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# WRITING ON ANARCHO SYNDICALISM





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The Direct Action Movement can be contacted at:-

Box 20,

164/166 Corn Exchange Buildings,

Manchester M4 3BN.

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ADDITION TO THE FINAL CHAPTER:- 'THE INTERNATIONAL MOVEMENT TODAY' ; Since this pamphlet was first printed, a Swedish section of the International Workers Association has been formed, the 'Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation'.

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Anarchism is frequently sneered at by Marxists as being "alright for peasant countries, but no good for modern industrial societies". In saying this they are following faithfully in the footsteps of their master on the theoretical plane, but unfortunately Marx's prophecies regarding the role to be played by the industrial proletariat have not been borne out by historical fact.

It is very comforting, no doubt, when living in an industrial society, to believe that you are automatically, by that very fact in the vanguard of the world revolutionary forces. The history of this century however, shows us that it is only in the industrially backward, peasant countries that social revolutions have been made, while in the highly industrialised countries capitalism has consolidated its grip through the bourgeois State, in a way which apparently Marx never foresaw, although the "impossible" Anarchist Bakunin could see it coming very clearly. The strongest revolutionary movements have sprung up, and the only revolutions of note since Marx's time have occurred, in Mexico, Russia, China and Spain - all peasant countries in which (with the exception of China) Anarchism or libertarian communism have been the strongest influences among the workers and peasants.

We need not go here into the reasons for the failures of these revolutions, but it is worth noting that it was in Marx's own country, Germany, a highly industrialised State with a dispossessed proletariat and an uncertain bourgeoisie, that the blackest, most reactionary and anti-working class regime was established, which has only been equalled by the tyranny of the State where Marxism is being worked out in practice.

When, therefore, Marxists maintain that Anarchism is alright only in peasant countries, we can point out that Marxism isn't alright anywhere, and that since two-thirds of the world are peasants anyway, Anarchism would seem to suit the majority. This however, is the answer if we accept that the idea of Anarchism cannot appeal to, or do not apply to the problems of, a working class in an industrialised society.

I do not accept that. The relationship between an industrial worker and the industrial means of production is not fundamentally different from that of a landless peasant. To free themselves from the economic bondage both peasants and workers have to enter into control of the means of life. The only difference is that it is more likely that a peasant can acquire a small piece of land of his own - although this gets increasingly difficult - than that a worker in industry can acquire any ownership there.

But as Anarchists we are not interested in "ownership". This is a legalistic conception which has meaning only in a legalistic society. What we are after is free access to the means of life for all, whether that means is land, to produce our food, industry to produce our goods, or transport or social services.

To achieve this we have to think along two lines - social and economic. On the social plane, Anarchist communism presents the only libertarian alternative to bourgeois authority. On the economic level Anarcho-syndicalism offers the only libertarian alternative to capitalism.

And these two conceptions must go hand in hand. It is impossible to be emancipated socially without a revolutionary change in the economic structure of our society, and it is impossible to be economically free without social relationships changing.

Syndicalism is often thought of by Anarchists as a junior partner, and to the extent that it is concerned with an aspect of social living, while Anarchism covers the whole of human life, that is true. But we must not forget that work is the basis of human life, both individually and socially, that it is the root of our culture, the source of our very existence, and that which is concerned with the organisation of work and through work the production of food, clothing and shelter - the necessities of life - has a



particular importance in human society.

Not only that. Syndicalism has this to offer Anarchism: on the framework of the Anarchist ethic, Anarcho-syndicalism has built a form of industrial organisation that conforms to the needs of industrial workers today. It offers a possibility of organisation that will give the workers weapons to guard and improve his conditions of living and working here and now such as he has never known before. It presents a basis and a means for performing that triple function necessary in a revolutionary industrial movement—defending our interests now, making the revolution when the time is right and looking after production and distribution in the free society.

On the structural level Anarchism has one lesson to offer Syndicalism which I would like to stress. It is the use of the small group as a working unit. This does not mean that Anarchists want either the Anarchist or the Syndicalist movement to remain small, but simply that within that movement the units of organisation shall remain small enough for the individual not to be submerged, for decisions to be arrived at, not by counting votes, but by the patient discussion of points of view and the maintaining of common interest and individual responsibility.

This means as I see it, regarding each syndicate not as an industrial union, but as itself a federation of workshop committees, local industrial councils, or whatever co-ordinating units arise. This federation can cover the whole industry—must in fact do so to be effective—but can avoid the monolithic character of the industrial union in the same way that the Anarchist movement can avoid the regimentation of the mass movement, by retaining the responsibility at the smallest point of co-operation.

The consideration of Anarchism and Syndicalism does not resolve itself into an "either-or" conclusion. These two conceptions are not mutually exclusive, but, on the contrary, are complementary—each strengthens the other. By adding the federative principle and the concern for the individual in Anarchism to the militant methods of direct action in Syndicalism we arrive at a synthesis of aims and methods that can be applied wherever men or women work together, in mines or hospitals, schools, farms or factories, roads or railways.

The dignity of man is continually affronted by the economic prostitution of capitalism and the irresponsibility of government. The achievement of a free society without either is not only desirable, it is a necessity if humanity is not to sink under fearful tyrannies to a level of barbarism intolerable in an age which should offer both leisure and abundance. And the most effective means to achieve that society is presented in Anarcho-syndicalism.



## ANARCHISM and SYNDICALISM

PHILIP SANSOM

This article first appeared in Freedom in April 1953, it is re-printed here unaltered.

Today, Anarchists and near-Anarchists are practically the only people supporting the idea of Syndicalism. The Marxists, of all their various brands, have turned in various degrees away from belief in industrial action as a means of emancipation, towards acceptance of political action alone.

The Labour party and the official Trade Union movement have steadfastly, over the last twenty five years, suppressed the use of industrial action by the workers.

"No industrial action for political ends", was the cry from the Labour leaders. "no industrial action for industrial ends," has been in fact their cry for years. In effect, "no industrial action" at all.

And the lesser parties under the patchwork quilt of "Socialism" adjust their attitudes towards industrial action strictly according to how it fits in with their political aims. For, fundamentally, all the Marxist parties see the working class as the step-ladder to power, and if their political interests can be furthered by industrial action by the workers, they are for it; if not, they are against it.

Small wonder then, as reformism has waxed strong, that syndicalism has waned, together with all revolutionary movements. But syndicalism, as it originally developed in this country, carried within itself the seed of its own destruction—to borrow a Marxist phrase—for it was in the first place allied ideologically with socialism.

True, not the Labour Party travesty of socialism, but certainly the industrial syndicalism which flourished in Britain during the first twenty years of this century did not specifically cut itself off from political activity, although it was much clearer about the limitations of politics than the majority of workers today seem to be.

For instance, in the first issue of THE INDUSTRIAL SYNDICALIST ("Prepare for Action"), July 1910. Tom Mann writes: "Does this mean that we should become anti-political? Certainly not. Let the politicians do as much as they can, and the chances are that, once there is an economic fighting force in the country, ready to back them up by action, they will actually be able to do what now would be hopeless for them to attempt to do."

This apparently meaningless concession to political action ran through syndicalist thought, although all the time the emphasis was on industrial action, and the syndicalists maintained strongly that it was through the use of direct action that the workers could gain most.

But this syndicalism was in reality little more than industrial unionism, though it undoubtedly had a revolutionary aim—"the overthrow of capitalism and the realisation of Socialism." Further, the syndicalists were concerned not to antagonise the already existing craft unions, but only to teach them what they should be.

We still get that attitude today among those syndicalists who advocate working within the unions—even talking in terms of capturing them—because workers resent criticism of their organisation, will remain loyal to them and will not readily think in



terms of starting new organisations. There was some excuse in Mann's day for thinking along these lines, for even though there were plenty of grounds for criticism of the craft unions from the industrial unionist standpoint, the unions had not then shown themselves to be as corrupt and reactionary as they have since.

It was inevitable that this sort of syndicalism should die out. It was too closely allied to the reformist "Labour Movement" to be able to resist the general corrosion and decay, the collapse of internationalism during the 1914-18 war and, above all, the creation of the Communist Party on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm for the Russian revolution—a revolution which, ironically enough, started through the spontaneous rising of workers, peasants and soldiers, much as anarchists and syndicalists had hoped, but had in fact been halted by Lenin's coup d'état in October 1917, so that the counter-revolution was well under way before the Communist Party was founded in Britain in 1921.

But still the C.P. was able to draw under its spell many militants of syndicalist persuasion—Tom Mann himself, of course, the outstanding example, together with the ex-anarchist Jack Tanner and many others—with what subsequent disillusionment we now know.

It was, as I see it, precisely because the early syndicalists had not emancipated themselves thoroughly from political thought that the movement declined. The way in which the leaders of the Triple Alliance (Bob Smillie for the miners, Bob Williams for the transport workers and Thomas for the railwaymen) balked at facing up to a revolutionary situation in 1919 is an indication, for example, that the issue of the workers' relationship to the State had never been really faced up to by the Labour movement of the time.

Aneurin Bevan, in *In Place of Fear* (p. 20) tells how these three union leaders were called to Downing Street to see Lloyd George, who said to them:

"Gentlemen, you have fashioned, in the Triple Alliance of the unions represented by you, a most powerful instrument. I feel bound to tell you that in our opinion we are at your mercy. The Army is disaffected and cannot be relied upon. Trouble has occurred already in a number of camps. We have just emerged from a great war and the people are eager for the reward of their sacrifices, and we are in no position to satisfy them. In these circumstances if you carry out your threat and strike, then you will defeat us....."

"But if you do so, have you weighed the consequences? The strike will be in defiance of the Government of the country and by its very success will precipitate a constitutional crisis of the first importance. For, if a force arises in the State which is stronger than the State itself, then it must be ready to take on the functions of the State, or withdraw and accept the authority of the State. Gentlemen," said the Prime Minister quietly, "have you considered, and if you have, are you ready?"

"From that moment on," said Robert Smillie, "we were beaten and we knew we were!"

Just why they should have been beaten before they started, with the state clearly crumbling, is a little difficult for anarchists to follow, except that the three heroes were "leaders" and "socialists", Smillie and Williams later being very closely associated with the Communists.

Syndicalism has petered out in Britain, reformist trade unionism has flourished. Now, however, that the latter is losing the confidence of the workers, there should be an opportunity for a more dynamic industrial movement, and the addition of anarchism to syndicalism (anarcho-syndicalism) certainly proves it.



Anarchism is based upon respect for the individual. It is the only militant philosophy asserting the autonomy of the individual which is socialistic and not capitalistic, and because of this the socialist opponents of anarchism like to describe us as petty-bourgeois, small scale capitalists" while the capitalists themselves do their best in most countries to repress us, or at least, misrepresent us.

Anarchists, unlike socialists see no contradiction between the ideas of individual freedom and co-operation. In fact we maintain that co-operation, mutual aid, far from curtailing the freedom of the individual, actually extends it. And this is increasingly true as production has become social rather than individual, for social production has rendered possible the elimination of much arduous toil and offers greater choice of occupation and opportunity for leisure.

Capitalism, of course, prevents these possibilities from becoming reality because the social production it has developed is not carried on for society but for the individuals who by luck or cunning have achieved dominant positions in that society. The freedom which individuals have within capitalist society to achieve these dominant positions, however, has nothing in common with the freedom of the individual which anarchists so ardently desire.

The capitalists freedom is completely illusory. He has to play ridiculous game strictly according to the rules, and if he does not play it efficiently, he goes under. All the time, however, his workers are already under, and the capitalists measure of failure - ie., loss of his dominant position - is having to join the ranks of the workers.

It goes without saying that the workers freedom is completely illusory also. He is dominated by the man who holds economic power, and the only liberty the worker has is to change his job - or his place of work - which simply means passing under someone elses domination, or taking the chance of working on his own, which with no capital and no experience is a very risky business.

For capitalist and worker alike, therefore, capitalism does not offer freedom. For the capitalist, it does offer a greater choice among material things, than it offers the worker. The capitalist can be unfree in comfort - the worker is unfree in want.

The illusion of freedom under capitalism has been maintained on the possibility of everybody being able to climb the ladder of success from worker to boss. "If Lord Nuffield could do it so can you," runs the argument. This completely overlooks the fact, however, that Lord Nuffield's success was due to the fact that thousands of workers remained on the lower rungs of the ladder while he climbed on their shoulders to the top. It also doesn't face up to the fact that there simply is not room for everybody at the top, since if everybody were at the top there would be nobody at the bottom - and those at the top depend on the continued labour of those at the bottom to keep them at the top.

If capitalism were genuinely competitive, and every individual were to set out to compete with everybody else in the way free enterprisers say they can, neither capitalism nor human society would last very long. Every form of human society, no matter how competitive, class divided, however vile it may be, can only exist through the co-operation of the human beings of which it consists.

This has always been clear to Anarchists. Kropotkins MUTUAL AID established in a scientific fashion what had been intuitively understood by Anarchists all along - that human beings are basically social and co-operative rather than competitive, as the capitalists would have us believe.



It is on this understanding that all socialist, communist and anarchist theory is based, and it is in the back ground of all working-class organisation. In the industrial organisations-the unions-there has been added to the recognition that unity is strenght. In order to fight the boss, who understood very well the old adage "Divide and Rule", the workers realised that they had to join together and pit their collective strenght against his.

From their very first beginnings, the trade unions encountered the fiercest opposition from the ruling class. It took the unions one hundred years of struggle to compel the authorities to grant them legal recognition, and it is interesting to note that nothing like the same opposition was mounted against the formation of "working-class" political parties. True, these parties were not formed, in this country, until the industrial organisations were firmly established, and the ruling class knew and feared the industrial strenght at the disposal of the workers, but it must have been with some relief that the rulers saw the workers turning from concentration on the industrial field to the diversion of political action. In other words, the rulers of Britain saw the workers dropping their strongest weapons and accepting ruling class ideas.

It is no coincidence that it was only a few years after the foundation of the Independent Labour Party that the trade unions were finally granted legal existence. With the creation of their political wing the unions had given the capitalists the signal that they were not going to rely on their own strenght, that the class struggle was to be abandoned, and class collaboration, through political activity, was to take its place.

After that, within the trade union movement, it was only the Syndicalist minority who maintained that the industrial weapons were the strongest in the workers armoury, and even they, were not completely emancipated from the idea of political action. Only the Anarchists have steadfastly maintained their opposition and contempt for political activity and stressed that it is at the point of production that the workers strenght really lies. Only Anarcho-Syndicalism has really resolved the problems involved in the struggle for the achievement of workers control, and only in the insistence on individual autonomy, as applied by the Anarchists, lies the protection against leadership and subsequent corruption which is an ever-present danger in a mass movement.

Further, it is only the influence of Anarchism with its definite goal and consistent principles which can prevent syndicalism from becoming bogged down in the day-to-day struggle and becoming nothing more than an alternative, even if more militant alternative, unionism.

As I see it, it is quite useless for syndicalists to day-to think in terms of anything but anarcho-syndicalism. It is undoubtedly the harder path, and if anarchism is played down, support for syndicalism may well come from disgruntled Labourites, stranded Trotskyists, and even Fascists. And if all that mattered was to get as many membership cards filled up as possible, these could be as good members as any.

But if syndicalism is to be regarded as the means to the free society of anarchy-and that is the way I regard it-then it must have the inspiration behind it that will lead it in that direction and no other.



The term "workers syndicate" ment in France at first merely a trade union organisation of producers for the immediate betterment of their economic and social status. But the rise of revolutionary Syndicalism gave this original meaning a much wider and deeper import. Just as the party is, so to speak, the unified organisation for definite political effort within the modern constitutional state, and seeks to maintain the bourgeois order in one form or another, so, according to the Syndicalist view, the trade union, the syndicate, is the unified organisation of labour and has for its purpose the defence of the interests of the producers within existing society and the preparing for and the preparing for and the practical carrying out of the reconstitution of social life after the pattern of Socialism. It has therefore, a double purpose: 1. As the fighting organisation of the workers against the employers to enforce the demands of the workers for the safeguarding and raising of their standard of living: 2. As the school for the intellectual training of the workers to make them acquainted with the technical management of production and economic life in general so that when a revolutionary situation arises they will be capable of taking the socio-economic organism into their own hands and remaking it according to Socialist principle.

Anarcho-Syndicalists are of the opinion that political parties, even when they bear a Socialist name, are not fitted to perform either of these two tasks.

For the Anarcho-Syndicalists the trade union is by no means a mere transitory phenomenon bound up with the duration of capitalist society, it is the germ of the Socialist economy of the future, the elementary school of Socialism in general. Every new social structure makes organs for itself in the body of the old organism. Without this preliminary any social evolution is unthinkable. Even revolutions can only develop and mature the germs which already exist and have made their way into the consciousness of humanity: they cannot themselves create these germs or generate new worlds out of nothing. It therefore concerns us to plant these germs while there is yet time and bring them to the strongest possible development, so as to make the task of the coming social revolution easier and to insure its permanence.

All the educational work of the Anarcho-Syndicalists is aimed at this purpose. Education for Socialism does not mean for them trivial campaign propaganda and so-called "politics of the Day", but the effort to make clear to the workers, the intrinsic connections among social problems, by technical instruction and the development of their administrative capacities, to prepare them for their role of re-shapers of economic life, and give them the moral assurance required for the performance of their task. No social body is better fitted for this purpose than the economic fighting organisation of the workers; it gives a definite direction to their social activities and toughens their resistance in the immediate struggle for the necessities of life and the defence of their human rights. This direct and unceasing warfare with the supporters of the present system develops at the same time the ethical concepts without which any social transformation is impossible: vital solidarity with their fellows-in-destiny and moral



responsibility for their own actions.

Just because the educational work of the Anarcho-Syndicalists is directed towards the development of independent thought and action, they are outspoken opponents of all those centralizing tendencies which are so characteristic of political labour parties. But Centralism, that artificial organisation from above downwards which turns over the affairs of everybody in a lump to a small minority, is always attended by barren official routine; and this crushes individual conviction, kills all personal initiative by lifeless discipline and bureaucratic ossification, and permits no independent action.

The organisation of Anarcho-Syndicalism is based on the principles of Federalism, on free combination from below upward, putting member above everything else and recognizing only the organic agreement of all on the basis of like interests and common convictions.



This article first appeared in FREEDOM, May 15, 1948 under the title Anarcho-syndicalism and workers councils.

Many readers of Freedom will be interested in an Australian paper "Southern Advocate for Workers Councils". This paper stands for an industrial policy very little distinguishable from the anarcho-syndicalism of Freedom and we note in the February issue a suggestion from workers in Sydney "for the formation of a form of organisation in Australia covering our viewpoint as Libertarian Socialists, IWW and Anarchists generally". However, the paper's policy is not exactly anarchist; it could be described as "council communism" in the old sense.

A letter from Anton Pannekoek wishes to show anarchism as "not suitable" and to offer a "necessary corrective criticism" of the ADVOCATES attitude to anarchism. We deal with this because we wish to show that as regards the present policy of the IWW in America, the advocates of workers councils on revolutionary lines internationally, and the anarchist movement, it would be sectarian to state that there are any serious differences.

Pannekoek wrote: "In the present times of increasing submission of the workers under powerful State tyranny it is natural that more sympathy is directed towards anarchism with its propaganda of freedom". Nineteenth century social democracy, he states, found its roots in the exploitation of the workers, nineteenth century anarchism in their slavery. Accordingly social democracy found its force in the need for organisation, anarchism in the need for freedom. But to-day "the problem and goal for the workers is how to combine freedom and organisation." Anarchism, by setting up freedom as its goal, forgets that the free society of workers can only exist by a strong community-feeling as the prominent character of the collaborating producers. The self-made organisation by free collaborating workers is the basis at the same time of their personal freedom, i.e., of their feeling as free masters of their own work".

But anarchism has long ago faced the need for combining freedom and organisation. The trouble with Marxist sectarians is that they will not acknowledge that there could be both nineteenth century anarchism and twentieth century anarchism also. In point of fact, anarchists decades ago faced the problem of industrialisation postulates the need for workers organisation at the point of production, and federating together there in order first of all to fight the employing class, and later on to take over the places of work.

This method of organisation is one in which libertarian council-communists concur. Anarchists object to the free councils formed at the places of work being dominated by a political party. Hence their disagreement with authoritarian council-communists (although not with libertarian ones). The policy of the IWW is similar, since although they accentuate the idea of industrial unionism, their conception of industrial unionism is not the centralist variety, whereby craft divisions are broken down merely to build up a strong "head office" union; but industrial unionism based on the idea of workers councils on the job linked together to form the big union.

This again is an anarcho-syndicalist conception also; since



the syndicalist programme of workers control has the same idea in mind. Namely, that the workers council at the place of production should federate to form a national council of workers councils in each industry; and locally to form a commune for the common defence of the workers in each locality. It is just untrue that anarchism is opposed to organisation; what it opposes is authoritarian organisation (organisation from above downwards) as distinct from libertarian organisation (organisation from below upwards).

We would echo the call of the Sydney group that anarcho-syndicalism has a common platform with council communists and IWWs in the building up of a revolutionary workers movement. Wherever the supporters of workers council organisation and revolutionary industrial unionism exist, we are prepared to join them in the building of workers councils. Our conception of a revolutionary movement is not an industrial union on paper alone, but one built on the solid basis of workers uniting in industry, and this can be done free from sectarianism. In this programme we welcome the "Southern Advocate", likewise the US "Industrial Worker" and similar organs, in the struggle to build a really working class movement against the employers, State and political wangers alike.

It can be agreed that council communism, revolutionary syndicalism and IWW unionism, are not anarchism. In the words of Pannekoek, "Freedom as the chief content of anarchist teaching may awake strong sympathies now; it is only a part, not even the basic part of the goal of the working class which is expressed by self-rule, self-determination, by means of council organisation". This which is a view common to some IWWs and many council-communists, makes a differentiation with anarchism. It is a conception of freedom as economic freedom only. The anarchist idea of freedom as "without government" of any kind - economically, politically and socially without domination of any kind of one group or person by another - is all-embracing, and the attainment of workers control of industry, although an integral part of the struggle, represents a great advance - in fact, the revolution - but not the whole battle. It is from such a society of workers control that the anarchists hope to see the free society evolved.

At the present time, therefore, in our view anarcho-syndicalism shares its industrial policy with the groups we referred to; we merely do not think they go the whole way. It is a debatable criticism whether we shall get that far in our lifetime anyway - and therefore why worry about that now? - but in our view the appeal of anarchism for the workers is that it does show the future goal as well as the immediate objectives and revolutionary possibilities. Without that goal a movement can degenerate into a sterile party of left-wing criticism, as happened to the council-communist and Spartacist movement following the last war. In the view of many anarchists, the greater the goal, even if we do not wholly attain it now, the more we shall immediately achieve.