

A New Syndicalism?

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2001

Anarcho-syndicalism has changed a lot from its origin in workers' movements of the late 19th century. It saw many of its practices adopted by reformist institutions, and other practices rendered illegal by the repressive hand of the state. Criticisms have grown outside of workplace related issues, and failures have been revisited time and again. I'd like to constructively address some of those criticisms to develop a revolutionary strategy for tactical intervention with the economic struggles of our class. Organizing around economic means is not enough, there are more struggles than class warfare, but any revolution that doesn't abolish class isn't a revolution (1). We need to not try to resurrect old models of anarcho-syndicalism, but reincarnate the ideals for a new life in our changing world.

A criticism common these days is the claim that anarcho-syndicalism is dominated by a positivist productionist idea. Indeed, at one time there were many syndicalists that emphasized the parasitism of the rich, and encouraged that science and syndicalism could create a more productive and efficient system. This idea, however, co-existed with the opposition to long work hours, celebrated the free existence of the migrant worker, and shopfloor battles against the deskilling and taylorization of crafts. Much worker resistance is not just a resistance to capitalism, but a resistance of work in general, particularly when labor is alienated through domination and exploitation.

It is not simply a question of production, but of the kind of production we are involved in. Increasing the amount of junk we have is not beneficial. Having all of our needs and a good number of our desires met with minimal effort and ecological cost, is close to an economic utopia. Quality of life issues like a reduction in working hours and safety protections are old anarcho-syndicalist issues. However, some of the important environmental issues can not be relegated to only what workers do at work, or to the wanton demands of consumers, but also whether there is going to be a toxic waste dump in your backyard (or toxic waste at all!) or to build a dam. Bio-regional, libertarian municipalist(2) or other communal approaches might offer us a direction to look for additions to workers' and consumers' councils.

Another criticism of anarcho-syndicalism is that it has generally been viewed as primarily being concerned with organizing workers as a labor union (3). This focus on only organizing with workers at the place of confrontation with their employer limited anarcho-syndicalists to fighting isolated, defensive battles. The old utopian economic solution of "workers' control" through a union "administration of things" or workers' councils is very limiting since the interests of

workers and consumers can be different. Everyone participating in an economic social relationship is a consumer; though everyone is not a worker. As human beings, we are so much more than these economic roles, but we are these things as well; and in fact, it is these roles that are the only ones capitalism addresses.

The problem of workers' councils having a monopoly of economic decision-making is addressed in Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel's work on participatory economics. Parecon basically advocates federation of workers' councils based in the workplaces and consumers' councils based in the neighborhood. Parecon lacks a revolutionary praxis; they have no way to get there proposed federation. I think there is a way... and that is a worker and consumer syndicalism. We need to organize not only at the point of production, but also along the lines of transportation and communication, as well as at the point of consumption.

Consumers, like workers, need to organize for their own interests, and while more difficult to organize than workers, organizing one can greatly support the other. There are many similarities between organizing a labor union, and organizing a tenants' union(4) or a bus riders' union. Workers and consumers have more in common with each other than they do with the capitalists and bosses.

Syndicalism should be thought of as the practice of organizing along principles of direct action and direct democracy by the exploited for economic action against their exploiters. It's primary weapon being refusal — refusal to work, and refusal to buy. From slow down on the job, to sabotage, from putting your rent in escrow until the leak is fixed, to a mass rent revolt until rent is lowered. As struggle increases, we move from refusal to occupation and expropriation.

Probably the most useful criticism coming from council communist influenced groups like the Anarchist (Communist) Federation is that unions are defined by their mediation between workers and capitalism. The union bureaucracy becomes separated from the interests of workers as the professional staff acts as mediators and negotiators between workers and employers. The union comes to exist as a permanent economic organization with interests separate from the rank and file. The union bureaucracy attempts to control the workforce through discipline to fulfill contracts, as much as it confronts the employers for a better contract. The union must deliver a docile and stable workforce to the boss or lose its power to bargain; and to do so it must work to reduce the militancy of spontaneous worker struggle against the employer. The union is your pimp.

While some of this needs to be taken with a grain of salt since many unions do not behave this way,(5) and many of these problems point to a lack of democracy in current unions, or show the difficulty of staying within labor law during struggle, I do think they make an important point. Unions alone can not be the vehicle for revolution. They are designed as confrontational organizations within a hierarchical economy. They might be good tools for surviving in this environment, but that doesn't mean they are the best tools for destroying capitalism.

Some neo-council communists forget, going so far as to oppose any kind of political organization or even any form of activism, that many of those workers who participated in the spontaneous formation of workers' councils also participated in unions and political factions before struggles became large enough to form councils. Anarcho-syndicalists believe that the unions can be schools for revolution. It gives workers confidence, resources and time so that they can prepare for a revolution. It develops a web of solidarity, mutual aid, and trust that can be developed no other way than through participating collectively with our class in struggles that are reducing the rate of exploitation.

Unfortunately, until there is a revolution, there is always going to be some degree of negotiation between the exploited and the exploiters. If our class organizations refuse to negotiate an eventual return to a rate of exploitation, then the bosses and state will construct an organization with whom they they can negotiate. Eventually they will find enough scabs or break the struggle forcing us to accept the deal negotiated by a fake union. If we deny ourselves the ability to have at the very least a democratic control over the negotiation process, then we are sure to get fucked by it. (5)

It's a common myth that if we all belonged to the best revolutionary organization, we would gain the critical mass that is in agreement on the correct theoretical and tactical unity and we would then have a revolution! The debate becomes, which revolutionary organization is best, and thus which organizations aren't then revolutionary at all. It doesn't take long to see where this will go. It would create a horde of rival sectarian organizations squabbling over whether the Confederacion Nacional Trabajo (CNT) was revolutionary in 1936, before, afterwards, or not at all.

The idea of "One Big Union"(OBU) here is taken out of context. The appeal to OBU is a notion of solidarity in action, not a monopoly of revolutionary activity by one body of organized labor. The Industrial Workers of the World(IWW) was very critical of "union scabbing" at the time where one union would continue work (and even increase work with overtime and job loading) while another union was on strike. The idea was that all workers in an industry should strike together. That was the intent of OBU. Workers would support each others' strikes regardless of craft, political party, union affiliation, race, ethnicity, etc...

I think we witnessed this during the general strikes in which the IWW agitated and participated. The IWW contest for the membership of workers with the American Federation of Labor obscured this point. In some ways this is uniquely a phenomenon of the United States labor law which only allows one union to represent workers. This method of election for official recognition by the government of one body of workers' representatives, certainly did much to weaken radical labor unions while giving advantages to reformist and business unions.

Unions vary. They vary alot. Even in the U.S. you have a spectrum of unions that include: hierarchical, state-collaborationist, mafia-controlled, corporate, pro-capitalist, sexist, racist, and nationalist unions, some are moderate social-democratic reformers, some are radical anti-capitalist democratic direct action unions, and even others are small formal anarcho-syndicalist groups. All unions are not the same, whether they are officially recognized by the government or not. Whether the government recognizes a body of organized workers isn't really up to us, but rather the government and the employers. When you've got a successful strike, the bosses are desperate to negotiate and grant recognition. Unions, though, are made by the collective actions of the workers, not the paper endorsement of the state or the permission of the capitalists.

If all unions are not the same, then some are better than others. We should do everything we can to encourage better unions. In the better unions we should encourage the support of revolutionary struggle, even if the revolution means the destruction of the organizations (or at least its role as negotiator with the bosses).

In most places, a majority of the workers are not organized into any but the most informal of work resistance organizations. There is plenty of space for a radical union that operates according to anarcho-syndicalist principles to grow without ever having to challenge the officialdom of the business unions. Perhaps the IWW can today be a banner in which similar efforts can gather.

For those workers who already have a “union” at work, they have to figure out their own strategy. Does it make more sense to try and reform the union toward a revolutionary goal, or does it make more sense to form an alternative and challenge the business union’s role? One problem for us from a class perspective is that many vital industries are already in the domain of business unions. Those industries would be essential for the creation of general strikes and revolution. However, the onslaught of neo-liberalism has launched its war against even reformist unions, breaking the decades of “cooperation” between labor unions and capitalists. The AFL-CIO is changing under the strain of assault from the capitalists, increasingly wild-catting workers, local autonomy, rank & file democratic movements. Other strains include radicals involved as organizers for those portions of the unions that are growing; the class collaboration of some union bosses more interested in acting as pimps; and the fragmentation being created by the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and the withdraw of local unions from central labor councils to setup their own progressive labor councils. As much as we have an opportunity to organize with the unorganized, we also have opportunities for radicalization in the reformist unions.

We need specifically anarchist groups which spread syndicalist ideals among our class and can provide a perspective, history and theory for our fellow workers to consider. This is to be a leadership of ideas, not a vanguard. These probably need to be no larger than a successful publication group, such as Anarcho-Syndicalist Review; though undoubtedly if they are confederated with similar organizations they can increase their reach and ability to intervene.

We need solidarity organizations that build support for workers across lines of industry, craft, locality, nationality; and where the need is across racial, tribal and gender lines. These organizations need to be open to anyone as long as they are willing to working in a directly democratic matter taking direct action in the interests of supporting workers in struggle. A good example here would be the New York City based Direct Action Network Labor group. It’s groups like these that will probably do much of the work in spreading the solidarity that will be needed for successful general strikes.

We need workplace organization. I’m talking about on the ground bread & butter organizations that help workers survive day-to-day. The kinds of organizations that get us coffee breaks or a pay raise. Sometimes, it will mean negotiation with the State and the Bosses; which means a contract even if all it is is a verbal understanding. Ideally, these would be direct action, directly democratic organizations of workers.

We need organizations pushing for the radicalization of reformist and business unions. These can be networks of rebel workers in the construction trades plotting a wild cat strike, or the activities of militants with a newsletter and alternate slate for the next elections, with a proposal to change the union’s constitution to allow more democracy. Hopefully, they will either succeed in changing the union, or in gaining enough supporters to break away and form a rival union that is a better model of workplace organization than the business union.

We need a seed for a new society. For that space we manage to carve out for ourselves through alternative economic organizations, communes and cooperatives, we need to encourage those to grow as an economic rival to capitalism. Much like unions, they are not the revolution unto themselves for they have not escaped the market economy completely, only mitigated it. They do provide important models and can provide employment for the black listed, and cost effective services for our class that objectively improve their income and resources. Workers cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, mutual insurance, credit unions and people’s banks are all examples of these kind of alternative economic organizations. They must become confederated with

each other, and support each other and the revolutionary movement in general or they will be isolated and destroyed by the competitiveness of capitalist exploitation or the repression of the state. Cooperatives can also learn much from the directly democratic nature of the radical labor and consumer movement – many cooperatives have failed in being cooperative by centralizing decision-making or trying to “compete” in the global market.

By using a multi-organizational economic approach, we can confront the existing power structure and build an alternative through dual power. We can advance from isolated class struggles to a revolutionary movement united in action and solidarity.

While focusing on our class organizations is a good thing, we should always keep in mind that the revolution is not just the organization of unions and their activities. When revolution comes, it is going to be much more spontaneous, chaotic and massive than any of the formal organizational forms in which we participate. Will we be ready?

1) The lead editorial by Nicholas Phebus in this issue on revolutionary strategy.

2) There are some deep criticism of the local electoral strategy of some libertarian municipalists, but the idea of organizing directly democratically in municipalities to build dual power is a valid one. Perhaps a revolutionary strategy involving neighborhood committees like the Popular Committee Saint Jean-Baptiste in Quebec City can be developed? It would be interesting to see if popular committees could develop in the United States.

3) Anarcho-syndicalism in practice often had a communal aspect. But increasingly anarcho-syndicalism is thought of only in terms of workplace organizing. This has been one of the anarcho-communist criticisms of syndicalism from the very beginning.

3) Becky (?) has an article on tenants’ organizing in this issue.

4) The Industrial Workers of the World often refused to sign contracts. The some CNT locals struck only for libertarian communism and not for any negotiation in modifying the rate of exploitation.

5) An excellent example of the union bureaucracy selling-out the membership is the recent struggle at Jeffboat ship-building yard along the Ohio River. The Teamster local president tried to sign a sweet heart deal with the boss, ignoring the voted opposition to the contract from the rank & file, as a result the workers (including a group of IWW members) held a short wildcat strike. In the case of Jeffboat, the wildcat strike gained support from the Teamster international. The international forced the corrupt local president out office, calling for a new election and putting all future contracts to be decided by vote of the membership.

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2001

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Northeastern Anarchist #2 Spring 2001

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