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# Editorial: Syndicalism and radical unionism

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## Editorial

*Ralph Darlington*

Throughout the history of capitalism the ideas and practices of *revolutionary unionism* - the notion that the trade unions should go beyond merely attempting to improve workers' terms and conditions of employment within the framework of capitalist society, to become the chief instrument through which workers can overthrow capitalism and establish a completely new society – have regularly emerged. For example, in Britain the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union of the 1830s aimed to build a massive single union that would represent the whole working class. Robert Owen promoted the body as the vehicle for the concerted and simultaneous 'Grand National Holiday' (general strike) that would force the capitalists to voluntarily abdicate their position as owners and directors of the means of production and usher in a new socialist society. Likewise in early industrial America, the Knights of Labor, the first important national labour organisation to appear, committed itself to a form of revolutionary trade unionism. And throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century syndicalists, anarchists, socialists and communists alike all sought to either transform existing reformist trade unions into revolutionary instruments of struggle against capitalism, or build entirely new anti-capitalist and revolutionary union bodies. From the Red International of Labour Unions formed by the Communist International in Moscow in the early 1920s, to the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement formed by a number of black union militants in Detroit car plants in the late 1960s, forms of revolutionary unionism were a persistent theme. But undoubtedly historically the most significant revolutionary union movement, in terms of its numerical size, influence and international reach, was provided by the phenomena of revolutionary syndicalism.<sup>1</sup>

### Revolutionary Syndicalism

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, amidst an extraordinary international upsurge in strike action, the ideas of revolutionary syndicalism connected with, and helped to produce, mass workers' movements in a number of different countries across the world. An increasing number of syndicalist unions, committed to destroying capitalism through revolutionary trade union struggle, were to emerge as either existing unions were won over to syndicalist principles or new alternative revolutionary unions and organisations were formed by dissidents who broke away from their mainstream reformist adversaries. This international movement experienced its greatest vitality in the period immediately preceding and following the First World War, from about 1910 until the early 1920s (although the movement in Spain crested later).

Amongst the largest and most famous unions influenced by syndicalist ideas and practice were the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France, the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT) in Spain and the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (USI) in Italy. In France (as well as Spain during the early 1930s) syndicalism became, for a period of time at least, the majority tendency inside the trade union movement, as it did in Ireland with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). Elsewhere, syndicalism became the rallying point for a significant minority of union activists, as in America with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or 'Wobblies' as colloquially they became known. In Britain, where syndicalism was represented within the pre-war Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) as well as (in a more diffuse form) the leadership of the wartime engineering Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee

Movement, they continued to operate inside the existing unions but encouraged unofficial rank-and-file reform movements. Other notable syndicalist unions and movements existed elsewhere in Europe, Scandinavia, and Latin America, as well as in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Russia.

Revolutionary syndicalism was a movement committed to destroying capitalism through direct action and revolutionary industrial struggle. Parliamentary democracy and working for reforms through the state were rejected as dead ends, and the traditional function of trade unions – struggling to better wages and working conditions through collective bargaining – was regarded as inadequate. Instead, syndicalists campaigned in favour of industrial and class-based unions that would become militant organisations dedicated to the destruction of capitalism and the state. They believed the road to the emancipation of the working class lay through an intensification of the industrial struggle, involving boycotts, sabotage, strikes and solidarity action, eventually culminating in a revolutionary general strike that would lead to the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement by workers' control of industry and society. Unions would have a double function – as an organ of struggle under the present system and as an organ of economic and industrial administration after its overthrow. Even though individual syndicalist movements adopted varying strategies and organisational forms in different countries they everywhere 'incorporated a vision of the revolutionary power of self-reliant workers, an insistence on their right to collective self-management, and a passionate belief in their capacity to administer their own affairs'.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the emergence of revolutionary syndicalism in the years leading up to and immediately after the First World War was only one, albeit conspicuous, dimension of a wider workers' radicalism inside the international labour movement. It reflected growing levels of discontent with the failure of social democratic parties and mainstream trade unions to deliver real improvements in social and political conditions, with new groups of activists (including militant trade unionists, left-wing socialists, revolutionary Marxists as well as syndicalists), organising along different lines to those of the established labour and trade union movement leaders. Indeed, the heyday of syndicalism was maintained for only a brief period of 20 or so years. Its existence as a powerful and influential current inside the international trade union movement effectively came to an end with the ebb of the revolutionary workers' struggles that had shaken many countries in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, which was followed by employers' and state directed counter-mobilisation and repression. But it was the seizure of state power by Russian workers under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, and the subsequent formation of the Communist International (Comintern) and its trade union arm the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), which was to prove a decisive ideological and political challenge to the revolutionary syndicalist movement.

Afterwards, although it remained a residual force in Europe until World War Two, syndicalism only survived as a pale shadow of its former self, being displaced partly by a rejuvenated social democracy (which succeeded in containing workers' discontent within established channels) and partly by the new revolutionary Communist parties that were subsequently established and which were to rapidly supersede syndicalist organisations in most countries. There was only one important exception: a mass following was retained by anarcho-syndicalism in Spain during the Civil War of 1936–1939. As Joseph White has commented (with reference to Britain but relevant more broadly), it is difficult to think of any other distinct tendency inside the labour movement during the twentieth century 'whose historical "moment" was as short as syndicalism's and whose working assumptions were so completely displaced and subsumed by

events and fresh doctrines'.<sup>3</sup>

But even if revolutionary syndicalism was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its overall aims – particularly when compared to the architects of the Russian revolution – it nonetheless made a significant contribution to the explosive wave of working class struggle that swept many countries during the early twentieth century. It expressed workers' rising level of organisation, confidence and political consciousness during this period. The movement displayed a powerful and inspiring capacity to mount uncompromising anti-capitalist forms of struggle which challenged both the structures of managerial authority within the capitalist enterprise and the legitimacy of 'democratic' state power within society generally. It came to represent an influential set of policy prescriptions and strategies for labour at a time when all politics was in flux and such matters as the nature of political authority and accountability were open to wide-ranging debate.<sup>4</sup> Emmett O'Connor has suggested that in the 'lacuna between pioneering Marxism and the triumph of Leninist realism in 1917' the syndicalist challenge that was mounted to jaded orthodoxies was both distinctive and far-reaching.<sup>5</sup>

In the process it provided a devastating critique of the prevailing versions of political labourism and state socialism, as well as of bureaucratic and conservative trade union officialdom. Its antipathy to capitalism and vision of an alternative society raised fundamental questions about the need for new and democratic forms of power through which workers could manage society themselves. Even though syndicalist-inspired voices were not the only one raising doubts about the drift of labour politics at the time, nor were the syndicalists the only revolutionary current, they nonetheless made a powerful and distinctive ideological and political contribution to a variety of debates about how society could be fundamentally transformed.

However, it is also clear that the revolutionary syndicalist movement was also confronted with a number of paradoxes and dilemmas, three of which can be briefly mentioned.

### **Cause without Rebels?**

First, how much influence did syndicalism have? Shortly after the demise of the movement internationally a number of historians developed a revisionist case against syndicalism suggesting its essential premise, that workers had an interest in overthrowing capitalism through revolutionary trade union activity, was fundamentally flawed. They argued that a combination of the untenable objective conditions within which syndicalism attempted to attract support and the unrealistic revolutionary policies it espoused, inevitably led to marginalisation of the movement to the fringes of the working class except for episodic periods. For example in America Robert Hoxie characterized the IWW's philosophy as a 'doctrine of despair' fundamentally at odds with the 'optimism' of American workers and concluded that the 'conditions are not here for its growth'.<sup>6</sup> Peter Stearns has advanced similar arguments in relation to French syndicalism. French workers sought limited and often traditional goals and most generally were simply not dissatisfied with their lot given the very limited nature of their expectations. Syndicalism had little genuine mass influence and was a failure, either as instructor or stimulant to the working class. 'A cause without rebels', claims Stearns; a movement unable to generate among French workers a revolutionary commitment to match its radical rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

So how valid is this attempt to suggest that the syndicalist movement's

advocacy of revolutionary trade union activity was inevitably doomed to fail? Should we assess the movement's significance essentially only in terms of the attempt to secure immediate improvements in wages and conditions? Or (even if syndicalist activists were relatively few in number) did there exist a far broader 'proto-syndicalist mentality',<sup>8</sup> a 'diffuse syndicalist impulse',<sup>9</sup> inside the working class movement arising from the mass strikes and anti-parliamentary ferment of the period?

### **Ultimate Revolutionary Goals versus Immediate Day-to-Day Reforms?**

Second, any assessment of the historical experience of syndicalism and revolutionary unionism more broadly conceived, must also necessarily also consider the often-commented upon inherent central contradiction of trade unionism under capitalism – that it is both a form of *resistance* to capitalism and a form of *integration* within capitalism.<sup>10</sup> On the one hand there was the conception of unions as the chief instruments for revolutionary change, and on the other hand there was the pressure of sectionalism, bureaucracy, reformism and the structural tendencies to incorporate even revolutionary unions within capitalism as permanent bargaining agents and mediators of conflict. In other words, the problem that confronted the syndicalists, was how in practice to combine their declared aims of conducting a state of permanent war against capitalist society with the pursuit of immediate and limited improvements for workers.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in France where the CGT came under constant pressure to adapt to their circumstances, to interpret 'direct action' not necessarily as the revolutionary general strike but as merely the use of industrial force to wrest limited concessions from the capitalist system. Thus, although the most pressing demands of the *syndicats* (such as agitation for the 8-hour day) had always been promoted as steps towards emancipation and the partial expropriation of the capitalist class, in practice they often became pursued for their own sake, as ends in themselves rather than as episodes in a permanent revolution. The CGT's leadership, unwilling to sacrifice their often expressed revolutionary ideals had been forced to interpret this reformist activity so that it fitted into their own philosophy. As the historian Louis Levine commented in 1912: 'The struggle for immediate gains is a necessity which they must make a virtue of while waiting for the hoped for final struggle'.<sup>11</sup> As a consequence, by 1918 the revolutionary syndicalism of the pre-war CGT had been transformed into the advocacy of social amelioration through legislation and collective bargaining.

Syndicalist movements in Spain and Italy were also bedeviled by internal divisions between different elements – on the one hand more moderate 'pure' syndicalists and on the other anarchist-influenced anarcho-syndicalists - arising from the relative emphasis placed on obtaining immediate reforms versus ultimate revolutionary goals. The latter were much less trade union orientated than the former, promoted political strikes rather than just economic ones, and were more concerned with building revolutionary consciousness than in negotiating better conditions of employment. Likewise inside the IWW there was a continuing conflict as to whether the organisation should be a functioning labour union, combining the struggle for higher wages and better working conditions with a programme for revolutionary socialism, or a revolutionary cadre organisation that concentrated exclusively upon leading the working class to revolution. The national headquarters stressed the first, whilst many of the more anarchist-influenced members stressed the second, arguing that there was a contradiction between the goals of revolution and unionism, and that to concentrate on union activity would blind the workers to the final aim. Indeed

from such a perspective it was felt that the IWW should abandon any pretence of being an economic organisation and devote its energies exclusively to propaganda and agitation.<sup>12</sup>

So was the syndicalist experiment necessarily fatally flawed by the limitations of trade union action within a capitalist society, or did it merely demonstrate that although accommodation and reformism were powerful and potentially overwhelming tendencies, they were not themselves un-contradictory and irresistible 'iron laws'? To what extent did the contradictions in trade unionism create space for syndicalists to fight for militant forms of struggle and for strategies which broadened solidarity among different groups of workers in a powerful anti-capitalist direction?

### **Communist Challenge?**

Third, what of the alternative mounted to syndicalism, which eventually superseded it, provided by the communist tradition of Lenin, the Bolsheviks and the Communist International? Clearly while syndicalism shared with communism the doctrine of class struggle and conception of the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society, it disagreed on the extent to which trade unions could be viewed as vehicles for revolution. Although the communists acknowledged, and sometimes enthused about, the potential role of trade unionism, they also stressed their limitations and argued that on their own trade unions could not be the vehicle of capitalism's abolition. Hence the insistence on the importance of *political* methods of struggle and of political parties, as the instrument by which a new society could be governed.

Lenin and the Comintern leaders believed that, following the impact of war and the Russian Revolution, and within a context of mass industrial unrest and political radicalisation across the world, there had been a qualitative shift in emphasis within many western trade unions. Increasingly the ability of the capitalist system to permit such trade unions even limited and temporary gains was being eroded, leading many union members to demand and initiate a more radical response. This had resulted in a swing of the pendulum in the direction of their role as vehicles of militant resistance to capitalism compared with more quiescent periods. The existing reformist unions, it was believed, could in principle serve a key role in revolutionary class struggle: 'The unions, which during the war, had been organs of compulsion over the working masses, become in this way organs for the annihilation of capitalism'.<sup>13</sup>

The role of syndicalists in explicitly attempting to radicalise trade unions into instruments of revolution was viewed as a welcome, albeit limited, reflection of this overall process. But the Comintern leaders insisted that workers' economic class battles via the trade unions demanded further organisation along political lines in order for the class struggle to become a full-blown struggle for state power. While the unions, whether reformist or syndicalist-led, could play an indispensable role in the process of revolution, their inbuilt limitations meant they were an insufficient agency *in themselves* to effect a revolutionary transformation of society. The Comintern leaders insisted, in line with Lenin's development of Marxist analysis, that while trade unionism's maximum economic weapon, the strike (or general strike) could win improvements in wages and working conditions, it could never overthrow a *social régime*; that would require the political conquest of state power via an insurrection, with the soviet (rather than the trade unions) as the chief organ of workers' power, and a revolutionary vanguard party - necessary to launch a political attack on capitalism and

transform individual strikes into a general class struggle - not only supplementing but also transcending the trade unions.

So was the efficacy of the syndicalist strategy for the revolutionary transformation of society overtaken by a more developed and richer Marxist tradition, or was the communist alternative no more credible than the syndicalist experiment? Clearly the establishment of the Red International of Labour Unions proved to be challenging as far as Moscow's attempted embrace of the syndicalists was concerned. Quite apart from the bitter argument over the nature of the relationship between the new trade union International and the Comintern, there was the ambiguous nature on which the RILU was set up – on the basis of urging communists and syndicalists alike to stay inside the old, reformist Amsterdam unions on a *national* level, whilst at the same time attempting to break them from Amsterdam in favour of an alternative revolutionary trade union body based in Moscow on an *international* level. An even more fundamental fault-line underlying the entire RILU project, which also undermined Moscow's wooing of the syndicalist movement, was that no sooner had the RILU been created than a decline in revolutionary workers' struggles occurred. Moreover, the revolutionary unionism of the new communist parties of the 1920s (notably during the Comintern's 'third period') proved as problematic as the syndicalist experiment had been in many respects. So, with the benefit of historical hindsight, how should syndicalism's conception and practice of revolutionary unionism be viewed relative to its main competitor, and eventual victor, communism?

## Contributions

All three broad questions about the revolutionary syndicalist movement, which are likely to continue to intrigue historians and inform future studies, are touched on in varying degrees within the collection of articles in this special issue of *Socialist History*. But the journal's contributors also go well beyond them to explore a variety of other important concerns.

To begin with, while there have been a number of biographical studies of some of the leading national trade union figures associated with British syndicalism, such as Tom Mann (within the ISEL) and J.T. Murphy (within the wartime shop stewards' movement), there has by contrast been very little exploration of the activities of other key rank-and-file activists within the constituent parts of the syndicalist-influenced movement. Alex Gordon's contribution attempts to fill the gap admirably with a fascinating glimpse into the important role of the Derbyshire signalman Charles Watkins, who founded and edited *The Syndicalist Railwayman* newspaper in the wake of Britain's first national railway strike in 1911. The article draws on Watkins's writings and fragmentary available trade union records to trace his bitter critique of conciliation schemes and state ownership of the railways in favour of workers' control, agitation for the fusion of railway workers' organisation to form the National Union of Railwaymen as an industrial and all-grades union, and encouragement of Vigilance Committees aimed at co-ordinating the efforts of workers involved in struggle.

Paul Buhle provides a brief panoramic overview of syndicalism in the United States, an account that not only recognises that, despite the fact the term 'syndicalism' has often been rejected as a title, its essential revolutionary unionist character and aspirations has enthused many different minority radical elements within the American labour movement over a long historical period. Thus, he not only traces the role of the IWW and the breakaway Syndicalist League of North America, but also the anarchist-orientated immigrant organisations of the late

nineteenth century, the ex-Wobbly anarcho-syndicalist leader (Primo Tapia) of a regional Mexican peasant rebellion in the 1920s, the Trotskyist labour radicals drawn towards rank-and-file movements beyond Communist Party influence in the 1930s, the 'sponteneism' of the independent Trotskyist-influenced Pan-African veteran C.L.R. James and the Russian-born Raya Dunayevskaya of the 1950s, the 'student syndicalism' that influenced the Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit car plants in the late 1970s.

The article by Wayne Thorpe documents in graphic and detailed fashion the way in which the European syndicalist movement throughout the First World War raised its voice in opposition to the discourse of national defence and the prevailing cultural legitimatisation of the war that emanated from governments, socialist parties, trade union officials, intellectuals and Christian churches alike. In particular, Thorpe explores the syndicalists' endeavour to undercut arguments that posited a common socially-based national and cultural identity.

The conflictual nature of the relationship between revolutionary syndicalist organisations and the Bolsheviks and the Comintern is the subject of Reiner Tosstorff's contribution, which briefly summarises aspects of the first half of his recently published book on the history of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). In the process, he traces not only the different sets of arguments between syndicalists and communists – concerning the role of the party and political state within the revolutionary process, the relationship between the Comintern and RILU, and the fate of Russian anarchists – but also the internal divisions among syndicalists themselves that contributed to the syndicalists' eclipse (and to some extent absorption) by communism, and inability of the 'intransigent' syndicalists of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA) to build mass influence outside one or two contexts (such as Spain with the CNT).

Finally Gregor Gall's focus of analysis is broadened out from syndicalism *per se* to the wider historical experience of 'radical' labour unionism (defined in fairly broad terms as straddling reformist and revolutionary aspirations) within Britain, in which he includes the 'new unionism' of the 1880s, pre-war syndicalism and the 'Great Unrest', post-war radical labour leaders, 1920s Communist Party (and National Minority Movement) activities, 1930s communist-influenced rank-and-file movements, post-second world war shop stewards' movement, and the early 1970s upturn in workers' struggle. In evaluating both the limits and potential of such radical unionism, he makes analytical and historical comparison with moderate unionism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> W. Thorpe, *'The Workers Themselves': Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913-1923*, (Dordrecht, 1989); M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe, 'The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism (1890-1940)', in M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe (eds.), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*, (Aldershot, 1990); M. van der Linden, 'Second Thoughts on Revolutionary Syndicalism', *Labour History Review*, vol. 63, no. 2, (1998); R. Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Aldershot, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Van der Linden and Thorpe, 'The Rise and Fall', p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> J. White, *Tom Mann* (Manchester, 1991), p. 170.

<sup>4</sup> R. Price, 'Contextualising British Syndicalism c.1907-c.1920', *Labour History Review*, vol. 63, no. 3, (1998), pp. 261-76; D. Howell, 'Taking Syndicalism Seriously', *Socialist History*, 16, (2000). pp. 27-48.

<sup>5</sup> E. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1988), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> R. Hoxie, *Trade Unionism in the United States*, (New York, 1920), p. 154; 160; 159; S. Perlman, *A Theory of the Labor Movement*, (New York, 1928).



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<sup>7</sup> P. N. Stearns, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labour: A Cause without Rebels* (New Brunswick, 1971).

<sup>8</sup> B. Holton, *British Syndicalism* (London, 1976), pp. 209-10; see also B. Holton, 'Syndicalist Theories of the State', *Sociological Review*, 28 (1980), p.7.

<sup>9</sup> D. Montgomery, 'The "New Unionism" and the Transformation of Workers' Consciousness in America 1909-1922', *Journal of Social History*, vol. 7, no. 4 (1974), p. 509. See also *Workers' Control in America*, (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 99-108, and 'What More to Be Done?', *Labor History*, vol. 40, no. 3 (1999), p. 361.

<sup>10</sup> For example see P. Anderson, 'The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action', *The Incompatibles* (Harmondsworth, 1967); T. Clarke, 'The Raison D'être of Trade Unionism', in T. Clark and L. Clements (eds.) *Trade Unions Under Capitalism* (London, 1977); R. Hyman, *Industrial Relations: A Marxist Introduction* (London, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> L. Levine, *The Labour Movement in France* (London, 1912), p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> *Solidarity*, 19 October 1912.

<sup>13</sup> Theses of the Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and the Third International, *Second Congress of the Communist International: Minutes of the Proceedings*, vol. 2, (London, 1977), p. 278.