. On the contrary, the political organisations within the CNT ultimately failed. And indeed, their number included more reformist anarchists such as Juan Peiro³³ and, arguably, Diego Abad de Santillán,³⁴ who had supported the industrialists in the FORA,³⁵ advocated collaboration with the popular front from the start,³⁶ and advocated collectivist economics not too dissimilar to self-managed capitalism, with prices, tax reforms and so on.³⁷ So the political organisations charged with ensuring the revolutionary fidelity of the CNT weren't free of reformists themselves. Indeed, there's absolutely no reason why ideological anarchists cannot be reformists; revolutionary ideology is often a foil for reformist practice.

But this wasn't a problem inherent to all anarcho-syndicalism, but one specific to the CNT's particular contradictory fusion of 'neutral syndicalist' structures and revolutionary anarchism, a fusion that was only tentatively possible under particular historical conditions. The problem does not lie simply in the CNT's openness to 'all workers' resulting in a lack of anarchist ideology (the rank and file, after all, made the revolution), but rather in its contradictory and contested nature. The problem was not that the leadership were anarchist or reformist, but that a leadership layer had emerged at all. After all, there was always a reformist tendency within the CNT leadership, which could draw support from reformist sections of the rank and file. The CNT was both a reformist and a revolutionary union at the same time. These tendencies would not decisively split until after the death of Franco in the 1970s, when the more reformist CGT split from the anarcho-syndicalist CNT over the question of participating in works councils and accepting state funds.

The tragedy lay in the fact that this contradiction was largely masked by circumstances until it mattered most. Precisely as the rank and file overtook their 'revolutionary leaders' who had kept the

³² Abel Paz, Durruti in the Spanish revolution, p.342.

³³ Peiro "was a member of a group affiliated to the FAI" (Stuart Christie, *We, the anarchists! A study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation*, p.50). He was also one of the signatories to the 'Manifesto of the Thirty' and thought conditions were not right for revolution, arguing for a less radical approach.

³⁴ De Santillán was not a straight reformist and argued vociferously against conflating syndicalism with the labour movement in general (*We, the anarchists! A study of the Iberian Anarchist Federation*, p.16). But within the FAI he was one of the more reformist members in practice.

³⁵ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.116.

³⁶ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.126. In de Santillán's defence, his argument was based on the impossibility of libertarian communism in one country. However, class collaboration is still not an anarcho-syndicalist solution.

³⁷ Vadim Damier, *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*, p.138. De Santillán argued these reforms would lead to the kind of socio-economic changes the CNT stood for, but nonetheless this was a reformist position to take.

reformists in check, those very same revolutionary leaders were co-opted against the insurgent rank and file. Thus, in a curious way, the failures of Spanish anarcho-syndicalism were twofold. On the one hand a failure to be syndicalist enough, tolerating the separation of a leadership layer from the rank and file to keep the reformists at bay. On the other hand, a failure to be anarchist enough, failing to smash the state (in Catalonia at least) when given the chance and thus allowing it to recombine its forces against the revolution and co-opt the CNT's leadership to that end. It is easy, of course, to supersede the failings of the revolution in theory. But that means little until they are superseded in practice. We must learn from the failings of the CNT. But that is only half of it. The task is to do better.

Theorising anarcho-syndicalism

The history of the twentieth century makes clear there are two distinct currents within syndicalism. On the one hand, 'neutral' or economic syndicalism, which seeks to unite all workers within its ranks on the basis of economic interests.³⁸ Pierre Monatte, in his debate with Malatesta at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress, was one of the clearest exponents of this tendency.³⁹ On the other hand, there is the tendency which seeks to unite syndicalist methods with anarchist philosophy and its goal of social transformation – anarcho-syndicalism. However, history does not follow such neat conceptual distinctions, and these opposing tendencies often found themselves battling it out inside the same organisation. In the French CGT, the anarcho-syndicalists' influence waned as the union grew. In the Spanish CNT, the price of keeping the reformists at bay was a semi-bureaucratisation which, in the course of the Spanish revolution, proved the CNT's undoing. In Argentina, these tendencies spun out into the anarcho-syndicalist FORA and the 'neutral' FORA IX, on a trajectory of integration into the state. Such a split did not occur elsewhere in the anarcho-syndicalist movement until 1956, when the Swedish SAC left the International Workers Association (IWA) in a row over administering state unemployment benefits; again in 1979, when the CNT in Spain split, producing the CGT-E; and 1993, when the French CNT split into the CNT-AIT and CNT-Vignoles, the latter two over participation in state sponsored works council elections (state backed bodies in which unions compete for votes to represent workers, and receive proportional state subsidies in return). By the end of the 20th century, these tendencies had more or less all spun out into separate organisations. It is the anarcho-syndicalist (i.e. IWA) current with which we are concerned here.⁴⁰

As we have seen, anarcho-syndicalism combines the political philosophy and goals of anarchism with the economic organisation and methods of syndicalism. This political economic organisation is a matter of practical experimentation, taking different forms in different places, adapted to circumstances. As the then secretary of the IWA, Pierre Besnard, wrote in 1937,

“like any truly social doctrine, anarcho-syndicalism is essentially a matter of trial and error. (...) [T]he idea springs from the act and returns to it.”⁴¹

This trial and error approach inevitably includes errors, such as those in Spain. But if the economic content of anarcho-syndicalism is self-evident – organising workers *as workers* to fight for their interests – then what is the political content? Lenin famously commented that “politics begin where millions of men and women are; where there are not thousands, but millions.”⁴² Anarcho-syndicalists could not

³⁸ It tends to call itself 'revolutionary syndicalism' or even insist it is also anarcho-syndicalist. It is typically labelled by its critics 'reformist syndicalism'. We've avoided either term here to avoid confusion.

³⁹ In Maurizio Antonioli (ed), *The international anarchist congress of Amsterdam (1907)*.

⁴⁰ These splits were acrimonious, destructive and sometimes violent. But we cannot help thinking it was for the best, since revolutionary and reformist unionism cannot easily coexist in the same organisation outside of very specific conditions which bind them together.

⁴¹ Pierre Besnard, *Anarcho-syndicalism and anarchism: libcom.org*

⁴² Vladimir Illych Lenin, *Political report of the central committee to the extraordinary seventh congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik): www.marxists.org*

disagree more strongly. This is in fact one of the fundamental differences with Marxism, even in its more libertarian forms. Pepe Gomez, a CNT militant active in the Puerto Real shipyard disputes of 1987, shrewdly noted that:

“There are two points inherited from a Marxist perspective. First of all, Marxism separates the political and the economic to try and promote the idea of economic unions, unions that deal purely and simply with economic issues, whereas the political issues are tackled by the political party. Secondly, we are left with the need to struggle against the whole culture that has been built up around delegating activities, around delegating power to others. Anarcho-syndicalism is trying to oppose these negative legacies of Marxism, so that people are actually re-educated in order to destroy this culture of dependency and to build up a new kind of culture that is based on activity and action for people, by themselves.”⁴³

The contention that politics requires millions is precisely the *reason* Marxism separates the political and the economic; the party needs to develop the ideas with which to lead the millions. For the council communists of the AAUD-E, this is why their political economic union was meant to be temporary; for them, political and economic struggles only combined in the mass struggles of the revolutionary period in Germany. For anarcho-syndicalists, however, politics *begin* long, long before there are blossoming mass movements. Mass movements are only the culmination of a huge number of smaller, preparatory struggles which are both economic and political in nature and which shape the character of mass movements when they occur. Politics is weaved into our everyday lives and conflicts. To begin to explore this contention, a quote from the historian of syndicalism, Marcel van der Linden, is instructive:

“In practice there seem to be at least three analytical levels which quite often are not, or not sufficiently, distinguished. In the first place, we could distinguish the ideological level, at which one thinks about the movement in a general, political-philosophical way. At issue here are questions such as: what is the world really like? What is unjust, bad, etc.? Who are our enemies and friends? What social changes are possible, and how can they be accomplished? Secondly, we could distinguish the organisational level: how is the trade union structured (for example subscriptions, strike funds) and how does it behave in daily practice, when labour conflicts occur, towards employers and the state? Thirdly, there is the shopfloor level: are the workers who are members militant and strike prone? What forms of action do they favour?”⁴⁴

Thus, we can think of the political content of anarcho-syndicalism as consisting of three interconnected levels. On the shop floor level, it consists in seeing that even ‘economic’ struggles for wages or rents are, at the same time, political struggles for power over the workplace and community. At the organisational level, it consists of the associational function of a union, stripped of any representative functions, and with structures, based on mandates and delegates, within which workers can collectively speak for themselves. At the ideological level, it consists of an opposition to integration into the state and the management of capitalism, and the goal of libertarian communism. These levels are interconnected; for example, integration into the state funded system of works councils would result in a development of a representative function at the organisational level and changes to the functioning of the union at the shop floor level, where management’s right to manage would need to be accepted as a condition of participation in the industrial relations framework. While the emphasis between the different levels may differ, e.g. the FORA’s ‘ideological unionism’ compared with the CNT’s ‘non-ideological unionism’, in reality all three levels are intimately connected to both the form and content of the union’s activity.

⁴³ Quoted in Solidarity Federation, Anarcho-syndicalism in Puerto Real: from shipyard resistance to community control: solfed.org.uk

⁴⁴ Marcel van der Linden, Second thoughts on revolutionary syndicalism: libcom.org

Together, they distinguish revolutionary unionism from reformist versions, although there is not, and cannot be, a monolithic anarcho-syndicalism across all times and places.

Another example of the political content of a revolutionary union would be the commitment to approaches to anti-racism and the emancipation of women. The old IWW was multiracial at a time of widespread segregation, and this was certainly a political assertion of class principles, going against the prevailing grain of the times. The FAUD attempted, albeit with only modest success, to set up women's leagues for self-education and discussion about the situation of working class women. Perhaps the most famous case is Spain's *Mujeres Libres* ('Free Women'). This was a group formed by anarcho-syndicalist women of the CNT in 1936, largely in response to the marginalisation of women within the male dominated union, despite its formal commitment to women's emancipation. The very existence of the *Mujeres Libres* was an indication of a failing of the CNT to express the needs of the whole class, i.e. not just the male half of it. It is a clear example of the way political content does not exist only on an ideological level, but is an immensely practical thing too. Indeed, it's relatively easy to adopt a formal ideological position in favour of women's emancipation, without really integrating that organisationally or in practical shop floor activity. In this sense the ideological level is the least important.

Van der Linden argues that confusion arises when some but not all of these shop floor, organisational and ideological levels are present. Certainly, this is true in some of the syndicalist unions we considered in Chapter 2. But in practice, such contradictions will tend to be resolved one way or another. A union which organisationally excludes women or minorities is likely to reproduce divides along these lines rather than traversing them. A militant and strike prone union, without any revolutionary ideology, will either develop one and refuse to be integrated into state and management structures, or it won't and will likely find its militancy increasingly checked by bureaucratic obstacles thrown up by developing representative functions. Or, of course, it could take up the offer of integration into the system, as many a once militant union has done before. On the other hand, ideological anarcho-syndicalist groups which lack any organisational or shop floor capacity for direct action are not unions at all, but propaganda groups (the Solidarity Federation has only recently begun to develop beyond this). The question of how to move from such a position towards being a functioning revolutionary union is one we take up in our final chapter. Van der Linden is right to stress that ideology is not decisive. Just because an organisation says it is anarcho-syndicalist (or libertarian communist, revolutionary, feminist etc) doesn't make it so. But neither is ideology unimportant, whether it is expressed implicitly through refusal to be integrated into state and management structures and other aspects of its practice, or is more overtly stated.

However, for anarcho-syndicalism, fidelity to revolutionary principles has come at a cost. Since World War II, the capitalist strategy for dealing with organised labour in the most developed countries switched definitively from repression to recuperation (this is the subject of the following chapter). Unions were invited in as partners in social management. For the IWA, this provoked a series of splits. When the SAC withdrew from the IWA in 1956, with Franco's dictatorship still strong in Spain and the CNT in exile, this left the IWA with no functioning union sections. Thus, Malatesta's claim about the impossibility of synthesising anarchism and syndicalism seemed to be proved correct, as the only functioning syndicalist unions were of a reformist character. The aforementioned splits in Spain and France over participation in works' councils were another reflection of this problem. By the end of the 20th century, anarcho-syndicalism was reduced to a militant, minority current, even in its strongest sections.

Today, the organised labour movement is plural and reflects the working class, with a range of unions and initiatives from revolutionary to reformist, and through to outright fascist and scab unions at the other extreme. Consequently, if revolutionary unionists are to avoid the division of the working class via separate unions, we need to find ways to organise struggles which unite workers beyond our membership and avoid divisions along union lines. The struggles in Puerto Real were one clear example; there, the CNT played a pivotal role in organising workplace and community assemblies which united workers and their families regardless of union membership. Consequently, the CNT was able to catalyse self-organised struggle along direct action lines. It couldn't have done this without a well established, organised basis in the workplace (i.e. its union section in the shipyards). But equally, it didn't require

the CNT to turn itself into a purely economic union and recruit a majority of workers regardless of whether they shared its aims and approach (though it surely grew from its activities).

Such assemblies are far from a panacea and are prone to many of the weaknesses of soviets, such as co-optation by political parties, or larger reformist unions, or the degeneration into reformism and bureaucracy. But ultimately this is a ‘weakness’ of democracy, i.e. if enough workers do not want revolutionary change or direct action methods, little can be done to force them whether they are organised in assemblies, committees, councils or unions. Rather, the fact the union is made up of those who *do* want these things means the struggle can be used as a prove the necessity for social revolution and direct action methods, and through the struggle, to win more workers round to revolutionary unionism. For example, as gains are eroded by inflation or legislation, or as the cops intervene on the side of the bosses, the anarcho-syndicalist union’s anti-capitalist, anti-state perspective can be shown to make sense and can thereby broaden its appeal as the best way to advance our economic and wider class interests. The organisational forms taken by anarcho-syndicalism are intimately related to its practical content, the twofold task of waging the everyday class struggle in defence of and to advance our living standards, and doing so in such a way which prepares the working class for social revolution, building confidence through collective direct action, engendering a culture of solidarity, and creating a working class public sphere where revolutionary ideas can be debated and developed as part of a real, practical movement.

“Here we come to the general cultural significance of the labour struggle. The economic alliance of the producers not only affords them a weapon for the enforcement of better living conditions, it becomes for them a practical school, a university of experience, from which they draw instruction and enlightenment in richest measure.”⁴⁵

Through the process of struggle, people change. A revolutionary union presence on the shop floor or in the local area can regroup those who want to organise along anarcho-syndicalist lines to carry on further struggles, even when the wider struggles ebb. The CNT continued to organise when the big Puerto Real struggles and the mass assemblies ran their course, and indeed was strengthened by this process. Much the same was in evidence with the FAUD, which declined following the revolutionary period in Germany, but still remained consistently larger than their pre-revolution predecessors until fascist repression finished them off. This exposes a fundamental flaw in Malatesta’s argument for the separation of economic syndicalism and political anarchism. It’s not necessary, after all, for a union to drop its anarchist principles in order to organise. It just needs a more radical approach which does not see the union as the *container* into which to bring the whole working class, but rather as a *catalyst* which acts within the working class to organise direct action along anarcho-syndicalist lines. Even as a minority, a revolutionary union can organise struggles, and through these struggles demonstrate its ideas in practice, grow, consolidate, and organise bigger struggles in turn. Of course this process is not continuous or without setbacks. The membership and influence of even the CNT in the 1920s and 1930s fluctuated wildly with wider social conditions. But whatever the conditions, the revolutionary union seeks to organise class conflicts using direct action, in such a way as to prepare workers for revolutionary social change by experiencing self-organised struggles, practical solidarity and the taste of victories won by our own efforts.

Furthermore, while trade unions often divide the class, a plural union movement, which by the end of the 20th century was a point of fact, does not have to mean divided workers. We absolutely want to win as many workers as possible to anarcho-syndicalism. But while they’re not won over, we still need solidarity on a class basis. A revolutionary union can commit itself to supporting the struggles of workers in the more reformist unions on a principled class basis. The recent rapprochement between the CNT and CGT in Spain, with co-operation in working towards a general strike against austerity measures,

⁴⁵ Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-syndicalism: libcom.org

bodes well for such class based unionism.⁴⁶ Of course, there is no guarantee this will be reciprocated. Anarcho-syndicalists may respect a TUC union picket line, but we can hardly expect TUC unions to respect ours. We can, however, appeal directly to the workers in more reformist unions to respect class solidarity, and will be in a stronger position to do so if we've already supported them, and have the organisational capacity to do so. If the principal form taken by anarcho-syndicalism is the revolutionary union as a political economic organisation, the principal content of its activity is the organisation of class conflicts which serve as both the means to directly meet our immediate demands and as a "practical education in social philosophy."⁴⁷

As we have seen, anarcho-syndicalism found its widest appeal in Spain and Argentina. Where conditions differed, e.g. in Germany or within the French CGT, anarcho-syndicalism operated more as a revolutionary minority. Indeed, as we saw, even Emile Pouget foresaw that, going into a revolutionary process, the revolutionary union would be "an active minority."⁴⁸ The million strong CNT of 1936 would surely have amazed him! The mass appeal of anarcho-syndicalism in certain times and places seems to stem from three main factors.

1. The context of early industrialisation. This had several important aspects. First, the dramatic social turmoil of industrialisation and urbanisation made capitalism something new, and meant many workers had either direct experience of this novelty, or it was within living memory. Capitalism was clearly a historical system and millions of people had experienced something else (even if that was rural poverty). The second aspect was that the countries where anarcho-syndicalism flourished the most, i.e. those that lacked widespread industry, also lacked developed trade union movements, meaning anarcho-syndicalism was 'the only game in town', or at least lacked the competition of established reformist unions with a high and stable membership and a cosy relationship to the state. Contrast this with the more developed countries like Britain and Germany, where syndicalism and anarcho-syndicalism operated mainly as militant minority tendencies inside and outside the established unions.
2. The lack of political integration of the working class into the state. Argentina and Spain were dictatorships or fragile republics. Suffrage was rarely universal. In Argentina, many militant workers were migrants too, and ineligible to vote. Workers had little opportunity to participate in party politics even if they wanted to. This did not eliminate party socialism, but did provide a huge boost to direct actionists, as well as increasing the appeal of anarchist ideology which preached that the state was a tool of the ruling class and couldn't be used for liberatory purposes. This is different today, although the dismantling of the welfare state and the declining appeal of 'post-political' party politics may be taking things back in the direction of a more naked 'us and them' (this will be explored in the following chapter).
3. In many ways related to the above, the ruling class in these places opted for repression of working class organisation rather than accepting and seeking to integrate it (as had happened in Britain for example, or Germany, with the legalisation of the factory councils). Of course they used repression because it could be effective; we saw how the IWW was smashed in the US. However, the flipside of this was that it polarised society between haves and have nots and legitimised revolutionary ideas. If you were going to be imprisoned or murdered for being a union activist, once you made the decision to become a union activist, you did so as a revolutionary unionist almost automatically. There is another side to this. As we've seen, reformists within the CNT argued that they could reduce repression by playing by the rules and seeking a rapprochement with the state. However, their overtures were rebuffed (until after the events of July 1936 at least), which limited the space for the reformist tendency to grow. Class collaboration takes two, and with bosses and the state

⁴⁶ CNT, CGT y SO llaman a la huelga general el 29 de marzo: www.cnt.es

⁴⁷ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism*: libcom.org

⁴⁸ Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the revolution*, p.63.

favouring repression over recuperation, reformists had little gains to show for their efforts and thus had less appeal than they otherwise might have had. The ruling class preference for repression made it appear as a choice between revolution or nothing, which suited the revolutionaries.

None of these conditions from Argentina, Germany or Spain in the early 20th century are likely to be replicated wholesale, certainly in the most developed countries, or even elsewhere where the ruling classes have the benefits of learning from their class brethren's mistakes. But we should also not make the mistake of taking the historical high points of anarcho-syndicalism as defining the whole tradition. Even in Spain and Argentina, membership and influence fluctuated wildly. And in their survey of revolutionary syndicalist currents, Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe remind us that overall, syndicalism of all stripes represents "a distinctive minority tradition."⁴⁹ That is not to say anarcho-syndicalism cannot seek or achieve mass appeal. Obviously, we work for the widest possible adoption of our ideas and methods. But we don't *rely* on such a mass appeal.

Anarcho-syndicalists can get on with the business of organising collective direct action in our own lives and workplaces perfectly well as a militant minority if needs be, while hopefully earning the respect of fellow workers with our principled and consistent solidarity, even if they, for now, do not share our revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anti-state perspective. As contemporary conditions are not identical to those in 1900s France, or 1910s Argentina, or 1920s Germany, or 1930s Spain, we cannot simply pluck Pouget, or the FORA, or the FAUD, or the CNT from history as a ready made blueprint. Rather, we must adapt by trial and error the political economic core of anarcho-syndicalism to present conditions, just as they did, whilst learning from their mistakes. We must therefore analyse the changing conditions since World War II (Chapter 4), before setting out our revolutionary unionist strategy for the 21st century (Chapter 5).

Summary

In this chapter we have encountered four distinctive forms of 20th century anarcho-syndicalism in the theory of Émile Pouget, the Argentine FORA, the German FAUD and the Spanish CNT. We then drew on these examples to understand anarcho-syndicalism as a practice of trial and error around a political economic core, combining anarchist principles and syndicalist methods in ways adapted to the conditions of particular times and places. We ended by taking stock of the situation at the end of the 20th century, with anarcho-syndicalism constituting a militant minority current within the working class, and discussed how this need not be a barrier to effective agitation and organisation on a class basis, nor to an effective revolutionary unionism.

Further reading

Vadim Damier's '*Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th century*' is the most comprehensive account in the English language, itself an abridged translation of a longer Russian text. Rudolf Rocker's '*Anarcho-syndicalism in theory and practice*' remains an important read on the origins of anarcho-syndicalism and the movement up to WWII. Units 13–18 of SelfEd focus on anarcho-syndicalism and Spain in particular, while unit 9 looks at Argentina. The Direct Action Movement pamphlet '*Revolutionary unionism in Latin America – the FORA in Argentina*' is also well worth the read. Hans Manfred Bock's chapter in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe's edited volume '*Revolutionary Syndicalism*' is a good account of the FAUD in Germany. Abel Paz's '*Durruti in the Spanish Revolution*' is far more than a simple biography (though it excels at that) and contains important information on the period, as well

⁴⁹ Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe, The rise and fall of revolutionary syndicalism, in Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary syndicalism*, p.1.

as the internal wrangling in the CNT between reformists and revolutionaries. Jose Peirats' three-volume '*The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*' is considered the most official and authoritative account. Martha Acklesberg's '*Free Women of Spain*' is a book length account of the *Mujeres Libres*.

Capitalism and the class struggle since World War II

Introduction

In this chapter, we will analyse some of the changes to capitalism and society since World War II, the point at which anarcho-syndicalism was all but wiped out by fascism, Stalinism, total war and social partnership. We will see how the post-World War II social democratic settlement limited the space for a re-emergence of radical currents in the workers' movement by integrating trade unions, as the representatives of workers, into the capitalist system. We will then look at the upsurge of class struggles from 1968 which marked the crisis of the social democratic settlement, and how their eventual defeat paved the way for the rise of neoliberalism and the "offshoring" of the traditional centres of militancy in the mines and factories. In analysing neoliberalism, we bring the analysis up to date with the conditions for organising today, characterised by casualised service sector employment and a withering of the institutions of political and economic representation – political parties and trade unions – which were central to the post-war settlement.

The social democratic settlement in Britain

"The war changed the balance between labour and capital. Most think that it shifted the balance in labour's favour. The real lesson of the Second World War was that it crushed the independent organisations of the working class."¹

World War II all but wiped out the radical currents in the workers' movement, with the strongholds of Germany, Spain and Italy crushed by fascism and total war. But following the war, the ruling class feared a repeat of the revolutionary wave which spread across Europe and beyond following World War I. In the first chapter we encountered Tory MP Quintin Hogg's 1943 remark that "we must give them reform or they will give us revolution." But this idea had older roots.

"When introducing the electoral reform to the British parliament in 1831, the prime minister Earl Grey said 'There is no-one more decided against annual parliaments, universal suffrage and the ballot, than am I (...) The Principal of my reform is to prevent the necessity of revolution (...) I am reforming to preserve, not to overthrow'"²

The British ruling class in particular had had the longest experience of capitalism and had arrived at the idea of 'reforming to preserve' fairly early on. What changed following World War II, almost universally across the most industrialised countries, was that this was integrated into the prevailing management of capitalism. The strategy of repression which had characterised pre-war industrial relations (tanks on the streets in 1926, gunboats in the Mersey in 1911) was eclipsed by a strategy of recuperation. This was not entirely new, but was adopted in a far more systematic way than ever before, particularly in the form of the welfare state. Class conflict was institutionalised and harnessed as

¹ James Heartfield, World war as class war: libcom.org

² Quoted in Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, Why did the West extend the franchise? Democracy, inequality and growth in historical perspective: scholar.harvard.edu

a motor for capitalist development, with reforms improving living standards sufficiently to marginalise revolutionary tendencies amongst the working class.

The post-war settlement was the ruling class being forced to accept the fact of the working class as a collective social force. This meant the temporary suspension of the capitalist project to reduce us all to atomised individuals offering our labour power on the market, in favour of the institutionalisation of the working class as a collective entity. This involved taking the reformist tendencies which had emerged within the workers' movement and giving them a seat at the table. The working class threat was accepted as a fact of life, an overhead cost of doing business. Thus, it had to be given representation within the capitalist system to prevent it disrupting or rupturing that system. The economic representation of the working class was to be handled by the trade unions. The political representation of the working class was to be handled by the Labour Party. We have already encountered these institutions in Chapter 1. Here, we are more concerned with how this model of 'reforming to preserve' stabilised post-war capitalism and marginalised the revolutionary tendencies within the workers' movement.

The other side of this institutionalisation of the working class as a collective was the development of consumerist individuality. Keynesian economics, which became mainstream after the great depression of the 1930s, stressed the importance of aggregate demand, the economists' term for the total money available for consumption. This was to be stimulated by two sources: wage rises and state spending. For the wage rises, the trade unions were brought in as social partners in productivity deals. The unions would guarantee peace on the shop floor and assist management in making productivity improvements (such as through new technology or working practices). In return, management would share some of the productivity gains with the workers in the form of annual wage rises. These productivity deals were the backbone of post-war social partnership in the workplace, and provided the basis for the expansion of the consumer market outside of it. At the same time, state spending, particularly via the new welfare state, provided direct employment for millions and stimulated the economy somewhat independently of the booms and busts of the business cycle. State deficit spending was used to smooth out dips in private sector activity and thus soften recessions, whilst maintaining more or less full employment.

This regime meant building a domestic consumer market to absorb some of the output of the post-war boom, and created a virtuous circle of economic growth, consumerism and relative industrial peace. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew continuously until 1974, and days lost to strikes remained relatively low until the late 1960s. The role of the state, into which the trade unions were more or less integrated, was to guarantee order and social peace. We should note that the basis of this post-war recognition of the working class as a collective force had a material basis, not just in the balance of class forces, but also in the organisation of production. The economy was approximately 70% primary (extractive industries, agriculture) and secondary sectors (manufacturing). Mining and manufacturing had been the backbones of industrial militancy before the war, and would be again in the 1970s. Consequently, large employers often dominated employment in a given town, which meant there were large collections of workers who could be represented through institutionalised collective bargaining. This was fairly successful at keeping workers' militancy in check, and channelling it away from open class struggle. The social democratic logic is captured in a quote from across the Atlantic. A leader of the Canadian Auto Workers' Union writes:

"Good unions work to defuse [workers'] anger – and they do it effectively. Without unions, there would be anarchy in the workplace. Strikes would be commonplace, and confrontation and violence would increase. Poor-quality workmanship, low productivity, increased sick time, and absenteeism would be the preferred form of worker protest. By and large, unions deflect those damaging and costly forms of worker resistance. If our critics understood what really goes on behind the labour scenes, they would be thankful that union leaders are as effective as they are in averting strikes."³

³ Quoted in Ed Goddard, Red flags torn: libcom.org

This social partnership was fairly successful from capital's point of view for the first two decades following the war. However, in the late 1960s and early 1970s it began to break down. Throughout the post-war period there had been a slow decline in political party membership, from peaks of over 2 million for the Conservatives and 1 million for Labour to around half that by the late 1970s. However, trade union membership continued to grow, peaking in 1979. The reasons for the breakdown of the post-war regime were numerous. The post-war boom was coming to an end. The international financial system was breaking down, with the US withdrawing from the gold standard in 1971, inaugurating an era of floating currency rates. The 1973 OPEC oil embargo sent energy prices soaring. At the same time, labour unrest was on the rise, and social struggles from anti-racism to feminism, to environmentalism and gay liberation, were also breaking out. A full account of all the factors leading to the breakdown of the post-war social contract could take a pamphlet in its own right. For our purposes, it is enough to note that a convergence of factors put increasing strain on profits and thus on the regime of relative social peace based on productivity deals. This set capital and labour on a collision course once more.

In Britain, the first major salvo in the resurgent class war was the first national postal strike in 1971, which was kept in check by the trade union,⁴ followed by the successful miners' strike of 1972. The latter strike had a strong autonomous streak to it, with action led by the rank and file and the union playing catch up. Fearing wildcats would break out, the National Union of Miners (NUM) called an official strike for January. The employers offered a new productivity deal, but this was rejected and the strike began. From the first day, all 289 pits were closed and the strikers at many of them, against the instructions of the NUM, refused to provide safety cover. Having already warned that "pressure from below" would "lead to anarchy", by the third day of the strike, NUM president Gormley said that "the men are being a damn sight more militant than we would want them to be." The following day he complained that "some men have been overambitious in applying the strike."⁵

The strike was spread through flying pickets organised mainly by rank and file NUM members and shop stewards. Strikers organised mass pickets of power plants and coking plants (most famously at Saltley), leading to power cuts due to lack of coal. There were solidarity actions by other groups of workers, including transport drivers, many of whom refused to cross picket lines, or even tipped off strikers of their destinations so there could be a flying picket waiting to turn them away. This culminated in a one off, three day week in February with over 1.5 million workers temporarily sent home due to the effects of the strike. The result was an emphatic victory for the miners, which helped set the expectations for workers in other sectors.

"A hastily cobbled together government enquiry recommended wage increases of between 15% and 31.6%, about 4 times what the NCB had originally offered, and a bit more than the miners had originally asked for. Even then, the NUM, under pressure from the miners who had clearly realised the enormity of their power, even rejected this deal, holding out for an extra £1 a week for the non-faceworkers. After appropriately romantic candle-lit beer-and-sandwich-type negotiations at 10 Downing Street, this demand was precisely what the miners got – a pretty good result which boosted working class confidence everywhere."⁶

The miners struck again in 1974. Tory Prime Minister Ted Heath called a general election just two days after a union ballot went in favour of a strike, asking the question of voters, "Who governs the country?" Neither Heath's Tories nor Labour won a clear mandate. The miners' strikes thus more or less ensured the downfall of Ted Heath's government, which had introduced the 1971 Industrial Relations act precisely to curb such examples of working class power. And they also sent shock waves through the ruling class as a whole. One of the first acts of the 1974 Labour government was to work with

⁴ See Joe Jacobs, *Sorting out the postal strike, 1971*: libcom.org

⁵ Quotes and chronology from *Endangered Phoenix et al, 1926–1985: So near – so far – a selective history of the British miners*:libcom.org

⁶ *Endangered Phoenix et al, 1926–1985: So near – so far – a selective history of the British miners*: libcom.org

the TUC to impose wage restraint. This was agreed in the region of 5%, at a time when inflation was running between 15% and 25%. In effect, these were massive pay cuts. In 1976, Labour called in the International Monetary Fund to bail out the UK, demanding austerity measures in return. The Labour government, the TUC, and international capital were on a collision course with the working class.

What became known as the ‘winter of discontent’ began with a strike by 15,000 Ford workers, emphatically rejecting the 5% pay offer and demanding 25% and a 35 hour working week. They were soon joined by 67,000 more Ford workers, bringing 23 Ford plants to a halt. As the unofficial strikes spread, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) sought to regain control and made their demands official. Strikers returned to work a month later, accepting a 17% pay offer. Next up were lorry drivers and public sector workers, including refuse collectors, nurses and ambulance drivers, and famously, the Liverpool gravediggers. Working days lost to strike action reached 2.9 million in 1979, and trade union membership peaked at 13.2 million. Workers across many sectors struck for, and won, pay increases far in excess of what the government was willing to offer. These went some way to clawing back the income lost to rampant inflation throughout the 1970s. They also marked the definitive death of the post-war social contract.

This was also the point where the strike movement reached its limits. Capitalism was being squeezed by numerous factors, not just industrial unrest, but also international and economic pressures. In many cases employers genuinely couldn’t afford workers’ demands. Now, of course, employers always *claim* they can’t afford the demands made of them. The difference was that in the 1970s many of them opened their accounts and empty order books to the workers, demonstrating they really were up against it. In other words, working class militancy collided with the limits of possible gains under capitalism. As sociologist Michael Mann wrote of this social contract:

“Britain has enshrined the rule of both interest groups and classes, jointly. The labour movement is part sectional interest group, part class movement, irredeemably reformist, virtually unsullied by Marxist or anarchist revolutionary tendencies.”⁷

He was right; the post-war social settlement had marginalised revolutionary tendencies on the shop floor. This meant when workers ran up against the limits of capitalism, the movement stalled. Many workers felt betrayed by the trade unions and the Labour Party, but no revolutionary movement emerged. There was no serious attempt to push beyond strike action into more radical action, such as expropriating workplaces (as happened in France and Italy around the same time). Having made the country ungovernable, the working class blinked, unsure what to do with this power. This paved the way for the neoliberal counter revolution, which sought to systematically break the bastions of that power in the mines and factories, and impose a new social settlement based on individualism and debt. But before looking at this, let us consider the movements in France and Italy during this same period, which had much in common with the industrial unrest in Britain, while in many ways coming closer to revolutionary upheaval.

France ‘68 and Italy ‘69

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, struggles erupted around the world in both the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries, both on the industrial and the social fronts, with anti-war, women’s struggles, civil rights, and students’ movements all coming to the fore. We will focus on two movements, which provide some of the clearest glimpses of what a revolutionary movement might look like in a developed country: France in 1968 and Italy’s ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969. Much like in Britain, here we see workers’ struggles coming up against the trade unions, but also pushing beyond them, but also falling short of any revolutionary break with capitalism, and ultimately being recuperated back into capitalism and the trade unions.

⁷ Michael Mann, Ruling class strategies and citizenship: dx.doi.org

The unrest in France began with a student movement. In May, a wave of university occupations was violently repressed by the CRS (riot police). Alleged student leaders were victimised, and mass demonstrations were held to support them. Many of these demonstrations clashed with the police, who suppressed them with considerable force. The demonstrations grew, with many workers joining students in the streets. These climaxed in the ‘night of the barricades’ (May 10th-11th), which saw running battles between students and CRS well into the early hours of the morning. Student and education workers’ unions called for solidarity strikes against the repression. Initially these were resisted by the main union confederations, but workers began striking locally regardless:

“From a few hundred strikers on 14th May at the Sud-Aviation air craft factory in Nantes the strike spread rapidly: 2 million strikers by 18th May, 9 million by 24th May, reaching nearly 10 million two days later.”⁸

Before going further, a brief note on French industrial relations is in order, as it is somewhat different to Britain. In France, there is a system of works councils (‘Comités d’Entreprise’). These function like workplace parliaments, with workers voting for unions to represent them, and union reps taking up seats on the council proportionate to their vote. Workers don’t have to be members of unions to vote for, or be represented by, the works councils, and as a result of this union density is quite low, around 20% in 1968. Consequently, union branches were not particularly strong, but normal disputes would be run by a negotiating committee, often cross union, in consultation with mass meetings/assemblies of the workforce (although usually treating these as a rubber stamp). In 1968, however, the workers at a rank and file level met and initiated strike actions without the sanction of any of the unions, although some retrospectively made the strikes official as the movement developed.

Consequently the strike wave spread and developed through initiative from below. Without any official strike call, the largest general strike in European history blossomed on a wildcat basis.⁹ Workers report listening to the radio as they occupied their factories, hearing the movement spread and gather momentum:

“Socialism seemed possible. (...) It was a ten year pressure cooker which finally exploded, and without the control of the Stalinists and other reformists and other professional organisers.”¹⁰

Workers set about marching on other factories to bring them out on strike and, in many places, formed joint action committees with radical students, which sought to spread the strike, discuss the political implications and spread propaganda, such as the famous slogans daubed across the walls of Paris (‘all power to the imagination!’, ‘never work!’, ‘beneath the pavement, the beach!’). However, strikers found the gates of factories policed by union men:

“I went to the gates of 5 or 6 factories and each time I arrived full of enthusiasm. I bumped into the CGT delegates, probably members of the PCF [French Communist Party]. It was impossible to enter the factories and discuss with the strikers. I realised that the factories were not occupied (...) we were not in 1936. I hoped that the demos would arrive and break through this blockade. (...) At no point did we have sustained and political contacts with workers in the large workplaces, independent of the unions.”¹¹

Thus the strikers, who had seized the initiative to generalise the strike, began to lose that initiative. In fact, it would be an exaggeration to say they ever really controlled the struggle, even when they were spreading it. Despite the feeling of many participants that they were making their own destiny, the trade unions remained largely in control:

⁸ Andre Hoyles, General strike: France 1968 – a factory by factory account: libcom.org

⁹ Strikes in India today dwarf France 1968, e.g. see: libcom.org, although as a percentage of the workforce France 1968 was probably bigger (around 66%, 10m out of 15m workers).

¹⁰ Mouvement Communiste, May-June 1968 – a situation lacking in workers’ autonomy: libcom.org

¹¹ Mouvement Communiste, May-June 1968 – a situation lacking in workers’ autonomy: libcom.org

“In every factory, a strike committee (or occupation committee) was set up to organise and co-ordinate the strike, but its composition and mode of election or nomination varied. Although the unions had not actually called for the strike, they successfully controlled it in most cases: the strike committee was an inter-union committee composed of union officials and shop floor delegates.”¹²

In other words, while not authorised by the unions, in most places the struggle stayed within the normal forms of French industrial relations, with control firmly in the hands of union dominated committees. As befits the nature of a blossoming movement from below, the demands raised varied from strike to strike, from occupation to occupation. Some focussed on solidarity with the students, others on wage rises, others on shorter hours. This allowed the trade unions to set about demobilising the strike:

“The trade-union strategy had a single goal: to defeat the strike. In order to do this the unions, with a long strike-breaking tradition, set out to reduce a vast general strike to a series of isolated strikes at the individual enterprise level. The CGT led the counter-offensive.”¹³

This was to be achieved by creating separate negotiations for each strike or occupation in a factory by factory basis, dividing and ruling the movement. Workers, lacking any pre-existing channels outside the unions to allow them to co-ordinate activity, were largely unable to form such direct links within the struggle itself, finding the factory gates policed by union officials. The trade unions gradually succeeded in *degenerating* the strike. Both the trade unions and the government united in calls to ban demonstrations and enter negotiations. The CGT, very much degenerated from the radical roots we encountered in Chapter 2, called for a return to work. The strike wave ebbed, and by June was over. Order prevailed once more in Paris.

A final point to discuss is what effect the struggles had on the participants. Indeed, many workers were radicalised by the experience, demoralising though it was to be demobilised and outmanoeuvred by the trade union apparatus.

“The real gain of 1968 for our class was elsewhere. This was the birth, everywhere, in all the factories, of a minority of workers who had more or less broken with the union apparatus. There, something changed and in the ten years which followed, we can talk about the important strikes of the 1970s which escaped, in whole or in part from the apparatus of the PCF/CGT, and there were some big strikes in those years.”¹⁴

There was talk amongst Trotskyists that a ‘workers’ vanguard’ had been born in the factories. However, where did they go? Some became sucked into the trade unions, aiming to reform them but finding themselves reformed to the realities of trade unionism. “A good number went to the LCR or LO [Trotskyist Parties] and the Maoists, and the biggest part went nowhere.”¹⁵ Consequently, while 1968 created militants who would shape the disputes over the following decade, many were either absorbed into the trade unions and political parties or demobilised altogether.

The following year in Italy saw struggles which, although not as large numerically, in many ways went further beyond the control of the trade unions. The ‘Hot Autumn’ saw waves of strikes and occupations alongside a growing student movement and increasing mobilisations outside of the factory, with mass squatting and women’s movements prominent. In the huge car factories of the north, industrial action was rippling beyond the control of the trade unions. Workers developed autonomous tactics and forms of shop floor organisation. One of the most effective was the ‘checkerboard strike’, where one part of the assembly line would stop work, and by the time the management and union officials had got them to

¹² Andre Hoyles, General strike: France 1968 – a factory by factory account: libcom.org

¹³ Situationist International, Enragés and Situationists in the occupations movement: libcom.org

¹⁴ Mouvement Communiste, May-June 1968 – a situation lacking in workers’ autonomy:

¹⁵ Mouvement Communiste, May-June 1968 – a situation lacking in workers’ autonomy:

start up again, another part of the line would stop. Due to the linear nature of the production process, these small stoppages would bring whole factories to a halt. A worker at Fiat's Mirafiori plant described the situation:

“The presses weren't producing a thing, the crane men and the trolley drivers had nothing to transport, and thus the production lines were virtually at a standstill. This was dangerous for the unions. They had lost control (...) The very fact that the line was not running sparked off meetings and discussions among the men: first of all inside the factory, next to the stationary assembly lines, and then outside, together with the groups of students who had gathered at the gates. The strike spread down the line, and political discussion followed it. Everyone was arguing and talking, and it was suggested that the demands of the Press Shop could be taken up by the assembly lines. The strike had begun in protest against the speed of the line. But work speeds are decided from above in the factory, and are based on the whole way that capitalism organizes work, that is, gradings and wages. So our initial limited protest soon spread to all aspects of the work relationship.”¹⁶

This captures very well the dynamics of the struggle, where seemingly everyday demands about the pace of work quickly gave way to an openly political struggle for power, contesting management's right to manage. In this context:

“[M]any comrades thought that we should begin to push harder. But for the time being this was difficult, because there was nowhere they could turn for organizational support. The unions were out of the question, and the students hadn't yet arrived on the scene.”¹⁷

The workers organised through impromptu assemblies, using recallable, mandated delegates outside the trade unions to negotiate with management. In many places, these delegates came together in factory councils. The trade unions sought to recapture the initiative and turn the delegates into representatives. Many militants saw this for what it was – an attempt to demobilise them and recreate representative structures. Consequently, they raised the slogan “we are all delegates!” and stopped work to negotiate with management en masse. Against this, “union officials aimed to discipline the movement so the workers acted through the organization which represented them, and not outside it.”¹⁸

They did this through an ‘institutionalisation from below’, dividing the most active militants from the rest of the workers and sucking them into union positions. The CGIL union (Italian General Confederation of Labour), which had originally opposed the delegate system, did a u-turn and made it the basis of the union structure. As the tide of struggle ebbed, the most active militants found themselves stranded as union representatives, mandated by assemblies which were rapidly dwindling. “Many leading activists became full-time union organizers after 1969, while in 1970 up to 50 per cent of delegates resigned.”¹⁹ There was no real organised revolutionary alternative to this, so many of the best militants became absorbed into the trade union structures for lack of a better strategy. This is partly reflective of the fact many of the most organised revolutionary elements in the Hot Autumn were those coming from Leninism. The ‘workerists’, organised in groups like *Potere Operaio* (Workers Power), *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle) and *Avanguardia Operaia* (Workers' Vanguard), had nonetheless broken with the mainstream Marxist conception of the party and support for the trade unions. Instead, they sought to organise politically in the economic sphere, with bulletins and anti-union agitation within the factories. The workerists recognised how the post-war settlement had harnessed class conflict to drive capitalist development, and discerned a ‘strategy of refusal’ amongst the workers in the vast factories of the Italian north:

¹⁶ Unknown Fiat worker, Organising at Fiat, 1969: libcom.org

¹⁷ Unknown Fiat worker, Organising at Fiat, 1969: libcom.org

¹⁸ Robert Lumley, Institutionalization from below: The unions and social movements – 1970s Italy: libcom.org

¹⁹ Robert Lumley, Institutionalization from below: The unions and social movements – 1970s Italy: libcom.org

“[T]he refusal of even passive collaboration in capitalist development: in other words, the renunciation of precisely that form of mass struggle which today unifies the movements led by the workers in the advanced capitalist countries.”²⁰

They made the argument that the assemblies and delegate councils would inevitably be recuperated. Thus, they did not seek to provide a revolutionary counter force to the trade unions, but to organise negatively, against all demands for better wages, conditions and so on and as a refusal of work, of wage labour – of capitalism. However, this left the trade unions unopposed in the factories, while the workerists turned their focus away from the economic sphere towards armed struggle:

“...the majority of workerists chose in effect to abandon to the confederations those militant workers still unconvinced by the tendency’s critique of unionism. In doing so, they would help to make their fears of union recuperation a self-fulfilling prophecy. As a consequence, Potere Operaio would encounter great difficulties in building a factory presence outside established strongholds like Petrolchimico; there as elsewhere, a number of its activists would choose to participate in the new councils of delegates. (...) the unions would soon prove successful in overtaking most of the radical rank-and-file factory groups of the creeping May. While Lotta Continua remained influential at FIAT, and the CUBs [workplace committees] sponsored by Avanguardia Operaia continued to spread through Lombardy, the unions’ resurgence was to have direct consequences for workerism’s political ambitions. In the crucial years of the early 1970s, the tendency’s major organisational expression would turn away from the problem of class composition [workplace organisation], towards the all-or-nothing gamble of ‘militarising’ the new revolutionary movement.”²¹

The armed struggle proved disastrous, and the state unleashed a huge wave of repression against the social movements, sweeping thousands into prison. It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that the workerists cut off their nose to spite their face. It’s true that wage demands were harnessed by the post-war settlement as a motor of capitalist growth. But this was precisely a period where workers’ demands were exceeding what capital could profitably concede, opening up a potentially revolutionary moment. As the previously quoted Fiat worker argued,

“For us the password is FIGHT INSIDE THE FACTORY, because it is only through fighting inside the factory that we shall be in a position to outlast a prolonged clash with the bosses and the State. We must put them in the weakest position, where they will have to pay the highest price, and not us.”²²

But in time the workerists rejected the idea that these struggles could prefigure a revolutionary break: “this would not be a pre-figuration of the future, because the future, from the working class point of view, does not exist; only a block on the present.”²³ Thus, the only struggles within the factory they could conceive of were refusals to make demands, wanting to turn the tables so that management had to make demands of the workers to return. This was no doubt a radical position. It affirmed the political (i.e. power struggle) nature of the class struggle and correctly insisted that revolution is more than the self-management of wage labour. In this sense ‘the refusal of work’ was not simply an invention of workerist intellectuals, but an attempt to theorise the rejection of the work ethic and the refusal to let life be reduced to work that characterised parts of the strike movement. However, in practice this stance, and the turn away from the economic sphere to armed struggle, left the field clear for the trade

²⁰ Mario Tronti, The strategy of refusal: libcom.org

²¹ Steve Wright, Storming heaven: libcom.org

²² Unknown Fiat worker, Organising at Fiat, 1969: libcom.org

²³ Mario Tronti, The strategy of refusal: libcom.org

unions to recuperate the movement. This meant turning militancy away from the strike movement, where workers were on home turf, towards the armed struggle, where the state had the advantage.

This is not to say everything would have been fine in the winter of discontent, France 1968 and the Hot Autumn 1969 if there had been well established anarcho-syndicalist unions. The point is that there were not, and there could not have been, since World War II had all but destroyed the independent organisations of the working class, and the social democratic settlement had limited the space for their re-emergence. But in all three cases, a lack of an organised revolutionary perspective on the shop floor was one of the factors preventing these struggles pushing beyond the limits of capitalism. Compare them with Spain, where decades of revolutionary agitation meant workers and peasants knew what to do immediately when the chance presented itself for expropriation and a push towards libertarian communism. Likewise, the lack of organisational links outside the trade unions limited the horizontal spread of the struggles and allowed the trade unions to regain the initiative. This was especially the case in France, where the factory gates were patrolled by Communist Party/trade union officials. The attractive idea of forming the organisations needed to struggle in the midst of struggle proved harder than anticipated, in part because the forces of reaction and leftist recuperation had a huge head start.

Finally, we can note that the lack of an organised revolutionary union movement meant those radicalised by the struggle were generally sucked into the trade union bureaucracy, the Leninist and Maoist parties, or drifted away altogether. They certainly didn't regroup themselves on the shop floor to push a revolutionary perspective and oppose the recuperation of the committee/delegate/council forms developed in the struggle. Compare this with the German Revolution, where the FAUD was able to regroup newly radicalised militants and boycott the factory councils when they were recuperated by the Social Democrat government. Their numbers declined with the struggle, but they remained much stronger than they had been before the revolutionary period and were able to carry on other struggles and agitation. There is no point lamenting this absence. What we can do is see that autonomous, democratic forms of workers' organisation such as councils and committees are often prone to recuperation if no clear alternative strategy is in play. As was written of the French wildcat general strike of 1968:

"This was the first step towards questioning legalism, the first attempt to enter a revolutionary insurrectionary phase: but there was no follow-up in that direction, and the movement was kept well under union control on the whole."²⁴

There's much to learn from the struggles of this period about how a revolutionary movement could develop, and also how it can fail. These discussions could fill a pamphlet in their own right, and we have only skimmed the surface of them here. The failure of these struggles to develop into an insurrectionary movement against capitalism and the state also highlights the necessity to have some organised revolutionary effort by workers to generalise strike movements, to counter the efforts of the trade unions and political parties to return to normal, and to spread militancy between and beyond workplaces into wider society. It seems highly unlikely such a revolutionary workers' organisation can be created on the fly, especially when the trade unions and political parties have decades of head start. But we also have to acknowledge that the basis of the militancy of this period, particularly in the mines and the vast car factories, has since been swept away through 'spatial fixes' (i.e. relocating industries abroad), and economic and social restructuring. In other words, the neoliberal counter revolution has destroyed the bases of these revolts, in the West at least.

The neoliberal counter revolution

Margaret Thatcher's conservative government came to power in 1979, oft repeating the infamous mantra 'there is no alternative'. In a sense, she was correct. Workers had pushed more or less up against the limits of capitalism, and been unable or unwilling to push beyond. Consequently, capital needed to counter attack, to restore order on the shop floor, discipline the working class and kick start capital

²⁴ Andre Hoyles, General strike: France 1968 – a factory by factory account: libcom.org

accumulation after a decade of industrial turmoil. Within the capitalist frame of reference, there *was* no alternative; the working class needed to be broken.

There are a couple of common myths about neoliberalism which we should first put to bed. The first is that it represents a ‘minimal state’ and a ‘free market’. This is false on both counts. While those directly employed by the state fell with the privatisation of the old state monopolies of British Rail, British Steel, British Telecom, British Gas and so on, general government expenditure has remained relatively constant since World War II, rising gradually until the late 1960s and levelling off around 40% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).²⁵ Widespread privatisations have been compensated for by subsidies and state contracts awarded to private sector firms. We should recall that Thatcher reportedly carried a copy of the classical liberal economist Adam Smith’s ‘Wealth of Nations’ in her handbag, and remind ourselves of what Adam Smith had to say about the state and free market:

“Laws and government may be considered in this and indeed in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of the goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor, who if not hindered by the government would soon reduce the others to an equality with themselves by open violence.”²⁶

The neoliberal state is thus only ‘minimal’ in the sense that it is focussed on its core function of class warfare, outsourcing many of the welfare functions and representative organs which were supposed to guarantee social peace under the social democratic regime. It is not the sidelining of the state, but a redefining of its role. Utilities, health care, education and so on are all seen as non-core functions and so there are ongoing attempts to privatise public services across the board. This ‘minimal’ state, concerned chiefly with the *management of disorder*, has been called a ‘security’ state. As political philosopher Michel Foucault wrote:

“The essential function of security (...) is to respond to a reality in such a way that this response cancels out the reality to which it responds – nullifies it, or limits, checks or regulates it.”²⁷

The neoliberal state is thus literally *laissez faire*. Rather than trying to guarantee order, it ‘lets things happen.’ Periodic disorder in the markets, especially the deregulated financial markets, or on the streets is more or less taken for granted, with the state seeking to nullify undesirable effects (such as eruptions of class struggle). This is the link between the market liberalisation and the security state that characterises the neoliberal regime. The dominance of the market over social life and the increase in repressive state power, ubiquitous surveillance, militarisation of the police and so on, are by no means contradictory; *they presuppose one another*. As the state sheds its social functions, political representation withers; membership of political parties and participation in elections falls. As this happens, the state can rely less and less on presumed ‘consent’ to legitimise its rule, and is likely to rely more and more on brute force. Students witnessed this in the repression of the movements against the tripling of tuition fees and the abolition of education maintenance allowance (EMA). The government’s own official report into the August Riots of 2011 cites “cynicism/anger towards politicians, authority, negative experience of the police” as amongst the causes.²⁸ Such conditions are endemic to the neoliberal regime, especially for those at the wrong end of rising inequality.

However, while disorder outside the workplace is taken for granted, order within the workplace is insisted upon. This brings us to the second myth, that neoliberalism is anti-union. This is only partly true. Everyone remembers Thatcher’s battle with the miners in 1984–85. Indeed, the working class is still

²⁵ Joe Hicks and Grahame Allen, A century of change: trends in UK statistics since 1900: www.parliament.uk p.22.

²⁶ Adam Smith, Lectures on jurisprudence, p.208.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, Security, terror, population, p.47.

²⁸ Gareth Morrell, Sara Scott, Di McNeish and Stephen Webster, The August riots in England: understanding the involvement of young people: www.natcen.ac.uk p.34.

feeling the consequences of that defeat today. But in order to take on the miners, Thatcher's government did deals with other unions. The state picked its battles one by one, and unions which were willing to adapt themselves to the new conditions were somewhat spared. Essentially, trade unions were no longer to serve primarily as the mediators of class conflict by negotiating productivity deals, but rather were to be an outsourced wing of management, disciplining workers and pushing through 'modernisation' where bosses couldn't do so alone. It's unsurprising therefore that trade union membership has fallen steadily since its 1979 peak of 13.2 million, to around 7.4 million today.

The changing role of the trade unions can be seen in the evolution of industrial tribunals (now employment tribunals). These were introduced by the 1964 Industrial Training Act as a low cost alternative to the civil courts for dealing with labour related matters. The official presiding over the case was known as a "chair", who sat with both a union official and an employer's representative. They are now known as 'employment judges', which gives an indication of the increasingly legalistic nature of the process. In the early days, to prepare for an industrial tribunal didn't require any specialist legal knowledge on the part of the worker. Although a knowledge of the case law always helped, it was by no means essential. Nowadays, your prospects are pretty slim without an employment lawyer; something which trade unions often provide to their members as part of their service model. While in the past there were many workplaces which would take wildcat action if a worker was unfairly disciplined or sacked (and there still are a few, some post office branches and the London Underground being the most frequent), "wait for the tribunal" is among the most effective ways of making sure this doesn't happen, diffusing anger into an individual, legalistic process.

Thatcher's government wasn't stupid, and was not prepared to leave the centres of working class power untouched, trade union mediation or not. While the trade unions had long served to police militancy on the shop floor, they'd proved unable to discipline the working class during the winter of discontent. And there was a strong correlation between those industries with strong rank and file union organisation and wildcat militancy. When the union hierarchy tried to call off strikes, often the branches and shop stewards ignored them to take unofficial wildcat action. Up until 1968, 95% of strikes had been unofficial, and the same was true of many of the conflicts of the 1970s.²⁹ Consequently, the strongholds of the organised working class, particularly mining and manufacturing, were to be dismantled. So-called 'anti-union' laws were introduced to clamp down on unofficial action and secondary picketing. But in practice these laws were not so much anti-union as anti-strike, imposing financial ruin (asset sequestration) on unions which didn't clamp down on their members taking unofficial action.

The National Union of Miners couldn't be trusted to discipline the miners, who had brought the country to a standstill in 1972 and brought down the government in 1974. The miners had shown a strong capacity for autonomous action at a rank and file level, particularly in 1972. A secondary stronghold was in manufacturing, particularly the car industry. These centres of working class power had to be destroyed lest they rise up again. The defeat of the miners was well planned, dating at least to the 1978 'Ridley Plan' which had been leaked to *the Economist*. Coal was stockpiled well in advance, some power plants were converted to run on petroleum, a fleet of scab hauliers was recruited in case rail workers refused to move coal, and riot squads were deployed to smash picket lines. Deals were done with other unions to pre-empt sympathetic action. In 1984 the government, via the National Coal Board (NCB), tore up the 1974 agreement and announced a programme of pit closures, costing 20,000 jobs. Without waiting to ballot, miners in the affected pits walked out. They soon spread the strike to other pits via flying pickets. But the story is a familiar one etched into the collective memory of today's militants, even those who weren't born at the time. Despite a long and bitter struggle, the miners were successfully isolated. They fought and lost almost alone.

For the manufacturing sector, the process was less sudden. Instead, firms increasingly employed a "spatial fix", relocating to countries with lower wages and laxer conditions. Often, these were military dictatorships like Brazil and South Korea. Here too, they often found that the workers they brought

²⁹ The Donovan Report, referenced in DAM, Winning the class war: libcom.org

together on the production lines got organised, fought and won better conditions. But in terms of Britain, the militancy was successfully exported.³⁰ Whereas in the 1970s the British economy had been 70% extractive industries and manufacturing, today it is more than 70% services. The economic restructuring has imposed a generational break in militancy across almost all sectors. Most workers born in the 1980s or since have never been on strike, and for those who have it has been mostly in one day, largely symbolic actions. Certainly, memories of *effective* industrial action are few and far between, and the sectors where this was commonplace are long gone. We have yet to see much in the way of effective service sector organising, something any contemporary anarcho-syndicalist strategy needs to address.

The advent of neoliberalism thus represented a shift in the balance of class forces, with capital once more on the offensive. Consequently, the meaning of ‘reform’ was redefined, not as concessions to placate the threat of revolution, but as an ongoing process of restructuring society in capital’s interests. ‘Labour market reform’ means casualisation, ‘flexibility’ (for employers), an increasing role for employment agencies, and rising job insecurity. Pension reform means cutting pension pay outs and increasing employee contributions. Financial market reform means deregulation of the sector, leading to greater financial instability, growing inequality and the massive expansion of personal credit (all factors in the current crisis). Public sector reform means privatisation and outsourcing, tearing up terms and conditions and the introduction of private sector management norms. Industrial relations reform means transforming the notion of relations into ‘human resources’, representing the relegation of the working class from collective subject to disciplined, individualised, managed object. Welfare reform means cuts and workfare, i.e. forced labour. Housing reform means the widespread privatisation of the housing stock, and the decline of social housing. In the absence of a strong working class movement ‘reforming to preserve’ was superseded with ‘reforming to develop’.

In short, reform has become a euphemism for attacking our living standards. Unions have been allowed to remain social partners so long as they accepted their role was no longer to police the shop floor in return for annual improvements in pay and conditions, but simply to manage their stagnation and decline with minimal disruption. This is normally called ‘consultation’, a managerial euphemism if ever there was one, since the outcome is rarely in doubt. During the ‘boom’ before the great financial crisis of 2007, pay was cut year on year in the form of sub-inflation pay offers. During the following austerity, this process accelerated. Neoliberalism has thus all but eliminated the space for reformism in the old sense of working through the representative institutions of unions and parliament to achieve gradual improvements in working class living standards. This is the paradox of reformism: without the revolutionary or at least, militant and uncontrollable threat, the reformists lose their seat at the table and capital and the state lose any incentive to concede reforms. Whether they could do so once more if faced with a renewed working class threat, or whether that ship has sailed, is an open question. We would err on the side of caution and say that it may indeed be possible, and as much as possible, we should organise in such a way that is wise to attempts at recuperation or buy offs.

With all this in mind, we can arrive at the counterintuitive formulation that neoliberalism constitutes *class collaboration on an individual basis*. No longer is social partnership institutionalised via collective bargaining and productivity deals. Rather, productivity and incentives are increasingly individualised. Home ownership and the corresponding mortgages were vastly expanded under Thatcher (and since with the ‘right to buy’ council housing). This formed a class basis for this ‘individualised class collaboration’, a burgeoning middle class identity to replace the ‘old fashioned’ working class identity associated with pit villages and manufacturing towns, which were in inexorable decline. The expansion of personal debt served to discipline the working class, first through mortgages (which mitigate against strike action which could cost your home) and later through the expansion of credit card lending which, together with rising house prices, plugged much of the gap in aggregate demand which, under the social democratic regime, had been served by productivity deals. Workplaces have seen a proliferation of minor hierarchies – team

³⁰ See Beverly Silver, Forces of labour: libcom.org

leaders and so on – to provide a semblance of truth to the ruling ideology of meritocracy that, if you keep your head down and crack on, you can progress your career. With the working class ever more atomised, inequality has risen dramatically. Britain’s Gini coefficient (0 = perfect equality, 100 = perfect inequality) rose from the mid 20s in the post-war period to 40 and above today, a figure which continues creeping upwards.

The atomisation of the working class has gone hand in hand with a mental health epidemic. Depression is rife as stresses, which were once seen as a collective battle between workers and bosses, are turned inwards as personal failings. After all, since our society is now a meritocracy, if you’re stuck in a dead end job, perma-temping or on the dole, *you’ve only yourself to blame*. Or so the story goes. One in four people suffers a mental health problem in any given year, most commonly anxiety and depression.³¹ Studies suggest that unemployment and rising income inequality are implicated in rising suicide rates.³² When the Greek economy went into crisis following the global recession, its suicide rate shot up from the lowest to the highest in Europe.³³ The depression epidemic is not solely caused by neoliberal capitalism, of course; mental health is far more complicated than that. But it’s certainly an important factor. Writer Mark Fisher notes:

“In Britain, depression is now the condition that is most treated by the NHS. (...) it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast privatization of stress that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.”³⁴

With the fragmenting of working class identity, the Labour Party, whose membership collapsed from 666,000 in 1979 to 348,000 the following year, became ‘unelectable’. That is, until they reinvented themselves as *New Labour*, declaring ‘we’re all middle class now’ (Labour membership was down to 194,000 at the latest count in 2010). Party politics has thus been transformed from *a spectacular image of class conflict*, where the party of the bosses and the party of the workers would do battle (the social democratic tragedy), into a contest between interchangeable administrators of the capitalist economy (the neoliberal farce). Neoliberal politics consists of a bland managerial face off, where increasingly indistinguishable candidates compete for a handful of decisive votes in marginal constituencies. Personality becomes decisive, but in truth mediocrity reigns. Real power lies elsewhere, and the sharpest of the ruling class no longer aim at a career in politics, leaving social administration to a succession of identikit clones.

Miliband imitates Cameron who imitates Blair; a copy of a copy of a copy, becoming more dull and unappealing each iteration. No wonder interest in party politics is waning! And good riddance. But it’s testament to the weakness of the working class that these mediocrities are able to rule us. With barely a semblance of anything at stake, membership of political parties is in steady decline, and electoral turnout too. Only the occasional short lived spectacle like the hype around New Labour or Obamamania can buck this trend. The incumbents promise a steady hand. The opposition promise change. They change places and change promises. In the 2010 general election, every major party ran on a slogan of ‘fairness’,³⁵ no doubt after some pollster discovered it was the value that really spoke

³¹ Mental Health Foundation, Mental health statistics: www.mentalhealth.org.uk

³² E.g. see David Gunnell, Nicos Middleton, Elise Whitley, Daniel Dorling and Stephen Frank, Why are suicide rates rising in young men but falling in the elderly? – a time-series analysis of trends in England and Wales 1950–1998: dx.doi.org and Alfonso Ceccherini-Nelli and Stefan Priebe, Economic factors and suicide rates: associations over time in four countries: dx.doi.org

³³ Helena Smith, Greek woes drive up suicide rate: www.guardian.co.uk

³⁴ Mark Fisher, Capitalist realism: libcom.org p.19.

³⁵ ‘Fairness means giving people what they deserve’ (Conservatives); ‘A future fair for all’ (Labour); ‘We will build a fairer Britain’ (Liberal Democrats); ‘Fair is worth fighting for’ (Greens).

to the fabled 'middle England'. In the past, revolutionaries had to make the case against parliament as the avenue for social change. Increasingly, parliament makes the case for us all by itself. As a BBC journalist writes:

“...the big parties have effectively given up on becoming mass membership organisations. There will be no return to the 1950s. What we might be witnessing instead is the birth of a new kind of political party. Not so much a religion to be followed by faithful, as a pastime to be pursued once or twice a year, when other commitments allow.”³⁶

This more or less brings us to the present crisis. As of 2012, much remains to be seen. But the Keynesian solution is no longer on the table. Even if there's the profitability to sustain new productivity deals (doubtful), or the wealth available for redistribution (doubtless), the ruling class aren't going to give it up, save in the face of a renewed class offensive. This has been contemplated in the pages of *the Economist*:

“...relatively undemocratic governments have historically extended voting rights in order to convince a restive public of the promise of future redistribution. In the West, that is not an option. A bit more growth and a bit less austerity might take the edge off public anger. But if social unrest has its roots in the effects of structural economic changes, a more fundamental societal reckoning may be needed. A study (...) examined inequality and unrest in India and found that redistribution can quell an outcry. That may well be the outcome of the current turmoil, too.”³⁷

But while one off redistributions might placate social movements, they cannot fix the economic crisis. There is plenty of existing wealth in the world which can in principle be redistributed, but as Karl Marx pointed out, capitalism is a system of producing new, surplus value. Moving existing wealth around won't in itself kick start that accumulation process. *A more fundamental societal reckoning may be needed.* The Keynesian/social democratic regime failed due to its own internal contradictions. It couldn't be sustained for more than 25 years or so in only a small part of the world (i.e. the most developed countries). There can be no return to the post-war settlement, whatever the nostalgic wishes of the left, for the conditions which made it possible no longer exist. But the original neoliberal solutions are now off the table too. The basis of neoliberal individualised class collaboration was the expansion of home ownership and the extension of easy credit to compensate for stagnating real wages. But with the bursting of the credit bubble and the fact much of the housing stock has already been sold off, that option is no longer viable.

What comes next remains to be seen. Neoliberalism may stagger on with further privatisations, casualisation and reliance on repression to compensate for falling political legitimacy. This seems to be the favoured course of the British ruling class. But this can be contested, resulting in either an alternative model of capitalist accumulation, or the re-emergence of a working class movement aiming beyond capitalism and the state, and towards a free society based on human needs. The latter, in fact, is likely to guarantee the former, to the extent it falls short. That is to say, it may take a push from the class struggle to put the final nails in neoliberalism's coffin, but there may be some other form of capitalism that follows, if we don't push all the way through to libertarian communism. Certainly, the best capitalism can offer us is alienated boredom and insecure employment; the worst, medicated misery and unemployment. Wherever the present crisis leads, we can be sure that the better organised we are, the stronger our solidarity, then the better prepared we are to influence things favourably in our direction. At the minute we are far from strong enough to do so. But a revolutionary unionist practice seems to us more relevant than ever, especially now the possibility for even modest gains through the reformist unions has been so much eroded.

³⁶ Brian Wheeler, Can UK political parties be saved from extinction?: www.bbc.co.uk

³⁷ The Economist, Unrest in peace: www.economist.com

Summary

In this chapter we looked first at the social democratic compromise. This marginalised revolutionary tendencies in the workers' movement by integrating the political and economic representatives of the working class into the state's management of capitalism. When this compromise broke down in the 1960s and 1970s, the working class took the offensive with waves of strikes and militancy. However, these struggles did not reach the intensity of revolutionary working class insurrection, although at times in France and Italy it came close. With the stalling of these struggles, capitalism and the state counter attacked with neoliberal reforms. These destroyed the old bases of militancy, put limited individual advancement in the place of collective struggles, and created a paradoxical 'individualised class collaboration'. These neoliberal conditions by no means mean a minimal or weak state, but a security state which creates the conditions for disorder whilst seeking to neutralise any outbreaks. This shapes the conditions for organising collective working class struggles today.

Further reading

Units 19 and 20 of the SelfEd history of anarcho-syndicalism cover the rise and decline of social democracy. *Aufheben* #13 contains a good article on housing and how it was used to decompose the working class.³⁸ *Aufheben*'s two part series on the financial crisis is also worth reading.³⁹ *Salt by Escalate* is an interesting take on the current crisis of capitalism and neoliberalism.⁴⁰ *Libcom.org* has a good brief introduction to the winter of discontent,⁴¹ as well as several good pieces on France 1968. These include '*Enragés and Situationists in the Occupations Movement*' by the Situationist International, '*General Strike: France 1968 – A factory by factory account*' by Andre Hoyles and '*May-June 1968 – A Situation Lacking in Workers' Autonomy*' by Mouvement Communiste. Daniel Cohn-Bendit's '*Obsolete Communism – the left wing alternative*' provides a book length account of the general strike in France. On Italy, the complete text of Robert Lumley's '*States of emergency: Cultures of revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978*' is available on *libcom* and covers the period of unrest well. Steve Wright's '*Storming Heaven*' covers the same period, with particular focus on the 'workerist' Marxist political currents. Mario Tronti's '*Strategy of Refusal*' remains a key workerist text from the time, outlining their unorthodox Marxist perspective. These can also be found on *libcom*.

³⁸ *Aufheben*, The housing question: libcom.org

³⁹ *Aufheben*, The return of the crisis – part 1: libcom.org and part 2: libcom.org

⁴⁰ *Escalate Collective*, *Salt*: libcom.org

⁴¹ Sam Lowry, 1978–1979: Winter of discontent: libcom.org

Anarcho-syndicalism in the 21st century

Introduction

In this final chapter, we set out our vision of anarcho-syndicalism today. We discuss how to move from being a simple political propaganda organisation to a revolutionary union capable of taking the initiative in organising and catalysing class struggles in the economic and social spheres. Central to this strategy is the potential for direct action to build confidence, capacity and self-organisation amongst the working class, and thus for struggle to serve as ‘the school of socialism’. We argue that a revolutionary union is an essential component of a revolutionary workers’ movement. Not only for organising and catalysing struggles, but providing both a physical and organisational infrastructure for the working class, and a point of departure for numerous anti-oppression, self-education and cultural initiatives, both inside and beyond its ranks. We set out how this kind of political economic organisation can help the re-emergence of a militant and revolutionary workers’ movement, and the necessity for this to seek to unite all the revolutionary workers of the world. Finally, we will sketch what a social revolution might look like on a world scale, and the role that revolutionary unions should play in this process.

From propaganda group to revolutionary union

In many ways it is easiest to start from what not to do. History furnishes us with ample cautionary examples. Certainly, anarcho-syndicalists do not want to function as a political organisation of anarchists. Political organisation leaves the organising of struggles either to reformist organisations (such as the trade unions), or to spontaneous action by workers. If we leave it to reformist unions or other organisations, the methods they will use will be representative, disempowering ones. This short circuits the power of direct action to serve not just as a means to achieve results but a school of social change. The main thing we learn from struggles organised along reformist lines is how to be marched out on strike and back in again, feeling thoroughly demoralised when union leaders snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. We certainly don’t experience self-organisation, control of our own struggles and the confidence and exhilaration of forcing concessions directly through collective action.

On the other hand, we reject the idea that the conditions created by capitalism will spontaneously lead to workers’ resistance. Conditions may shape struggle; they do not guarantee it. For us the key determinant in workers’ resistance is organisation; the greater the organisation, the more resistance, the greater the chance of success. It is notable that when council communists like Pannekoek (for whom “organisation springs up spontaneously, immediately”¹) championed workers ‘spontaneously’ organising strike committees in Germany and elsewhere, they did so from the base of highly organised union shops. So when the union bureaucracy didn’t back their actions they were in a position to launch wildcat strikes, form strike committees and so on. A similar pattern has been seen in the UK in recent years, with unofficial action concentrated amongst highly organised workers such as in the postal service, refuse collection, and rank and file electricians. In the absence of such organisation (and even many unionised workplaces are not *organised*, as we set out in Chapter 1) capitalist offensives far more often result in resignation, demoralisation and defeat, as has overwhelmingly been the case in Britain since the neoliberal counter offensive from the 1980s. As this culture of defeat sets in, it becomes ever more

¹ Anton Pannekoek, Workers’ councils, p.62.

entrenched, until it becomes impossible to imagine doing things differently as the neoliberal mantra of ‘there is no alternative’ takes root.

So we can neither leave the organisation of class conflicts in the hands of reformists, nor wait for struggles to emerge spontaneously. We need to organise struggles ourselves along direct action lines. And if we’re not capable of doing so at present, we need to aspire to that capability; we need to move from being a political propaganda group to being a revolutionary union. The Solidarity Federation describes itself as a revolutionary union initiative to signify this intent. So far, the struggles we have initiated have been small scale and often focussed on individual grievances. But that merely reflects the limits of our present capacities, capacities we are always seeking to expand. Specific political organisation is not sufficient to this task. We seek to become an organisation which is at once political and economic.

We can also reject the fanciful notion of reforming the bureaucratic unions, commonplace amongst socialists and not unheard of amongst anarchists either. Bureaucratisation is a one way process. Or rather, while it could theoretically be reversed by a strong enough rank and file movement, it would be a misdirection of energy to pursue union reform at the expense of direct action (a mistake that helped co-opt British syndicalism, as we saw in Chapter 2). Whatever energy and self-organisation it would take to dislodge entrenched bureaucracies, backed by the state, would be far better spent organising struggles directly, and regrouping workers into organisations based on the principles we espouse – revolutionary unions. This does not mean we should tear up our trade union cards, but rather abandon any pretensions to reforming the existing union structures, and regardless of trade union membership seek to pursue an anarcho-syndicalist strategy.

An argument commonly raised against revolutionary unionism is the numbers game. Unions, it is said, are ‘mass organisations’, which far exceed the scale of what it’s possible to organise along revolutionary lines. Thus, we are told, you can be revolutionary, or you can be a union, but never the twain shall meet. This gives rise to a reformist argument masquerading as ‘pragmatism’, that we must drop our ‘ideological’ opposition to reformist methods – works councils, full time officials, representative functions, state funds, compliance with the law and so on – in order to grow into such a ‘mass organisation’. This may be the way to ‘build’, but build what? We have no interest in building new bureaucracies, which is the sure fire result of building a union on anything other than clear anti-capitalist and anti-state principles. In the ‘post-political’ neoliberal world, we should be wary of anyone denying ideological motivations. The denial itself is the surest sign of ideology! Reformist ideology always presents itself as post-ideological ‘pragmatism’, as if this somehow makes its embrace of class collaboration any less ideological. Sure, revolutionary unionists are starting out as a tiny minority of the working class. That doesn’t mean we can’t organise class conflicts beyond our limited numbers, and win workers over to revolutionary unionism through the victories we win in the school of struggle.

In any event, a closer look at the trade unions should dispel the simplistic notion that they are ‘mass organisations’ in any meaningful way. It is true that in this country, the trade unions together maintain a membership numbering millions, with several of the largest topping a million members each. But what does this mean in practice? On a day to day basis, the union is run by a bureaucracy of paid officials and a minority of lay reps. These reps – shop stewards, health and safety reps and so on – are often the most militant workers in their workplaces. It’s not at all uncommon that less militant workplaces don’t even have a rep, or regular members’ meetings. When members’ meetings are held, and we sometimes encounter opposition from the bureaucracy to doing even this, typically only a tiny minority of the paper membership attends. This only changes in the course of a big dispute, when meetings may swell to most or all of the membership, and new members may even sign up to participate. So in practice, in the workplace the trade unions are organisations of worker activists which, in the course of disputes, organise mass meetings of the workforce. The strategy we are setting out merely recognises this reality of what a union is.

The trade unions are centralised, bureaucratic and hierarchical organisations, and so they don’t link worker activists horizontally with one another. Rather, workplaces are only linked to one another via the branch or the region, often staffed by full time officials or lay reps with an eye to becoming full time

officials, and not infrequently by ‘revolutionary socialists’ with their eye on a trade union career path. Consequently, they work against the circulation and co-ordination of self-organised struggles. Worker activists such as shop stewards in different areas or departments are limited to communicating with one another through ‘the proper channels’. This gives the union apparatus the chance to mediate, diffuse and control the rank and file should they get any ideas above their station (such as carrying on a strike which has been called off by head office despite strong rank and file support, a fairly frequent occurrence in recent British industrial relations). This leads many on the left to advocate some form of rank and fileism, i.e. a networking of rank and file activists independently of the union structure.

Our predecessor, the Direct Action Movement, was involved in such rank and file networks, but came to the conclusion that the very nature of these groups, and of the politics of those who have tried to organise them, has meant that they were doomed to failure. Since World War II we have seen various political groups try to set up rank and file networks, from those set up by the Communist Party (CP) in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Flashlight and the Building Workers’ Charter, through to the SWP dominated rank and files of the 1970s and, of course, the Militant Tendency (now Socialist Party) dominated Broad Lefts. Needless to say, such Marxist groups were not slow to manipulate rank and files for their own ends, even if this was to the detriment of those rank and files and the workers involved. For instance, Building Workers’ Charter, which had widespread support in the building industry, failed to appear in the massive and bitter building workers’ strike in the early 1970s due to the manoeuvring of the CP. Thus, they not only failed to provide an alternative lead to the reformist unions in a crucial strike, but so demoralised supporters of Building Workers’ Charter that it led to its eventual collapse. Again in 1973, when the International Socialists (IS; now the SWP), tried to set up a national rank and file movement, the CP dominated rank and files boycotted the conference organised to launch the movement, with the Morning Star newspaper denouncing the whole event as an IS plot. We saw it once again with the 2011 implosion of the National Shop Stewards Network (NSSN), when the Socialist Party made its long anticipated move to try and turn it into an anti-cuts front, and most of the anarchist, syndicalist and independent activists walked out.

It would be a mistake, however, to put the lack of politics down simply to malign Marxist influence. Instead, we should look at the nature of rank and file groups themselves. They are not made up of masses of ordinary workers but trade union activists (often members of political groups), sinking their political differences to the lowest common denominator – militant trade unionism. Perhaps a quote from the paper of one of the more successful rank and files of the 1970s, the NALGO Action Group, will illustrate this. An editorial stated: “the future development of NALGO Action Group remains as it always has, in the hands of its supporters whose political persuasions are less important than their common desire to work for greater democracy and militancy within NALGO and [the] larger trade union movement.”² Here, the problems are similar to those of ‘neutral’ syndicalism. The result is not the desired horizontal networking of workplace activists, but lowest common denominator trade unionism. This means many well meaning militants and revolutionaries end up being foot soldiers for leftist agendas, such as reforming the union or party political adventures (this was certainly the experience of DAM). This is not to say rank and file initiatives cannot also be a vehicle for workers to begin to take struggles into their own hands. The recent victories for the ‘Sparks’ electricians are a clear example of this potential, notably organising around a specific grievance (pay cuts) rather than a union reform agenda. But for anarcho-syndicalists, rank and fileism, much like trade unionism as a whole, is no substitute for *revolutionary* unionism.

So while it is always necessary to organise with as many workers as possible on a class basis, the unions we seek to build cannot afford to water down their principles to the lowest common denominator. Nor should we content ourselves with tailgating the struggles organised by the mainstream unions which, under neoliberalism, normally means defeat sold as victory. Rather, we should be seeking to build a revolutionary workers’ organisation based on clear anti-capitalist and anti-state principles which can take the initiative in organising struggles. This is what the Solidarity Federation means when it describes

² This quote, and indeed much of this section, is taken from DAM’s Winning the class war: libcom.org

itself as a revolutionary union initiative. Having recognised that the existing unions are but minority organisations of activists, and dispensed with the fallacy that “politics begins with millions”, we can recognise that everyday struggles are political. The question becomes a practical one – how to organise collective direct action for ourselves?

We unite the political and the economic because it reflects the realities under capitalism. The working class is at one and the same time oppressed and exploited. If we are ever to be truly free, we must challenge both capitalist exploitation and the power capitalism and the state have over us. The coming together of exploitation and oppression can be clearly seen in the smallest of workplace or community actions. When workers organise they challenge the management’s ‘right’ to manage. When tenants organise they challenge the landlord’s ‘right’ to their private property. It matters little whether this takes the form of a fight for increased wages, or reduced rents, or a fight to resist attempts to impose new working or residency conditions. In fighting one we fight the other; the economic and the political cannot be separated. Should the workers win a strike for increased wages, their power to win better conditions improves and vice versa. The revolutionary union unites the political and the economic, seeking to organise collective direct action in the here and now, not waiting to follow the lead of reformists or for struggles to arise spontaneously.

The role of the revolutionary union in the everyday class struggle

What we are describing is sometimes called ‘minority unionism’, but this is somewhat misleading on two counts. First, as we have argued above, even million strong trade unions are in practice, in terms of their presence in the workplace, minority organisations. It is not uncommon for there to be no workplace activists in a given ‘unionised’ workplace. Even when there is, it’s most commonly one or two shop stewards for a whole department or employer. It’s rare for a trade union to have a large density of workplace activists in a single workplace. So all unions, in terms of everyday activity, are as Emile Pouget said, “an active minority.”³ Secondly, we are not a minority out of aspiration, but out of recognition of reality. We, of course, seek the widest possible adoption of anarcho-syndicalist ideas and methods throughout the working class. It’s just that we see no reason to wait until then to organise. We need to use what capacity we have to organise what struggles we can in the here and now.

When we talk of organising direct action, what most immediately springs to mind is the strike. But in truth, a strike requires significant organisation to pull off, and often we may find ourselves setting our sights on other forms of action. Generally speaking, the fewer the number of participants, the less direct economic pressure we can bring to bear, and thus the more we rely on moral pressure. This could be as simple as shunning the boss, such as the members of a team refusing all non-essential communication, perhaps all verbal communication full stop, until their concerns are addressed. This type of action can certainly be organised by individuals, and any propaganda organisation capable of bringing out a newspaper can surely orient itself to such practical activity as well as, or indeed instead of, propaganda activities. Doing so and shouting about it has been, in our experience, a way to attract more militants of a similar persuasion.

Conversely, the greater the number of participants, the more economic pressure we can bring to bear and the less we need rely on moral pressure. At this end of the spectrum is the insurrectionary general strike. We will discuss this more in the following section, which discusses the role of the revolutionary union in the revolutionary process. Needless to say, such an action requires the ability to mobilise millions of workers, and thus a serious level of organisation far beyond anything existing today. We are not saying we can grow into such an organisation by sheer force of will. Such a revolutionary union could be formed by many possible means, and probably through some combination of all of them:

³ Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the revolution*, p.63.

simple membership growth, radicalised breakaways from other unions, recruitment from wider waves of struggles, mergers between existing and new organisations along anarcho-syndicalist lines... What we are saying is that by organising class conflicts along anarcho-syndicalist lines in the here and now we can, via the school of struggle, develop both an organisation and wider culture of solidarity and direct action within the working class greater than that which exists at present. The exact path between here and the revolutionary process remains to be trodden. The important thing is that we begin to walk it. What role does the revolutionary union have to play in this process?

The aim of the anarcho-syndicalist union is to act as an organisational force in the daily lives of the working class. We seek to organise workplace and community resistance, and to constantly link this to the need to overthrow the double yoke of capital and the state. We seek the overthrow of capitalism, and for it to be replaced by the self-managed libertarian communist society. Though the physical organisation of resistance is central to our ideas, we do not reject revolutionary theory. But for anarcho-syndicalists, theory grows out of practice and as such, should be seen as an aid to organising workers struggle and not, as so often is the case, a means of dominating and controlling it. And as capitalism is dynamic with conditions constantly changing, so must the methods used by workers to fight it. Engaged in this daily struggle we are best placed to ensure our theory keeps pace.

As anarcho-syndicalists, we oppose all forms of political parties. We reject the notion that governments act in the interest of the working class. They may bring forward minor improvements in order to make electoral gains, but fundamental change can only come about through the power of organised labour. We also reject the so called 'revolutionary' parties, on the grounds that, like all political parties, they seek state power. Our aim is the democratically controlled, self-managed libertarian communist society, not one in which the capitalist parties are simply replaced with a Marxist dictatorship. We argue that the workers must take control of their own struggles, as opposed to relying on politicians. We argue for, and seek to organise, direct action both as a means by which workers can democratically control their struggles, and as the most effective weapon in the fight against capitalism. As opposed to voting every few years for some useless politician, we argue that people must organise and confront capitalism and the state head on.

For anarcho-syndicalists, direct action is much more than a tactic to be employed against capitalism. Through the use of direct action, we seek to build a culture of solidarity and mutual aid in direct opposition to the dominant capitalist culture, based on narrow self-interest and greed. Through direct action, the working class can develop the skills, confidence, and understanding of the nature of society needed to administer the future libertarian society. Direct action doesn't just meet our immediate demands, but frees us from the stultifying reliance on political leaders and the state. Through direct action, the working class can forge the bonds of solidarity that will form the ethos that will underpin the future libertarian communist society. Through direct action, workers can begin to build the foundations of the future libertarian communist society now.

The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is to build militant workers' organisation, but from a clear revolutionary perspective. It fully realises that conditions in society may vary, and accordingly so will the possibility of organising class struggle. But no matter what the conditions, anarcho-syndicalists argue that militant workers' organisation cannot be achieved by a political group organising outside of the workplace. Organisation in the workplace will have to be built by the revolutionary union that involves itself in the day to day struggle of workers. But the aim of anarcho-syndicalism is not to enrol every worker into the revolutionary union, but rather to organise mass meetings at which the union argues for militant action. 'Mass' does not necessarily mean 'massive'. If a team consists of five people, then a meeting of four is a mass meeting. Obviously, at the other end of the spectrum, these could include hundreds of workers. But such large meetings can stifle opportunities to participate, and so splitting into smaller meetings, co-ordinated by a delegate council may be more appropriate. The precise forms employed by the revolutionary union are dictated by the needs of the struggle and not by theory. And the revolutionary union does not limit itself to the workplace. Class struggle also takes place against

landlords, property developers, the benefits regime, letting agencies, temp agencies, the tax authorities, the prison regime, and other representatives of capital and state.

But neither should the anarcho-syndicalist union be seen as a monolithic organisation that seeks to organise every aspect of human activity. Our aim is to build a revolutionary culture within the working class that will form the basis of the future libertarian communist society. And this revolutionary culture will be as rich and diverse as humanity itself. It will comprise of countless groups and interests, formal and informal, that will operate both in and outside of the union. The role of the union is to bring this diversity together on the basis of class in opposition to capitalism and the state. At the heart of the anarcho-syndicalist union is the Local, which aims to be at the centre of community and workplace struggle in the surrounding area. But the role of the Local goes beyond that. It provides the physical space where a diverse range of groups, such as oppressed, cultural, and education groups can organise. The Local acts as the social, political, and economic centre for working class struggle in a given area. It is the physical embodiment of our beliefs and methods, the means by which workers become anarcho-syndicalist not just on the basis of ideas but activity.

The Local aims to be a hive of working class self-activity in the area, inside and outside the union, a catalyst for workers' self-activity, an infrastructure and tool of struggle for the working class. It's a base not only to organise against capital and state, but for all sorts of marginalised and oppressed groups to organise. If we're serious about prefiguring a libertarian communist society, we must challenge patriarchy, racism, and bigotry of all forms within society and, when necessary, within our own ranks too. So long as we don't have our own premises, we can use drop in sessions in whatever venues are available, we can use picket lines, or hold regular stalls, to discuss organising with workers. And out of these we're likely to find fights to pick with capital and the state. In the early days, these fights are likely to be small, attempts to collectivise individual grievances. We can only bite off what we can chew. But by taking on instances of wage theft, stolen deposits, and the other everyday little attacks, we can both win concrete demands but also start to build a culture of direct action, and normalise the idea of standing up for our interests, of fighting for ourselves.

Casualisation is often said to be a new phenomenon which undermines the possibility of organised labour. But this is only partly true. Short term contracts and temp jobs will mean building up a permanent organisation on the job will likely prove difficult to impossible. But this simply calls for different tactics and forms of struggle, in which the Local can play a central role. The Local is the place for casual workers to meet, discuss and develop tactics adequate to their conditions. Remember the casual workers who formed the militant backbone of the early French CGT, and recall the IWW's itinerant agitator organisers with branches in their satchels. Capital will always seek to break down our areas of strength. But this only forces us to develop new tactics. If we are lucky, we can turn our weaknesses into strengths. Workers may move between jobs too frequently to build up lasting collective organisation on the job, but they'll often remain in the same sector. So, for instance, restaurant workers belonging to a Local could share ideas and knowledge about employers, and draw on the Local to organise pickets to enforce demands. The flipside to casualisation is, if you're not going to be in the job long anyway, the threat of losing your job for standing up for yourself is much reduced. For those in more permanent positions, building up solid workplace organisation which could resist victimisation would likely be a better approach.

The typical vanguardist position is that consciousness precedes action. This is, after all, why the vanguard party, bearer of 'revolutionary consciousnesses,' must lead the working class. This attitude is explicit in Leninist Marxism but implicit in many other political organisations, even when they seek only to be 'the leadership of ideas.' For anarcho-syndicalists, it is the other way around. Workers may not all share our goals of overthrowing capitalism and the state, but we're not asking them to sign up to that as a precondition of organising. We're simply asking them to take direct action with us in their own interests. If, in this process, anarcho-syndicalism begins to make more sense to them, then the union gains another member. It should be explained that this is not any old union, concerned only with bread and butter issues, but a revolutionary one also pursuing radical social transformation. This isn't

a question of *identifying* as an anarcho-syndicalist, but rather of identifying with our *methods and goals*, whatever your preferred political label (or lack of). It doesn't do us any good to be recruiting workers who don't share our aims and methods, nor does it do workers any good to be joining a union whose aims and methods they don't share. But we should not be afraid to actively recruit through activity either, as this is the only way to expand beyond the existing pool of politicised militants. Revolutionary union activity can expand the pool.

Workplace organisations may be militant but that does not automatically make them revolutionary. We cannot just limit ourselves to organising workplace meetings and hoping they will, as if by magic, gain a revolutionary perspective. Many a militant struggle has demanded union recognition, won it, and then settled down into the normal routine of mediated industrial relations. Our aim is to organise militancy as a stepping stone to revolutionary thinking. The revolutionary union can play a catalytic role in creating such a culture of solidarity and direct action amongst the working class, recruiting those who share our aims and goals into our ranks. As well as raising issues and, where possible, organising action, we should be putting out regular propaganda, attempting to organise workplace meetings, and generally attempting to draw people into SF. In the long term, the aim would be to increase the organisation to the point where workplace meetings will slowly transform, from being simply militant, or primarily economic, meetings to being meetings of revolutionary workers. In effect, the workplace meeting would become the foundation of the anarcho-syndicalist union branch in a given workplace. A similar process can take place in the local area through the Local, which is especially important for casual, unemployed, domestic or retired workers.

We sometimes hear the argument that, by negotiating within capitalism, we risk becoming part of it. But this does not stand the reality test. This is to equate negotiation with class collaboration. But as every demand short of revolution is a negotiation, this approach would in effect brand every organisation that did not demand revolution in every situation as reformist. This is nonsense and pure posturing. Negotiations are simply meetings between workers and the enemy, whether management, the letting agent, or whoever. The factor that determines the nature of negotiations is who is doing the negotiating. Our approach to negotiations is to see them as part of class struggle. Negotiations should be done en masse, or by delegates mandated by all the workers taking action. The revolutionary union does not negotiate on behalf of workers, workers negotiate for themselves, but we don't shy away from being delegated. We don't seek negotiations looking for a "just" or "fair" result, but rather to demand as much as possible in any given circumstance. If an action has management on the run, then we do not limit ourselves to the original demand but rather, we seek to press home our advantage and make as many gains as possible. Revolutionary practice consists of the relationship between means and ends. It is the use of direct action to win immediate demands in such a way that builds the confidence, solidarity, and culture needed for further struggles, and ultimately, revolution itself. Revolution is a matter of deeds not words, in our everyday struggles as well as the future upheaval.

It has to be understood that direct action is economic war carried out at a distance. As such, it is always hard to assess what effect a dispute is having on the other side. The only time that the two sides come together is during negotiations. One of the primary aims of negotiations, therefore, is for one side to try to assess what effect the action is having on the other, while attempting to conceal any weaknesses of their own. Should it become clear that the effect of the action is having a greater effect than first thought, then obviously the demands made should increase. The anarcho-syndicalist goes into negotiations as a mandated delegate. But only an idiot would not ask for more if it becomes apparent that management are on the run. Negotiations also have a further role in that they can be used as part of the process of demoralising management. The anarcho-syndicalist union engages in class war, and as in any war, morale or alternately demoralisation plays an important role in the battle. The anarcho-syndicalist union seeks to instil in management a sense of fear, hatred and bewilderment. We want to get to a point where they're tearing their hair out at our 'unreasonable' demands and are desperate to make it stop. On this note, one of our members was once involved in an action which forced the manager to go and buy everyone ice creams on a hot day. When the manager relented and offered to

pay for ice creams, they insisted he went to buy them in person. This is the kind of ‘unreasonable’ and demoralising power we seek to have over management. And needless to say, ice cream does not equal reformism.

The anarcho-syndicalist approach is to pick fights we can win, and use these victories to attract more workers into our orbit and to demonstrate the validity of our anti-capitalist and anti-state approach. It is true that most workers don’t share our perspective at the present time. But this is not a fixed fact, but dependent on numerous variables, some of which we can control and others which we cannot. In practice, we have found that at least some of our fellow workers are open to our revolutionary ideas and methods, whereas reformism is most often pushed by politicians convinced that ‘ideology’ puts off ‘the workers’ (remember the *Treintistas*). And we should add, the distance between disillusionment in your job and party politics, attitudes which are widespread, and a revolutionary perspective is not as great as many specialists in ‘revolutionary theory’ like to insist. Many of us have traversed it, and there’s nothing special about us. Being against capitalism and the state in the abstract doesn’t make much sense. But when it’s expressed through direct action, asserting our independence from those we struggle against, it’s almost common sense. Through the process of struggle, we are confident our perspective will come to appear more and more self-evident, even as it evolves through these experiences.

For example, it is often difficult to conduct anything resembling direct action in the streets these days without coming into conflict with the police. Marching without prior permission, or leaving the route of a march (or sometimes for no apparent reason at all), is likely to attract police repression. Police repression vindicates our anti-state perspective. Many of our newest members have been politicised by the baton in the recent struggles over tuition fees and austerity. But the police are in a bind. If they don’t respond with repression, then we’re free to organise direct action, such as picketing temp agencies and organising economic or communications blockades. When these tactics get the goods, they vindicate our anti-capitalist, direct action ethos. If our understanding of the nature of society is broadly correct, then struggles should expose the fault lines between the working class on the one side and capital and the state on the other. Through waging the everyday class war, anarcho-syndicalist ideas can become a working class common sense. Deposit stolen? Picket, occupy, and blockade the bastards. Problems at work? Get some workmates together and get organised.

SF members in the same industry also form industrial networks. At present, these are small and function mostly as email lists for discussion and the production of propaganda. Unlike Locals, Networks are geographically dispersed and so lack the immediacy of face to face organisation, and are thus limited in what they can do, for now at least, with most practical activity being carried out through Locals. But as we grow, there is the potential to form industrial Locals, as well as workplace branches of SF, which linked together through the industrial networks, will form embryonic revolutionary industrial unions. We, of course, do not mean ‘industrial’ in the sense of smokestacks, but in the sense of ‘one workplace, one union’. So for instance on a university campus, porters, cleaners, teaching assistants and academic staff (assuming they were not bosses of some sort) would form a workplace branch, which in turn would form part of the Education Workers’ Network. For us, this is still in its early stages. For our sister-sections in Spain and Italy, workplace branches and industrial unions are far more advanced. British conditions, particularly with regard to trade union legislation, are somewhat different. But that only impacts the details, not the broad thrust of what we’re trying to do.

As we are presently a tiny minority of the working class, we will need to organise beyond our membership. Even if we were 10,000 times larger, this would still be the case; as we saw, it was even the case in Catalonia in 1936. Various organisational forms can be employed for this purpose: from workplace committees, mass meetings, neighbourhood assemblies, and strike committees, through to factory committees, delegate councils, or a fully fledged federation of workers councils. None of these forms are a panacea and all have their drawbacks as well as benefits. Rather, they are democratic means of organising which can be employed by the revolutionary union as the needs of the struggle dictate. The particular forms of organisation we employ reflect the content of the struggle. In Puerto Real, workplace and community mass meetings were a vital part of the struggle. But we have also attended

‘mass meetings’ organised by reformist unions, where a string of top table speakers mouth platitudes to a bored audience, or which simply serve to rubber stamp decisions already made elsewhere. In the case of the Workmates collective on the London Underground, the delegate council they set up was sidelined by action coming directly from the mass meetings. But if similar mass meetings were happening across multiple work sites, something like a delegate council could have proved indispensable in joining up the struggles.⁴ The content of the struggle must shape the forms we use. The role of the revolutionary union is to take the initiative in organising struggles in the first place.

The role of the revolutionary union in the revolutionary process

Just as the anarcho-syndicalist union cannot and does not wish to organise all aspects of human activity, nor does it seek to organise the revolution on behalf of the working class. For us, revolutions come about when the anger of the oppressed can no longer be contained by the power of the oppressors, leading to an explosion of anger that drives revolutionary change. Revolutions break out, they cannot be planned, they cannot be predicted, they cannot be organised. But if they are to succeed, revolutions have to move quickly from anger to decisive action. The revolution has to be advanced and defended, people have to eat, they need water and electricity, and these things have to be organised. The role of the anarcho-syndicalist union is to act as a catalyst and organising force within the revolution to ensure its success.

Within the revolutionary process, the anarcho-syndicalist union seeks to organise the insurrectionary general strike as the means by which the workers take control of the streets and the workplaces. This means that, amidst strike waves and street demonstrations, riots and political turmoil, the revolutionary union looks to generalise the strikes, to turn them from walkouts into expropriations, restarting production and distribution under self-management to meet social needs. The insurrectionary general strike marks the start of the process of building the libertarian communist society. The production and distribution of goods and services is taken over under workers’ democratic control and run on the basis of human need. The revolutionary union seeks to organise a system of free councils without subordination to any authority or political party, bar none. These organisations of the working class both administer production and distribution according to needs, and supplant the authority of the state. Militias are formed to defend the revolution from the external forces of capitalism and to shut down the forces of the state. The building blocks of the new society are put in place on top of the foundations laid by the preceding struggles.

In truth, the idea of revolution in one country always belonged to the bourgeois revolutionaries, who sought to seize control of the state and turn it into an instrument of capitalist development. The 20th century is a striking indictment of the notion that revolution in one country could ever result in anything remotely communist. Isolated and surrounded on all sides, even the most impeccable revolution would leave revolutionaries stranded on an island, facing the permanent threat of military intervention, and the necessity to source resources unavailable domestically from the world market. Whilst defensive forces can be organised in a non-statist manner through workers militias, it is hard to see how a permanent war footing in such an embattled revolutionary pocket could establish and maintain libertarian communist social relations. The necessities to engage with the world market and to maintain war production would undermine the reorganisation of society to meet human needs. The revolution we seek will be worldwide or it will not be at all.

Thus, the revolutionary process we have described should not be conceived of as a national one, or even a series of national revolutions one after the other. Indeed, there is no reason to think such waves of class struggle will respect national borders. The international wave of class struggles following World

⁴ The cases of Workmates and Puerto Real form pamphlets #1 and #2 in our Theory and Practice series: solfed.org.uk

War I certainly did not, and nor did the wave of struggles from 1968. To be sure, national identity is a powerful force for many workers, but the daily work of the revolutionary union in its cultural and educational aspects, as well as practical international solidarity, should have helped to undermine its appeal in favour of working class internationalism. As Rudolf Rocker wrote of the First International, it “became the great school mistress of the socialist labour movement and confronted the capitalist world with the world of international labour, which was being ever more firmly welded together in the bonds of proletarian solidarity.”⁵

Language too is a material barrier to the international circulation of struggles. A true revolutionary international could only assist in this process of circulation and co-ordination. Here too, there is much work to be done. The IWA is mainly centred in Europe and South America. Many of our sections, including ourselves, are not (yet) functioning unions. We hope this text can help in the movement from propaganda groups towards revolutionary unions across the International. But even then, there is still work to do. It is now impossible to conceive of the kind of worldwide revolutionary wave we’re discussing, without the working class populations of China, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and countless other countries playing a prominent part. Conditions for organising in many of these places are hostile to say the least. But yet they have seen massive waves of autonomous struggles outside the control of the official unions which dwarf the struggles in Europe in recent years. If we are serious that “all the revolutionary workers of the world must build a real International Association of Workers”, we must find ways to open a dialogue with such groups.

It is difficult to know where to start. This is a profoundly practical question beyond the scope of this text. It will require much discussion, and trial and error to move towards an answer. We raise it here simply to acknowledge the scale of the task we have set for ourselves. Perhaps this process could begin with making anarcho-syndicalist materials available in Mandarin, Cantonese, Hindi, Arabic, Farsi... and by seeking to initiate a dialogue around revolutionary unionist practices, translating any correspondence that results back into European tongues. Perhaps we could seek out and build contacts in parts of the world where the IWA lacks a presence, then seek to turn contacts into sections, small sections from propaganda groups into unions, and for union sections to begin to weave a culture of direct action into the daily life of the working class. Perhaps there are already radical workers’ groupings operating along similar lines and we simply are unaware of each others’ existence. Such working class internationalism represents a practical task of vital importance to the prospects of any global revolutionary wave that sweeps away capital and states to instantiate libertarian communism.

However a global revolutionary wave starts, *somewhere* goes first. Some factory or office or infrastructure is the first to be taken over. The drive for this is likely to be material necessity. People need to eat, people need electricity, people need water. If the revolutionary wave isn’t sparked by an economic crisis, it’s sure to provoke one. With a worldwide wave of strikes, occupations, demonstrations and riots, workers will begin to go hungry, while the capitalists, who have the deepest pockets, will be stockpiling reserves. Thus, within this process, the revolutionary union seeks to generalise the strike wave, across industries, localities, and national borders. And as it generalises, it seeks to organise for the strikes to become occupations. To expropriate the expropriators and seize back social production for human needs.

Everything we know about social revolutions suggests they are messy, contradictory processes, an open clash of opposing forces that sees advances and retreats, consolidations and capitulations. They proceed unevenly in fits and starts, ebbs and flows, and all the more so when we’re not talking about the overthrow of one state, but 200 or more! The rupture with capitalism is likely to follow this pattern, developing unevenly, with revolutionary surges battling counter revolutionary inertia and attempts to restore the sanctity of private property. Some of these clashes are likely to be armed. However, revolution is not principally a military question but a social one. Stripped of their capital by workplace occupations, and stripped of their states by the beating back of the police, and mutinies amongst the troops when

⁵ Rudolf Rocker, Anarcho-syndicalism: libcom.org

ordered to fire on ‘their own’, the ruling class will represent a much diminished force.⁶ Still, they will likely unleash whatever violence they can via the state or mercenary forces to crush the revolution, and this will need to be met with violence, organised along libertarian lines through a militia system.

The libertarian communist revolution is a process. It is a movement. It will likely develop and blossom from strike waves to expropriations over a period of years. This isn’t a ‘transitional phase’, it is what the revolution is. We do not wake up one morning and find that libertarian communism has been proclaimed. We seize back society from capital and the state as much as we can, and push for libertarian communist social relations as much as possible. We aim for the abolition of wages and the distribution of goods and services according to need. We aim for the abolition of all state power and the destruction of all social hierarchies, whether based on gender, colour or anything else. Through direct action in our daily struggles, the working class forges the bonds of solidarity and forms the ethos that will underpin the future libertarian communist society. The foundations will have been laid by the preceding struggles. The idea of revolution as a glorious day was born on the threshold of the Bastille and embellished with the Bolshevik mythologising of the storming of the Winter Palace.⁷ We must let it go.

Any global revolution will have its dramatic days, but the idea of revolution as an instantaneous transition belongs to those who wish to seize power in a single state. It is utterly inadequate for the overthrow of an entire mode of production. Libertarian communism is not something to be established ‘after the revolution’. The revolutionary process is the process of creating libertarian communism, a process which is likely to build in rising waves, rather than be achieved on a single glorious day. As more and more workplaces are seized, and as the state forces are weakened and states begin to crumble, private property becomes a mere memory of a bygone era, like tithes and tributes before it. Expropriated workplaces do not relate to each other as isolated enterprises trading in a market. They federate together into a single entity, pooling resources on the basis of needs under self-management, and doing away with wage labour, as the necessities of life become available to the working class directly from our own efforts, without the mediation of the market.

The revolutionary union is vital to play both a preparatory role for these decisive struggles, and to generalise the libertarian communist movement within them towards the insurrectionary general strike when they erupt. Yes, the task is a great one. But of course, we only want the world.

Endnotes

⁶ As the revolutionary union develops the capacity to organise more effective struggles and begins to attract the attention of the state, the importance of Locals undertaking anti-militarist agitation amongst the troops increases. Particularly in garrison towns, fraternisation with the troops could be pursued, as could organising around ex-service personnel, military housing, or the workplace and other grievances of the families of troops. The exact content of effective anti-militarist activity will need to be worked out in practice, but it will increase in importance as the class struggle heats up.

⁷ The storming of the Bastille on the morning of the 14th July 1789 symbolises the outbreak of the French Revolution, where the rising capitalist class seized power from the monarchy. The Communist Party attempted a similar mythologising of the storming of the Winter Palace, staging a mass spectacle with over 100,000 spectators in 1920. These iconic events stand in for much messier and contradictory revolutionary and counter revolutionary processes.

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