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## Syndicalism and Strikes: Leadership and Influence

Ralph Darlington

### Abstract

The explosion of industrial and political militancy that swept the world during the early years of the twentieth century gave the revolutionary syndicalist movement a prominence and notoriety it would not otherwise have possessed, while at the same time providing a context for syndicalist ideas to be broadcast and for syndicalists to assume the leadership of major strikes in a number of countries. But to what extent did syndicalist ideology and activity contribute to the labour militancy? If at the time syndicalist 'agitators' were accused of being the direct instigators of strikes, a number of historians have subsequently insisted the unrest was encouraged by conditions in the labour and product markets rather than by any syndicalist influence.

This paper sheds new light on the complex nature of the relationship between syndicalism and strikes by means of an international comparative analysis of the revolutionary syndicalist movements in France, Spain, Italy, Britain, America, and Ireland. It contributes to a much neglected comparative historiography of the international syndicalist movement and draws on both existing secondary literature and a variety of primary sources. The paper presents evidence to suggest ideological/organisational initiative and leadership was of immense importance in understanding how syndicalist

movements could be simultaneously a contributory cause, a symptom and a beneficiary of workers' militancy.

### Introduction

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, amidst an extraordinary international upsurge in strike action, the ideas of revolutionary syndicalism, originally gathered in small propaganda groups, 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 direct industrial action and revolutionary trade union struggle, were to emerge as either existing unions were won over to syndicalist principles in whole or in part, or new alternative revolutionary unions and organisations were formed by dissidents who broke away from their mainstream reformist adversaries. 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 Sindicale Italiana (USI) in Italy. In Ireland the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU) also became a mass force. Elsewhere, syndicalism became the rallying point for a significant minority of union activists, as in America with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and in Britain with the pre-war Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) and Unofficial Reform Committee (URC) of the South

Wales Miners' Federation, as well within the leadership of the wartime engineering Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement.

The international explosion of industrial and political militancy during this period was of significance in encouraging the emergence of the syndicalist movement. For example, in the United States the labour economist and historian Louis Levine<sup>1</sup> explained the origins of syndicalism as 'born of conditions of life in America.' By this he meant the bitter industrial conflicts of the early years of the century had a profound influence in moulding a section of American workers' attitudes toward employers, society and the state. Even though early IWW members read revolutionary literature, it was primarily their experiences of bloody industrial warfare - often associated with the interventions of government, police and troops on behalf of the employers - that politically radicalised them and encouraged their belief in solidarity, industrial unionism and syndicalism. Out of these violent conflicts, a sizeable layer of American workers, particularly migratory or seasonal workers in the western states, turned violently against the existing social order and found both an explanation and a remedy for their predicament in syndicalist theory, organisation and activity.<sup>2</sup> In the case of IWW leader Vincent St. John, it was primarily bitter experience as a worker and union official, rather than books or theories that shaped his thoughts and action: 'his school was his own experience and observation, and his creed was action'.<sup>3</sup> A similar process occurred in other countries.

The wave of industrial and political struggles subsequently enhanced the broad (albeit minority) appeal of syndicalism in each country, providing the mass force to

sustain and extend the movement. For example, as Joseph White<sup>4</sup> has commented, if the 'Labour Unrest' in Britain between 1910-1914, owed more to material conditions than to the spread of syndicalist theories, the size and scope of the unrest undoubtedly gave syndicalism a prominence and notoriety that it almost surely would not otherwise have possessed, while at the same time providing a context for syndicalist ideas to be broadcast and for syndicalists to assume the leadership of major strikes. In the process, the success of the strikes clearly led to greater confidence in collective and militant action among previously acquiescent workers. As even one hostile observer at the time put it: 'The masses of workers in Great Britain are not socialists nor are they syndicalists. But they are being converted to the methods of socialism and syndicalism by the proof that in following those methods they are able to win great concessions'.<sup>5</sup>

Syndicalism was not the only beneficiary of workers' radicalism during this period, and from 1919 onwards the rise of Bolshevism was ultimately to be a major contributory factor undermining syndicalism's appeal. Nonetheless, such radicalism, particularly during the pre-war years, helped lay the foundations for an international syndicalist movement. But such a dynamic reciprocal relationship inevitably raises the important, and yet remarkably hitherto much neglected, question as to what extent syndicalist ideology and activity contributed to the labour militancy that swept the world during this period, particularly during the pre-war years. On the one hand, in many countries syndicalists were often accused of being the direct instigators of strikes and other forms of industrial strife. In Britain, Lord Robert Cecil in a speech in Parliament in March 1912 laid the blame for the 'Labour Unrest' entirely on the

activities of syndicalist ‘agitators’<sup>6</sup> and the government’s own leading industrial conciliator stated the employment of active propaganda by syndicalists, appeared to be one of the most important sources of conflict between the classes.<sup>7</sup> Even historians like Elie Halévy<sup>8</sup> argued that the pre-war strike wave in Britain was primarily a ‘Syndicalist Revolt’. Likewise, in pre-war France the employers attributed the rise in strikes to the influence of the militant leaders of the CGT, whom they accused of planning strategy on a national scale, organising conflicts and inciting workers to revolt.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, a number of historians have dismissed syndicalist influence in strike activity. For example, Hugh Clegg,<sup>10</sup> Henry Pelling<sup>11</sup> and Keith Laybourn<sup>12</sup> have suggested British syndicalism’s role within the pre-war labour struggles was not particularly significant, while Eric Hobsbawm<sup>13</sup> has asserted ‘its influence was almost certainly much smaller than enthusiastic historians of the left have sometimes supposed’. Likewise, some commentators on French syndicalism have insisted that the increase in labour disputes which took place in France between 1891 and 1911 was encouraged by conditions in the labour and product markets rather than by any syndicalist ideological considerations.<sup>14</sup>

In an attempt to explore the complex nature of the relationship between revolutionary syndicalism and strikes, this paper contributes to a much neglected comparative historiography of the international syndicalist movement by providing a comparative analysis of the movements in Britain, America, France, Spain, Italy and Ireland, drawing on both existing secondary literature and a variety of primary sources.<sup>15</sup>

### Labour Unrest and Syndicalist Membership

Clearly the revolutionary syndicalist movement was only one of many stimuli to workers' militancy and was in many respects itself a response to the growing labour unrest and political radicalisation that occurred internationally, rather than its cause. Invariably strike action derived from factors directly related to economic grievances, work intensification, erosion of job control, and either lack of union recognition or the constraints of existing union organisation, as well as certain contingent circumstances that gave workers the self-confidence to take collective action in the belief that their demands were realisable. Faced with such material grievances and perceived opportunities for redress, it is likely there would have been an upsurge in strike activity with or without the presence of syndicalists (or any other political influence). For example, reporting on the relationship between the IWW and strike activity, President Wilson's Labor Commission found that:

The IWW had exercised its strongest hold in those industries and those communities where employers have most resisted the trade union movement, and where some form of protest against unjust treatment was inevitable...Sinister influences and extremist doctrines may have availed themselves of these conditions; they certainly have not created them.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, syndicalist agitation would have been unlikely to fall on receptive ears unless there were genuine grievances and justifiable demands to agitate about.

Therefore, to wholly attribute the industrial and political militancy of the period to agitators, syndicalist or otherwise, would undoubtedly be to exaggerate their influence.

Nonetheless, as Robert Magraw<sup>17</sup> has argued with reference to the relationship between French syndicalism and the labour movement, 'a reductionism which explains all workers protest as a pragmatic response to work experience and technological change is unconvincing...politics and ideology also play a role'. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that workers' readiness to engage in militant strike action in France, as in other countries, also often critically depended upon the subjective element - the encouragement they received from the minority of organised activists within their own ranks. It was precisely this role that syndicalist activists and leaders assumed; in the process identifying grievances, persuading workers that collective strike action was the appropriate means to seek redress and convincing individuals to commit resources to the building of revolutionary union movements.<sup>18</sup>

The relative success of syndicalist movements was at least partly determined by the general level of class struggle, with the level of membership in each country essentially rising and falling in line with the extent of industrial and political conflict at any one time. Even though syndicalist organisations sometimes grew rapidly, they remained almost everywhere minority movements (sometimes a tiny one as in Britain, sometimes a substantial one as in Italy) compared with their much larger reformist labour adversaries. Only in France, where it faced no mass reformist rival, did a syndicalist body constitute the largest union organisation in the country, and in Spain, during the exceptional conditions of Civil War and social revolution, did it sink genuine



mass roots. Moreover, it should be noted the actual number of syndicalist activists in most countries was relatively quite small, although it is difficult to determine actual membership with any degree of accuracy.

In Britain, where the ISEL's appeal was directed at activists within established unions, they performed a propaganda role and did not succeed in building a mass base. There were probably no more than a few thousand members at any one time, and sales of the paper The Syndicalist only reached a peak of about 20,000. However, an ISEL conference in 1912 drew together delegates from unions, trades councils and amalgamation committees representing a claimed 100,000 workers. And with their emphasis on working class self-reliance, British syndicalists played a leading part in the establishment of the Plebs League and the Central Labour College (CLC), bodies which supported encouraged educational study classes in such questions as Marxist economics and industrial history. Syndicalist propaganda was also to be found in a number of papers and pamphlets, including the Daily Herald, which had a circulation of around 200,000 at its peak.<sup>19</sup> During the First World War J. T. Murphy's pamphlet The Workers' Committee,<sup>20</sup> which contained the syndicalist-influenced Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement's chief theoretical statement, reached a total sale of some 150,000 copies.<sup>21</sup>

By comparison, in Ireland, America, Italy, Spain, and France, syndicalists were able to build mass trade union bodies, in varying degrees and in different contexts attracting a relatively diverse group of workers – skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled (primarily young and male) - who felt neglected by and/or alienated from the

established bureaucratic and reformist trade unions. But even in these countries, the numbers were limited in comparison to the size of both the workforce as a whole and the reformist unions, and membership gains were invariably short-lived. For example, in the United States the IWW was not a massive success. For short periods they involved thousands in their organisation and had mass circulation newspapers. Nonetheless, before 1916 they never had more than 40,000 paid-up members. During 1916-17 membership leapt to 75,000 and it is estimated that by the end of the summer of 1917, at their height, they had between 125-150,000.<sup>22</sup> But in many respects their membership rose and fell with the level of struggle, with little continuing organisation. For example, at Lawrence, at the end of the 1912 strike, the IWW had 16,000 signed up members in the union 'local', but a few months later this had dropped to about 700.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, in France, although the CGT succeeded in increasing its membership from about 122,000 in 1902 to 350,000 in 1913, internal divisions and the impact of war meant that by 1915 it had haemorrhaged to just 49,000 dues-payers. For a time, the CGT became a 'skeletal' organisation until membership began to revive in 1916-17. By the end of the war there were 600,000 members, increasing to 1.2 million in 1919 and reaching a peak of 2.4 million in 1920, before falling off dramatically in 1921 following internal schisms.<sup>24</sup> But even at its high point in the immediate post-war years the CGT never officially represented more than half the organised workers of France and at best one tenth of the industrial wage earners.

In Italy, syndicalists were able to build a much larger union, with broader representation inside the working class movement. The USI, which was founded at the

end of 1912 with a membership of 80,000, grew in the course of 1913 to 100,000 members, and then leapt to a peak of about 305,000 in 1920. However, this expansion was accompanied by an even greater rate of growth by the socialist CGL.<sup>25</sup> In Spain the CNT, which claimed about 26,000 members in 1911, increased to 50,000 members in 1916, and then leapt in the immediate post-war years to over 790,000 by 1920. But driven underground in 1923 its membership declined, before eventually rocketing to 1.7 million by the outbreak of the Civil War.<sup>26</sup>

#### Leadership and Influence within Strike Activity

However, syndicalists exercised an influence way out of proportion to their formal numerical strength, as their role in many sizeable and prominent strikes, influencing the temper and scale of the unrest demonstrates. In Britain this was evidently the case in the unofficial Cambrian Combine dispute associated with the establishment of the syndicalist-influenced Unofficial Reform Committee<sup>27</sup> and the 1911 railwaymen's strike and 1914 London building workers' lockout both witnessed a substantial organised syndicalist presence and influence, with rank-and-file activists encouraging powerful unofficial opposition to the union leadership.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the unprecedented 1910-14 strike wave, known as the 'Labour Unrest', the leader of the ISEL, Tom Mann, was at, or near, the centre of many disputes, the most important of which was the Liverpool transport strike of 1911, where he headed the strike committee.<sup>29</sup> A number of

syndicalist-influenced revolutionaries went on to occupy a prominent role within the leadership of the wartime engineering shop stewards' movement, organising a number of large-scale and national strikes.<sup>30</sup>

In Ireland Jim Larkin was the undisputed leading figure in the 1913 Dublin strike and lock-out, as was the ITGWU in many of the workplace occupations and 'soviets' that swept the country during the wages movement strike wave of 1919-20.<sup>31</sup> In Italy the USI was centrally involved in the quasi-insurrectionary 'Red Week' general strike of 1914, the Piedmontese general strike of April 1920 and the nation-wide factory occupations of September 1920.<sup>32</sup> In Spain the CNT was at the centre of the general strikes in Barcelona in 1917 and 1919, as well as the strikes and revolutionary uprisings of the 1931-36 and subsequent Civil War period.<sup>33</sup> In America, IWW activists were involved in one hundred and fifty strikes, including the Goldfield, Nevada miners' strike in 1906-7, the McKee's Rocks, Pennsylvania, steel workers' strike in 1909, the Louisiana and Arkansas timber workers' strikes in 1912-13; and the forest and copper miners' strikes of Montana, Arizona, Idaho and Oregon and Washington State in 1917-18. Again and again the IWW offered strikers' advice, direction and leadership. The most notable intervention took place in the Lawrence, Massachusetts textile workers' strike in 1912, when the IWW sent a number of full-time organisers (including Joseph Ettor, Arturo Giovannitti, Elizabeth Gurly Flynn, 'Big Bill' Haywood and William E. Trautmann) who helped teach the 23,000 strikers how to bridge their ethno-religious differences, and organise a 56-strong strike committee, mass picketing, demonstrations, and solidarity support.<sup>34</sup>

In every country syndicalist newspapers – such as the IWW’s Industrial Worker in the United States, the USI’s L’Internazionale in Italy, the CGT’s Solidaridad Obrera in Spain, and the ISEL’s Industrial Syndicalist in Britain – served as important strike propaganda outlets and organisers. Syndicalist pamphlets – like the The Miners’ Next Step produced by the syndicalist-influenced Unofficial Reform Committee<sup>35</sup> in the South Wales Miners Federation, Sabotage produced by the CGT<sup>36</sup> and The General Strike produced by the IWW<sup>37</sup> – played a similar propaganda role, denouncing employers, identifying capitalism as the enemy, providing analysis of state policy and the limitations of official labour leaders, and advocating uncompromising militant strike action and revolutionary unionism as the most appropriate response. In addition, syndicalists distributed leaflets, organised meetings and actively intervened in workers’ strikes at every opportunity. In the process, during periods of upsurge in the industrial struggle, when large numbers of workers were drawn into conflict with the existing order and established labour leaders, syndicalists were sometimes able to gain significant influence and gain new adherents for their cause.

On the one hand, in many cases syndicalist activists were called in by workers who had already ‘spontaneously’ walked out on strike. For example, in February 1913, in a repeat scenario to the Lawrence dispute of a year earlier, the IWW was called into another major strike, this time by 25,000 silk workers across 300 mills in Paterson, New Jersey. Although the walk-out had not taken place at the instigation or under the leadership of the Wobblies, the small local IWW branch called for assistance from outside organisers as had been done previously.<sup>38</sup> The American revolutionary journalist

John Reed (who helped mount a theatrical production based on the strike at Madison Square Gardens in New York) later celebrated 'the power of the IWW mass tactics' during Lawrence, Patterson and other industrial disputes:

The characteristics of an IWW strike are these: the workers are discontented; they are either unorganised, or their union will not support their demands. A spontaneous strike movement occurs. The IWW is called in to take charge. Union or non-union, it makes no difference to the IWW, whose aim is to completely tie up the industry. Other workers are called out in sympathy. The mass is kept constantly stirred up, with speeches, demonstrations, and mass picketing, leading to collisions with the police. Meanwhile, the leaders educate the strikers in a revolutionary way, preaching the necessity for the overthrow of capitalism, advocating the 'perpetual strike': that is to say, 'This is not a strike for wages. When we have won this strike we shall strike again and again and again, until the capitalists are finally ruined and the workers will take over industry'.<sup>39</sup>

In France also there were repeated requests for CGT assistance by workers who already spontaneously embarked on strike action.<sup>40</sup> For example, during a large agricultural workers' strike over increased wages and union recognition in the Midi in December 1904, CGT representatives Griffuelhes and Louis Niel were called in and proceeded to travel from village to village 'as a sort of peripatetic strike committee, boosting morale, baptising new unions, and helping in negotiations with the winegrowers'.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, on some occasions the relationship between workers' spontaneity and syndicalist leadership was rather more blurred, with syndicalists acting, in part at least, as a stimulus and catalyst to strike activity. One notable example of the

direct promotion of strike activity by the CGT occurred in 1906 when the CGT circulated brochures, held meetings and organised strikes to fan workers' rage into a 'white heat', and on May Day 150,000 workers in Paris and the provinces responded by taking 24-hour strike action.<sup>42</sup> Other examples include the Paris metalworkers' strike of May-June 1919 and the two national railway strikes of February and May-June.<sup>43</sup> In America there were also instances where the IWW played a major contributory role in directly promoting strike activity, for example, during the spring and summer of 1917 in the copper mining industry of Montana and Arizona and the lumber industry of the Northwest. Unlike other pre-war disputes in which they were involved, these were strikes by groups of workers who had joined the Wobblies to present a series of demands to their employers and who then fought effectively through the IWW to redress their grievances.<sup>44</sup> Comparable direct syndicalist initiative and leadership within strike activity was also central in Italy (during the Palma general strike launched by the syndicalist National Resistance Committee in 1908),<sup>45</sup> Spain (during the general strike in Barcelona, launched by the CNT in 1917),<sup>46</sup> and Ireland (during the numerous workplace occupations launched by the ITGWU in 1919-20).<sup>47</sup>

In Britain J. T. Murphy, who often publicly repudiated the notion of shop stewards' 'leadership' of strikes, later privately reflected: 'Every one of the wartime strikes were engendered and developed by the anti-war socialists and syndicalists who were seizing upon any and every grievance arising from the conduct of the war'.<sup>48</sup> Even though the use of the term 'engendered' runs the risk of exaggerating syndicalist

influence, the question of agitation and leadership was nonetheless belatedly acknowledged by Murphy.

### Cause without Rebels?

Shortly after its demise 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. A combination of the untenable objective conditions within which syndicalism attempted to attract support and the unrealistic revolutionary policies it espoused, inevitably led to the marginalization of the movement to the fringes of the working class, bereft of genuine mass support except for episodic periods in some countries.

Best known for their studies of American labour history, Selig Perlman<sup>49</sup> and Robert Hoxie<sup>50</sup> regarded the collapse of the IWW as evidence of an underlying conservatism among rank-and-file workers. Discounting any higher aspirations of the labour movement, they attempted to explain unionisation solely in terms of workers' material interest in protecting their jobs and raising wages. Whilst exceptional circumstances, such as a charismatic IWW leader or anger over repressive state policies, might allow militants to dominate unions for short periods, in the long-run unions adopted a pragmatic immediate focus on jobs and wages. Over the years a number of historians of the IWW have subsequently concurred with this view. Thus, Patrick



Renshaw asserted: 'the plain fact is that the American working class, in general, was just not interested in socialist theory with its millennial promises', and Vernon Jenson<sup>51</sup> claimed the 'mass of workers hardly subscribed to a class struggle' and that 'most workers were simply looking for economic improvement and security'. Peter Stearns<sup>52</sup> has advanced similar arguments in relation to the CGT, suggesting French syndicalism was a failure, either as an instructor or stimulant to the working class: 'A cause without rebels'.

So how valid is this attempt to hamstring the historical experience of the syndicalist movement? Was the movement really only significant in terms of securing immediate improvements in wages and conditions or did it have any broader political resonance? To begin with the interpretation of strike militancy as direct action in pragmatic pursuit of demands on wages and conditions ignores the inherent anti-capitalist sentiment that was expressed during this period, and understates a consistency in the pattern of militancy that suggests a cohesion deriving from shared precepts and ambitions amongst at least a sizeable layer of workers. Of course, it is undoubtedly true that many workers were reformist, and some were conservative or apathetic. Certainly many remained loyal to existing reformist trade union and socialist leaders, and as we have seen only a minority (albeit larger in some countries than others) were attracted to membership of syndicalist organisations. However, the assumption that all 'real' workers were, by definition, 'pragmatists', essentially indifferent to radical ideas, and that strike action was purely 'economistic' is wholly unconvincing.

In reality, wage demands frequently disguised other fundamental grievances such as shorter hours, improved conditions, union recognition, and control over work. In pursuing these immediate goals workers were often confronted with intransigent employers and hostile government officials, police and even troops, as well as by hesitant labour movement leaders anxious to channel demands within established channels. In the process, the rising level of strike activity could sometimes produce a sharp polarisation between workers and their employers and the state, on the one hand, and between the workers and their official leadership (whether in the unions or socialist parties), on the other. The established 'rules of the game' – piecemeal advancement by means of parliamentary action and institutionalised collective bargaining – was widely questioned, and even if the ideology of reformism was not destroyed it was certainly put under considerable strain. It was for this reason that the syndicalist movement (alongside other militant trade unionists, socialist and communist activists), which represented both a reaction to and a rejection of the politics of gradualism in favour of revolutionary industrial struggle, could draw considerable support in varying degrees in different countries at different times at different times.

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At the same time many strikes of the period, with their aggressive resistance to employers, defiance of magistrates, and clashes with police and troops – whether primarily reactive and defensive protests or more offensive disputes fanned by syndicalists aimed at extending workers' gains – encouraged a process of radicalisation inside the working class that, while est not necessarily revolutionary itself, signified the emergence of a political culture that was outside the formal consensus of the day. It was

in this extraordinary context that syndicalism's insurgent trade unionism, whose cornerstone was to overturn the accepted order of things, could give hope and self-confidence to workers who had previously had to be content with survival on the employers' terms. The syndicalist movement gave organized form and inspiring voice to a determination to shift the balance of class forces in society in favour of the working class and offered the prospect of a new world where labour ruled.<sup>53</sup>

Only on this basis can we understand, for example, the widespread appeal inside the American working class movement of IWW poet and song-writer Joe Hill's sardonic anti-capitalist ballads of class antagonism such as 'Solidarity Forever' and 'Workers of the World Awaken!' that according to Patrick Renshaw<sup>54</sup> 'captured the imagination of a whole generation of workers'. Such counter-politics stood for the celebration of working class solidarity and direct action and pointed in the direction of taking things a step further amongst the most militant workers, with demands for workers' control and fundamental political change to the existing political system.<sup>55</sup>

Such radicalization was undoubtedly considerably further enhanced by the impact of war and the October 1917 Russian Revolution. The dynamic of war, with its multiple sacrifices and shifting relations between social groups, begged the question of whether the return to peace would mark a return to the status quo or to a changed social order.<sup>56</sup> And the impact of the Bolshevik revolution could be seen during many of the post-war strikes, as workers came to view the struggles for union recognition, higher wages, few hours, and improved working conditions as part of a world-wide revolutionary movement in which they now had a chance to participate. In a

memorandum to the Versailles Conference of 1919 the British Prime Minister Lloyd

George wrote:

Europe is filled with revolutionary ideas. A feeling not of depression, but of passion and revolt reigns in the breasts of the working class against the conditions of life that prevailed before the war. The whole of the existing system, political, social and economic, is regarded with distrust by the whole population of Europe. In some countries, like Germany and Russia, this unrest is leading to open revolt and in others, like France, England and Italy, it is expressed in strikes and in a certain aversion to work. All signs go to show that the striving is as much for social and political changes as for increases in wages.<sup>57</sup>

Such an analysis does not portray the mass of workers as necessarily ripe for revolution ~~necessarily~~; certainly compared with the violent clashes between the old order and the forces of revolution in countries such as Italy and Spain, Britain remained relatively calm. But at the very least we will never understand how societies that were scarred by bitter and bloody industrial conflict managed to contain discontent and retain their essential stability if we deny the existence of class conflict, or the possibility that, in certain circumstances and among a wider layer of workers, such conflict created class consciousness and for some even a revolutionary commitment.<sup>58</sup>

In the process, we should not minimise the contribution of syndicalist (and other left-wing) activists to such working class radicalism. As Larry Peterson<sup>59</sup> has suggested, there was the convergence of three forces: individual union militants, formal left-wing organizations (notably syndicalist bodies, but also socialist and Marxist parties), and mass unrest among industrial workers all converged in a general anti-capitalist movement. The role of left-wing organizations lent the movement its revolutionary

ideology; the participation of union militants (whether or not members of left-wing groups) established a vital link between revolutionaries and the unions; and the unrest of industrial workers provided the mass force to sustain and extend the movement. This was a real social movement in which the initially spontaneous industrial action of workers (mostly in strikes) opened the way for union militants, and in which industrial workers themselves joined slowly in more organized forms of industrial unionism and direct action as they responded to the leadership and propaganda of such union militants. Specific left-wing groups, such as the syndicalists, played an important role in trying to give organization, leadership and coherence.

This syndicalist element was important not only in the way in which they sometimes played a crucial role in leading strike resistance but also in their simultaneous attempt to utilise workers' immediate issues of concern as the take-off point for a full-scale indictment of the capitalist system and an exposition of the principle of the class struggle and need for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. The high level of class struggle and political radicalisation became a fertile breeding ground for the sowing of the syndicalist seed. For example, referring to the militant workers' struggle in Dublin in 1913, the British government's chief conciliator, Lord Askwith, acknowledged:

...the serious riots in Dublin, although founded on poverty, low wages and bad conditions, included a determination to establish...'one big union' and put into practice the doctrines of syndicalism. The influences...[for] the overthrow of Capitalism, and revolution against existing authority, were all present.<sup>60</sup>

In the 1910-11 South Wales coal dispute the syndicalist-influenced strike committee began by calling on workers to 'Down Tools' in support of higher wages and ended by calling on them 'To put an end to Capitalist Despotism and do battle for the cause of Industrial Freedom'.<sup>61</sup> And testimony to the widespread appeal of the IWW's explicit revolutionary unionism was also provided by James Cannon:

The IWW struck a spark in the heart of youth as no other movement in this country, before or since, has done. Young idealists from 'the winds' four quarters' came to the IWW and gave it all they had. The movement had its gifted strike leaders, organizers and orators, its poets and its martyrs. By the accumulated weight of its unceasing propagandistic efforts, and by the influence of its heroic actions on many occasions which were sensationally publicised, the IWW eventually permeated a whole generation of American radicals, of all shades and affiliations, with its concept of industrial unionism as the best form for the organization of workers' power and its programme for a revolutionary settlement of the class struggle.<sup>62</sup>

Ironically, an important measure of syndicalism's influence within strike activity can be gauged by the level of fear it engendered, and condemnation it received from employers and politicians, even if there was sometimes an element of exaggeration involved. For example, in the United States during 1908-18, the IWW, a tiny band of labour radicals, vexed employers, congressmen, cabinet members and American presidents. 'By World War 1 some Americans considered the Wobblies as great a threat to national security as German imperialists and Russian Bolsheviks. Neither before nor since has any group of labour radicals been as feared as the Wobblies'.<sup>63</sup> In Britain even prominent official labour leaders such as Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden amongst others, as well as the Fabian couple Sidney and Beatrice Webb, published

scathing attacks on the syndicalist movement, which was viewed as a dangerous influence that could encourage workers into 'unnatural' social and political behaviour.<sup>64</sup>

As Robert Price<sup>65</sup> has suggested, British syndicalism was seen as a threat precisely because it came to represent an alternative extra-parliamentary 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 debate. Certainly, in its celebration of the spontaneity of direct action it challenged the existing industrial and political order as well as the authority structures of the mainstream labour movement. While ~~est~~ syndicalist-inspired voices were not the only ones raising doubts about the drift of labour politics, they were treated as if they posed a more serious threat to British social democracy and orthodox trade unionism than any other group of the time.

~~It follows t~~he experience of the international revolutionary syndicalist movement cannot simply be dismissed as some sort of irrelevant 'sideshow' as some historians have implied. No doubt serious questions could be (and were at the time) posed about the dilemma of attempting to balance a struggle for ultimate revolutionary goals with the pressure to achieve day-to-day reforms. Nonetheless, its explicit revolutionary aspirations proved to be of considerable appeal to a significant layer of workers (much wider than mere formal membership figures would indicate) because it expressed workers' rising level of organization, confidence and class consciousness during what was, by any accounts, an exceptional period of industrial and political militancy.

### 'Syndicalist 'Mood' of Revolt?

Finally, we can consider the extent to which there was an alleged broader syndicalist 'mood' of revolt inside the working class movement. Thus, with reference to Britain, John Lovell<sup>66</sup> has suggested: 'It was the mood of syndicalism, not the doctrine that made headway'. Similarly, Bob Holton<sup>67</sup> has argued that, while the British labour movement contained only a small hard core of avowed syndicalist activists, there existed a far wider 'proto-syndicalist mentality' evident in the mass strikes and anti-parliamentary ferment of the years 1910-1926. By 'proto-syndicalist' he means the unofficial, insurgent, and expansive nature of many of the strikes. In such movements Holton points to the primary importance of direct action over parliamentary pressure as a means of settling grievances, and to mass support for industrial unionism to oppose employers, assert rank-and-file control over union leaders, and establish workers' control. Although not necessarily expressed in explicit revolutionary commitment, popular support for syndicalism was based upon the uplifting inspiration of fighting collective organization, with many workers acting in a 'proto-syndicalist' manner on the basis of a feeling that they could change society through industrial rather than political action.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, in relation to the United States, David Montgomery<sup>69</sup> has argued that autonomous self-activity, direct action at the point of production, and an emphasis on workers' control were all part of a diffuse 'syndicalist impulse' that defined the struggles



of American workers for nearly two decades following the birth of the IWW. Between 1909 and 1922 this 'new unionism' pushed strike activity to record levels in the United States, particularly in the immediate post-war years. Although the IWW set out to 'fan the flames' of this industrial and political unrest, it was much more widespread and diverse than the IWW could itself possibly embody. This meant the direct action challenge to managerial authority was often to be found, ironically enough, within industries that were strongly unionised by the AFL, involving a contemptuous rank-and-file rejection of official AFL conservative practices. That this industrial insurgency extended so far beyond the organisational boundaries of the IWW led Montgomery<sup>70</sup> to question 'the customary image of the IWW as representing conduct and aspirations far removed from the "mainstream" of American labour development'.

Howard Kimeldorf<sup>71</sup> has recently gone even further to argue that if syndicalism is viewed as a practice of resistance rather than a theory of revolution, then the IWW's 'industrial syndicalism' can be seen to have been a part of the American labour's mainstream, anchored in the same syndicalist waters as the AFL 'business syndicalism'. Both waged the day-to-day struggle against the rule of capital by eschewing the political arena of legislative action in favour of the workplace, and preferred the immediacy of direct action at the point of production in pursuance of common objectives of extending their control over the job. The historical thrust of Kimeldorf's argument is that business syndicalism~~syndicalism~~ gave way to industrial syndicalism, not by the triumph of the IWW, but by the absorption of Wobbly practice into mainstream unionism fundamentally as a result of 'situational' factors that appeared appropriate.

Arguably, the problem with this particular interpretation is that it downplays the significance of syndicalism's ideological appeal and effectively dilutes the central revolutionary component of the very term 'syndicalism' into something else entirely. To some extent even the use of terms such as 'proto-syndicalism' and 'syndicalist impulse' are problematic given that a variety of material, ideological and political factors coalesced to provoke what might be more aptly described as the zeitgeist of workers' industrial and political militancy of the period. Certainly we should not forget there was a logical and historical difference between the general movement of unrest and the organised syndicalist groups that tried to lead and influence them, which is liable to be obscured and confused with the use of terms that render them both as 'syndicalist'.<sup>72</sup> Even though syndicalist activists attempted to provide organisation, leadership and ideological coherence to this broader workers' revolt, it was, of course, at no stage contained entirely within such a doctrine (or organisation) and the use of fairly arbitrary (and partisan) terms that suggest otherwise is confusing.

However, in so far as all these labour historians have attempted to recognise that syndicalism's appeal was much more widespread than mere organisational structures and formal membership figures would suggest, and was grounded on the distinctive radicalism of important minority sections of the labour movement they make a very valuable contribution to defending syndicalism from those who would write it out of working class experience as an aberration. It is true the strike militancy and political radicalisation of the period, in these countries as in others, often took place largely 'spontaneously', in conditions in which syndicalists were not even present. But it also

seems clear that the experience of strike activity against employers, magistrates, police and military helped to generate a wider sympathy and interest in syndicalist ideas. Many of the most class conscious workers knew of the efficacy of syndicalist practice even if they were not fully versed in the theory, and the sheer breadth of working class struggle affected – because it reinforced and seemed to confirm – syndicalist strategies, tactics and doctrine. As James Estey<sup>73</sup> commented in relation to France:

The service of syndicalism to the cause of Labour must be sought, in short, not in its programme of action, nor in its model for future society, but in the spirit of independence and militancy which it has kept alive, and energetically fostered, in the hearts of the labouring classes. Its insistence on the practical application of the great motto of the International – ‘the emancipation of the labourers must be the work of the labourers themselves’ – has engendered a habit of self-reliance, a courage, and an optimism among the workers, that can only be a cause for general gratification.

As we have seen, even if syndicalist activists did not in any sense cause the underlying material conditions that led to such militancy, they could sometimes play a central role in agitating around workers’ grievances as part of a broader class struggle and urging them to seek redress through militant strike action and revolutionary union organization. And even if syndicalists were only a distinct minority their ideological, political and organizational influence should not be dismissed, not the least because they were a product of a much broader radicalization inside their respective working class movements.

In conclusion, ideological, political and organisational initiative and leadership was of immense importance in understanding how syndicalist movements could be ‘simultaneously a contributory cause, a symptom and a beneficiary’<sup>74</sup> of workers’ militancy during the early years of the twentieth century. If the established trade unions were the historical product of workers’ everyday experience of and resistance (however tentative) to capitalism, the emergence and development of the syndicalist movement was, amongst other factors, an expression of the perceived inadequacies of these existing union organisations to represent workers’ interests effectively, which in turn was intimately related to the role of syndicalists in both stimulating and responding to the unprecedented level of industrial and political struggle of the period.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Melvyn Dubofsky, We Shall be All: A History of the Industrial Workers of the World (Chicago, 1969), 36, 73-4, 147, 204.

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<sup>3</sup> James P. Cannon, The IWW: The Great Anticipation (New York, 1956), 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph White, 'Syndicalism in a Mature Industrial Setting: The Case of Britain', in Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (Aldershot, 1990), 104.

<sup>5</sup> Geoff Brown, 'Introduction', in The Industrial Syndicalist (Nottingham, 1974), 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> George R. Askwith, Industrial Problems and Disputes (London, 1974), 294.

<sup>8</sup> Elie Halévy, A History of the English People, Vol. 2: 1905-1914 (London, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Frederick F. Ridley, Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of its Time (Cambridge, 1970), 111.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh A. Clegg, A History of British Trade Unions Since 1889: Vol 2: 1911-1933 (Oxford, 1985), 22-74.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Pelling, A History of British Trade Unionism (Harmondsworth, 1987), 130.

<sup>12</sup> Keith Laybourn, A History of British Trade Unionism c1770-1990 (Stroud, 1997), 119.

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<sup>13</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'The 1970s: Syndicalism Without Syndicalists' in Workers: Worlds of Labour, ed., Eric Hobsbawm (London, 1984), 273.

<sup>14</sup> Arthur Kornhauser, Robert Dubin and Arthur M. Ross, Industrial Conflict (New York, 1954), 260-262; Jean Montreuil, Historie du mouvement ouvrier en France (Paris, nd), 237-238.

<sup>15</sup> Ralph Darlington, Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis (Aldershot, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Philip S. Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States: Vol. 7: Labour and World War 1: 1914-1918 (New York, 1987), 293.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Magraw, 'Socialism, Syndicalism and French Labour Before 1914', in Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914, ed. D. Geary (Oxford, 1989), 70.

<sup>18</sup> Gerald Friedman, State-Making and Labour Movements: France and the United States 1876-1914 (Ithaca, NY, 1998), 260.

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<sup>19</sup> Bob Holton, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism and the British Labour Movement', The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914, eds., Wolfgang. J. Mommsen and Hans G. Husung (London, 1985), 273-274.

<sup>20</sup> Jack T. Murphy, The Workers' Committee: An Outline of its Principles and Structure (Sheffield, 1917).

<sup>21</sup> Jack T. Murphy, New Horizons (London, 1941). 135.

<sup>22</sup> Paul F. Brissenden, The IWW: The Study of American Syndicalism (New York, 1919), 183, 357; Melvyn Dubofsky, 'The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism in the United States', in Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (Aldershot, 1990), 214.

<sup>23</sup> Philip S. Foner, History of the Labor Movement in the United States: Vol. 4: The Industrial Workers of the World (New York, 1965), 349.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Magraw, A History of the French Working Class, Vol. 2: Workers and the Bourgeois Republic (Oxford, 1992).

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<sup>25</sup> Charles L. Bertrand, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism in Italy', in Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Wayne Thorpe (Aldershot, 1990), 148.

<sup>26</sup> Andy Durgan, A, 'Revolutionary Anarchism in Spain: the CNT 1911-1937, International Socialism 2:11 (1981): 93-110.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 229.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 74-83.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 117-119.

<sup>43</sup> Bernard Moss, The Origins of the French Labor Movement: The Socialism of Skilled Workers 1830-1914 (Berkeley, 1976).

<sup>44</sup> Foner, Labour and World War 1, 248

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas R. Sykes, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism in the Italian Labor Movement: The Agrarian Strikes of 1907-8 in the Province of Parma', International Review of Social History 21 (1976): 186-211.

<sup>46</sup> Meaker, The Revolutionary Left in Spain, 84-91, 165-168.

<sup>47</sup> Emmett O'Connor, Syndicalism in Ireland (Cork, 1988); Emmett O'Connor, A Labour History of Ireland, 1824-1960 (Dublin, 1992).

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<sup>53</sup> Renshaw, The Wobblies, 24; John Newsinger, 'Irish Labour in a Time of Revolution', Socialist History 22 (2002): 1-31.

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<sup>59</sup> Larry Peterson, 'The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism, 1900-1925', in Work, Community and Power: The Experience of Labor in Europe and America, 1900-1925, eds., J. E. Cronin and C. Sirianni (Philadelphia, 1983), 68.

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<sup>68</sup> Holton, British Syndicalism, 118-119, 209-210.

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<sup>71</sup> Howard Kimeldorf, Battling For American Labor: Wobblies, Craft Workers, and the Making of the Union Movement (California, 1999).

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