

# New Technology - Friend or Foe?

## Introduction: The Value of Work

The modern labour movements have, by and large, been trapped within a work dominated ideology. This is not surprising, since industrialisation has had an overwhelming effect on the lives of ordinary people. Thus, revolutionaries and reformists alike, have prioritised the issues which relate primarily to the workplace. Issues such as the demand for workers' control, workers' self-management, industrial sabotage, collective bargaining, workplace politics and the demand for the 'right to work', have all been to the fore. To a large extent, this concern is both understandable and reasonable. After all, a majority of adults (and sometimes children) spend the greater part of their conscious lives in and around the workplace. To humanise and control the working environment, to increase earnings etc, is a way in which at present working people can effectively take control over their own lives.

The fetish of work has, over the last 200 years or so, become deeply ingrained within the working class. Labour and toil is seen by many to be noble and virtuous, whilst idleness is equated with wasted lives. For socialists, life without work lacks direction and purpose. Some anarchists, under the impact of mass unemployment, are discovering that worklessness, offers both 'negative' and 'positive' advantages. Absent is the petty bullying, managerial dictatorship, boredom, danger, fatigue and diseases such as asbestosis, which industrial work, for example, necessitates. And present is the time to develop interests, ideas and projects in conjunction with friends. The idle rich have never felt a particularly strong urge to work, and do not seem to suffer too much from not doing any, their lives are perfectly acceptable to them. Work then, is not a necessary or even desirable end in itself. It is simply, at present, the main means for most people of managing to survive.

## New Technology and Capitalism

"...the gradual and relative growth of the constant over the variable capital, must necessarily lead to a gradual fall of the average rate of profit".

The above quote is from Marx's 'Capital', and in a more accessible form of language, means that the capitalist boss class would lose profit and thus power because they would introduce constant capital (ie machinery and technology), in certain areas of production to replace the amount

of variable capital (ie workers) that was used. Marx believed that this, together

with proletarian dissatisfaction, would lead to the downfall of the capitalist class, as only variable capital (workers) could produce surplus value which was needed for profit to be made. In other words, the introduction of new technology by the capitalists would lead to their downfall. On this point, as on many others, Marx was wrong, as the capitalists have continued to introduce new technology, and far from leading to their downfall it has benefited them enormously. The introduction of new technology has boosted their profits as automation means that less money has to be paid out in the form of wages, and under capitalism, a system whereby workers are dependant on these wages as a means of survival, this has meant that very often computerisation and the implementation of new technology has been in conflict with workers' interests and has served only to benefit the rich boss class.

## Technology and Anarchy

Under capitalism, computerisation and new technology has been perverted, so that very often it is not as beneficial to society as it should, and could be; in fact, under capitalism technology has very often proved to be somewhat of a menace. This has led some anarchists (particularly green anarchists) to reject technology and advocate an anarchy whereby people lead a pastoral existence, in small, self-sufficient village communities. But is this really necessary for anarchy to be achieved?; and indeed is it really practical? In an anarchist society there is no reason why computerisation and the introduction of new technology could not be used so that it was beneficial to all, rather than just the rich who use it to put workers on the scrapheap of unemployment for their own profit. A system of true workers' control would mean that the affect would be less work for everyone, and without the

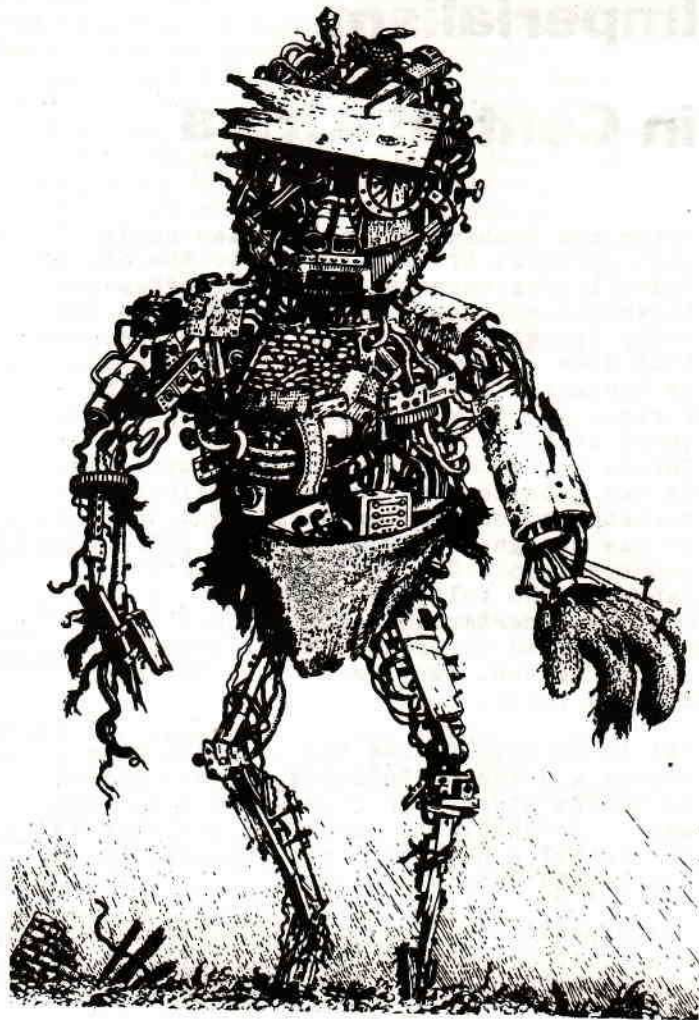


poverty that that means under capitalism. The emphasis should be not on the abolition of technology, but on how best technology can be used and implemented, as it is not technology itself that is evil, but the system under which it is currently implemented. Computers and technology can perform tasks quickly, efficiently, and can work a lot longer than humans can. Modern technology means that much information (eg hospital patients' records, lists of goods produced and goods requested) can be stored in the memory of one computer rather than on endless files and pieces of paper that can often be mislaid. In hospitals the speed of computers can save lives, and in industry computerised robot devices can save labour, in an anarchist society therefore, technology would be extremely useful; it is only in today's society that they very often are not. A prime example of this is the Wapping dispute; in a society organised by workers themselves, printers would be glad of technology that saved them labour.

All societies face difficulties in relating production to consumption and distribution. The market economies of capitalism and state capitalist Yugoslavia solve this problem through rationing by price, whilst in the USSR, prices are fixed, but goods are in short supply, resulting in food queues, for example. Technology provides a solution to this problem which communist-anarchists have in the past tended to ignore, or at best offer partial solutions, given the proposed abolition of money in anarchist society. Currently, institutions like banks and multinationals use computerised technology to carry out extremely complicated tasks of accounting, production, distribution, marketing etc. This technology can be adapted for the benefit of society as a whole, taking into account the nature and level of consumer demand and altering production to meet it - consumer sovereignty would for the first time be a genuine possibility.

Some anarchists criticise technology on the grounds that it makes people emotionally dead by encouraging an unnatural processed world. Surely though, it is the socialisation of people under capitalism (which encourages greed and selfishness) that causes people to be emotionally dead, rather than the actual technology used by capitalists. In an anarchist society where peoples' conditions of existence changed, there would be an awakening of emotion and community, and rather than people being controlled by machines, machines would be controlled by people. Technology in an anarchist society would take the drudgery out of many aspects of work, and would thus leave more time for people to interact with each other in leisure activities; therefore technology would encourage the development of emotion and community etc.

It is surprising how many anarchists see anarchism as reverting back to village style communities where the advances that have been made in technology, which have involved workers sacrifice, would be abandoned. If we can only imagine anarchism in very small rural village communities



which are self sufficient, then how much faith do we really have in anarchist organisation? Anarchism is not about the abolition of technology for a so-called natural way of life, it is about people taking back technology so that they may use it to benefit everyone, rather than a small minority.

The capitalists would like us to believe that if we stick to their twisted system, the so-called leisure society will arise which will bring enormous benefits to everyone; under their twisted system though, the leisure society would mean enormous wealth for the few, and poverty for the masses. Under anarchy however, the leisure society would mean equal wealth and leisure for all. It is not technology that is morally wrong, but only the system under which it is currently implemented.

Now, for the first time in history, we have the means, if democratically controlled, to free ourselves from work and enjoy high living standards. The key to achieving this is automation of industry, computerisation and the growth of information technology. At the moment, automation/new technology are perceived as a threat to the working class, they lead to de-skilling, mass unemployment and lessened control over the environment. In a condition of anarchy, however, they provide the solution, freeing the working class from onerous toil and creating the possibility of affluent idleness.

# Problems of Anarcho syndicalism

The problem of organisation and leadership (and what happened to the CNT in 1936).

It has long been a part of anarchist theory that means cannot be separated by ends. By 'means' here, it is meant what type of organisation, what sort of tactics; to argue that the new, free society will have blood on its hands and will therefore be somehow psychologically doomed because people will undoubtedly get killed trying to stop the revolution is just silly, hypocritical, bourgeois moralism. Many anarchist analyses of historical events or movements have shown that 'degenerations' in movements or organisations are not really degenerations at all, but faults that have become fully evident and that can be traced back to the structure of the organisation in question, or the ideology that has shaped it. For example, whereas certain Trotskyists would argue that the USSR was a 'degenerate workers' state', we would argue that the initial ideology and organisation of the Bolshevik Party made that 'degeneration' inevitable. Before the end of the last century, anarchists were correctly predicting what would happen to a revolution if the Marxists were allowed to direct, or hijack, it; they were predicting Stalinism long before Stalin was even in the Party.

Anarcho-syndicalism correctly asserts that workers must organise themselves in their economic units and in these structures must practice the organisational forms of the anarchist society, this is only possible if the organisations are anti-parliamentary. The anarcho-syndicalist CNT in Spain, in its congress of 1918, stated that: "professional politicians can never represent workers organisations, and the latter should make sure that they never affiliate themselves to any political club". Slogans of the CNT reflecting its apolitical/anti-parliamentary stance included: "there are no good and bad politicians, only bad ones and worse", and, "provisional governments turn into permanent ones inevitably". However, on November 4, 1936, the CNT entered four ministers to the government, which was led by the non-revolutionary socialist Largo Caballero. José Peirats, the official historian of the CNT, has written:

"The top cadres of the movement acknowledged the crushing weight of a situation which they had been incapable of foreseeing seriously. They never outgrew their apprenticeship in which, paradoxically, they had to act the unwelcome part of acting as a brake on the inexperienced revolutionary impulses of their own comrades. They had to take on an ungrateful task, for which they were neither prepared nor felt a vocation".

"Solidaridad Obrera", the paper of the CNT in Catalonia, wrote at the time:

The entry of the CNT to the government of Madrid is one of the most important facts of the political history of our country. Always, on principle and by conviction, the CNT has been anti-state and the enemy of every form of government. But circumstances, almost always superior to human will, although determined by it, have transformed the nature of the government and the Spanish State. The government at the present time, as a regular instrument of the State organs, is no longer an oppressive force against the working class". (In the light of the May events in Barcelona in 1937, amongst others, this statement reads like a bad joke).

However, Federica Montseny, one of those CNT ministers, said: "All the most prominent men of the syndical and anarchist groups were present (at the decision to join the government) ... We have joined the government, but the streets have escaped us...).

And "Los Amigos de Durruti": "The truth is that the rank and file was not consulted, only a few of the best known elements of the CNT and FAI were present at the meetings".

In fact, the entry of the four anarchists to the Republican government was a local stage in the policy of the CNT, relating to the revolution and the fight against Franco, which began on July 21, 1936, the day after the people had defeated the military rebellion in Barcelona and proclaimed the revolution.

Hours after the defeat of the military rebellion, Luis Companys, as head of the Generalitat (regional government) of Catalonia, arranged a meeting with prominent members of the CNT-FAI. He told them that since it was they who now had the power, he would step down as President of Catalonia if they so wished. However, he also suggested that the struggle against fascism nationally might be aided by his presence as President of a government composed of all the leading parties in Catalonia. He knew that his generalitat would have little authority without the CNT.

On July 21, a Regional Plenum of the CNT "decided not to speak about Libertarian Communism as long as part of Spain was in the hands of the fascist". (Paz). With objections from only one delegation, a policy of collaboration was agreed upon.

Garcia Oliver explained that the fascist threat was the most important consideration and that anti-fascist unity had to be maintained. Gaston Leval gives his other, deeper reasons: "He expressed them in conversations with comrades. 'What would I have done with the power? I was in no way prepared for what was implied, the situation was such that I could not but fail'. And it was quite true. Garcia Oliver, like all the more or less demagogic orators of the FAI, was quite ignorant of the steps that had to be taken to direct the life, industry and provisioning of a city like Barcelona. The same could be said of Federica Montseny. This did not stop them from becoming ministers

of the Republic. It was easier than organising a collective".

In reality it was to be the Central Committee of Militias which wielded the real power in Barcelona, not the Generalitat. Although it did not have the authority of the State, which the Generalitat did have, it was still a political body composed of eight different political groupings. The CNT-FAI, however, was clearly dominant.

The revolutionary CNT and FAI were now embarking on a course which, because of the revolution was going on around them, meant that for the sake of collaboration they would have to try to slow down the spread of the revolution, any steps toward the new society, beyond the ones already achieved, had to wait until the fascists had been defeated.

This policy of postponing the revolution affected the military strategy of the CNT (probably disastrously) and forced the CNT into untenable positions.

The contradictory (though perhaps tragically common in revolutionary periods) situation of revolutionaries attempting to hold back the revolution while still trying to maintain, or envisage, a course to the revolution, led to a strange formula being adopted by prominent CNTers (Santillan especially). This was that the revolutionaries must legally build up defences, using the power of the armed workers controlled by the Central Committee of Militias, so that the old regime would not be able to restore itself, either now or after the defeat of fascism. This would entail creating an 'armed vigilance unit' controlled by the unions.

Legally creating the conditions whereby the revolution could not be seriously attacked, and could in fact extent itself, would mean complete integration into, of perhaps take-over of, the State - not the abolition of the State. The new economy, already managed by the workers, would gain strength against the Central Committee of Militias, which was provisional and regional, and the CNT would perhaps become the dominant force in the State since it would control the economy. As Durruti argued, this would lead to a "sort of State socialist economy", it would not mean revolution since it is impossible for a revolution to have "a legal basis".

Here we can see the 'degeneration' of the union at untra-fast speed. Collaboration - with other political parties and the state in order to ensure the survival of the organisation and its growth of power in the present society - has led to the acceptance of bourgeois legality and the organisation trying to use the workers for its own political ends: ultimately the taking over of the running of the state, and thus of exploitation, "in the interests of the workers". This is every ambitious trade union bureaucrats dream.

The entry of the CNT to the Madrid government was not a very big surprise, nor was it an 'historic error' but a symptom of



Garcia Oliver; "in no way prepared..."

the weakness of the CNT as an anarchist organisation. (1).

As Malatesta has pointed out, and Alfredo M Bonanno expanded, traditionally a union that aims to defend and increase the immediate, partial gains of the workers (which is an objective of anarcho-syndicalism) tends to collaboration with the state. Basically, the leaders, or the bureaucracy, become fearful of 'losing all they have fought for' (ie, their positions) by jeopardizing their relations with the state.

Bonanno: "Given that the job of the unions is that of claiming better conditions, to claim them it is necessary first to save the life and efficiency of the counterpart (employer/economy/state)". And again: "On the morrow of the revolution ... there can be neither party nor trade union, just as there can be no capitalism. The structure of the future will consist of only economic and not political federations of grass roots organisations, otherwise the work will have to be begun all over again".

The argument here is that even revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalism will, sooner or later, find itself inevitably bound up in a trade union logic, defending the organisation before anything else, and doing this by getting involved in all sorts of political chicanery.

Malatesta: "In fact, being a movement which proposes to defend the present interests of the workers, it must necessarily adapt itself to the living conditions of the present".

The problem is that an organisation is built that acts in the workers' interests, the organisation must therefore act in the best interests of all its members; in fact in the best interests of the organisation. In a revolutionary event it means that the revolutionary proletariat will be subject to stops and checks from positions of seeming authority, and finally repression. Witness the CNT's collaboration with the Communist Party during 1937 when the CP started to stamp out anarchist initiatives.

Footnote.

(1). A Giles-Peters, in 'A New World..', in an article in support of the CNT writes: "The CNT has its own political traditions even if these are more ambiguous than many people would like to believe". p91. "The celebrated 'anti-politicism' of the CNT was not only compatible with the 'historic error' of entering the Caballero cabinet in 1936 but also with collaboration with all the military and political conspiracies against the Primo de Rivera dictatorship in the 1920's and the rather more dubiously useful political alliances of the CNT in exile in the 1940's". p96.

#### Problem of the General Strike

A central tactic that emerged with the concept of anarcho-syndicalism was that of the revolutionary general strike. At the beginning of this century many anarchists had given up hope of a mass revolutionary insurrection, partly because organising it seemed too difficult and partly because it was thought that the armed forces of the state were now so efficient and so technically advanced that an armed uprising would stand little chance of success. A complete, mass withdrawal of labour was considered to be the ideal way to make the bourgeoisie relinquish power; the bourgeoisie would be, in effect, 'starved out'.

Some realised the error in this position as it stood on its own (it would certainly be the strike that would break before the bourgeoisie, because the people would also starve) and argued that the strikers must also start expropriating the means of production and using them for the benefit of the people. This was called the 'expropriating general strike', later the idea of insurrection was also incorporated into the concept, this made it the 'expropriating and insurrectionary general strike'!

But the general strike would have finished once the expropriating had started and due to the certainty that mass expropriation will provoke an armed response from the bourgeoisie the people would have already made provisions for their defence (locating and distributing arms, for example) - the revolution, therefore, would be identifiable not as an expropriating general strike, but as a mass insurrection.

In 1907 Errico Malatesta was complaining that the use of the term 'general strike' was misleading: "Some of the enthusiasts of the general strike go so far as to admit that the general strike involves expropriation. But then the soldiers come. Are we to let ourselves be shot down? Of course not. We should stand up to them, and that would mean Revolution. So why not say Revolution at once, instead of General Strike?". There is perhaps a kind of unconscious deceit in using the term general strike instead of revolution, as if the words 'general strike' will not frighten the workers off, whereas the word 'revolution' will.

Apart from the confusion over what the general strike is supposed to be there is another problem which relates to armed resistance or struggle during the revolutionary event. The general strike is considered to be a tactic which will minimise armed intervention by the state. Alexander Berkman, in 'The ABC of Anarchism'. 1929, argued that the masses would not stand a chance in a fight with a modern army, and that to propose such a thing was foolish. Apart from the fact that he wrote this before several guerrilla movements of the 20th century had defeated modern state armies - and after the Ukrainian peasants had driven out the Whites during the Russian revolution - his argument lacks a certain logic. The only reason the bourgeoisie might give up the power without a serious fight would be if there was absolutely no chance of winning or they had nothing to fight with, ie, the whole of the armed forces went over to the people or foreign states refused to intervene. These things would be highly unlikely, to say the least.

In 1930 Pierre Besnard, the French syndicalist, wrote on the general strike that "On the duration of the stoppage will depend the future of the revolutionary movement". And Berkman wrote: "You can shoot people to death but you can't shoot them back to work". However, people can be starved back to work. If the general strike is to be a revolution then the people will have resumed all the essential services well before any workers, or their children, have started to go hungry. And this revolution is going to have to be able to defend itself, as well as trying to extend itself, in the face of the state's armed forces. This is an insurrection not a mass withdrawal of labour.

In 1943, Lady Katherine Chorley's 'Armies and the Art of Revolution' was published, part of it deals with the efficiency of the general strike as a revolutionary tactic and though Chorley wasn't an anarchist or revolutionary she makes some interesting comments:

"During a revolution, the more smoothly the machinery runs for the neutral population the better...

"A general strike, then, must succeed in its objective within the first few days. If this does not happen, it will probably collapse under the weight of the dislocation it has itself brought about before that dislocation actually brings down the whole social structure. There is an alternative: that it should transform itself into armed revolt. Granted the opposition of the armed forces of the government, such a revolt can only be successful if the conditions created by the strike prevent the troops from exerting their full strength ... Taking it by and large, the general strike is not a good revolutionary weapon. Its main revolutionary value is as an expression of working-class solidarity. It can sometimes be used to create artificially a revolutionary situation, but unless such a situation can be used as the taking-off point for an already planned insurrection, whose chances have been

calculated, it is a useless expenditure of enormous energy. As an actual instrument of policy it is more wasteful of energy than a straight insurrection, and its failure is more likely to set back a working class movement than the failure of an insurrection".

There will be a suspension of work during a revolutionary event, this will be the time of initial armed defence/insurrection, celebration, and the re-organisation of services, production and distribution for the benefit of everyone. It was the armed workers who defeated the military rebellion in Barcelona in 1936, not the general strike.

Problem of the relationship of workplace to community in anarcho-syndicalism.

The most common criticism of anarcho-syndicalism is that it neglects roles in the community by being solely pre-occupied with the workplace and industrial struggles.

This criticism can be looked at in two ways. Firstly, it is actually true that anarcho-syndicalism neglects wider issues and, if it is true, then does it have to remain so? Secondly, does it matter?

Both these questions presuppose that anarcho-syndicalism is truly revolutionary. So, criticising anarcho-syndicalism for its apparent neglect of other issues becomes pointless, unless you are an anarcho-syndicalist, because if you are right at the moment it doesn't mean the criticism has to be valid forever and also, if the criticism is correct, does it matter?

If anarcho-syndicalism is truly revolutionary does it matter if it is restricted to organising around industrial struggles? Will it be one organisation, decided upon, and built up in non-revolutionary times that will prefigure the organisational forms of society after the revolution, whether syndical or not?

In 'A New World in our Hearts', Albert Meltzer writes that anarcho-syndicalism should be viewed as a movement within the anarchist movement. He argues, for example, that the CNT, as a union organisation, is not designed to operate outside the workplace and that other anarchist organisations should be created to work in the wider community.

This would seem plausible, and desirable: people creating their own forms of organisation specifically designed to operate with a certain situation, ie, in the workplace, on the housing estate, etc. These organisations would then of course be helped by the fact that people would be involved in at least two or three of the different organisations.

But what if anarcho-syndicalism is not, or cannot remain, an anarchist organisation? What if all unions, from neutral to anarcho-syndicalist, end up with a similar relationship to the state, and to their membership? Bearing in mind that

anarcho-syndicalism must always try to expand, or strengthen itself with regard to the state, is it reasonable to assume that anarcho-syndicalism will eventually be in competition with all other forms of organisation, even anarchist ones? (To act like a trade union in protecting workers' 'rights' anarcho-syndicalism must become a counter-power, struggling against the bourgeoisie under the rules the bourgeoisie have set down).

The ultimate aim of the trade union is the management of the state, their argument is that the union will be able to look after the interests of the workers far better, and run capitalism (exploitation) more smoothly than at present.

Malatesta: "The union can emerge with a socialist, revolutionary or anarchist programme, and indeed it is with such programmes that many workers' organisations were originally launched. But they remain faithful to the programme so long as they are weak and impotent, that is so long as they are propaganda groups, initiated and sustained by a few enthusiastic and convinced individuals rather than organisms capable of effective action; but then as they manage to attract the masses to their ranks, and to acquire the strength to demand and impose improvements, the original programme becomes an empty slogan which no one bothers about, tactics are readjusted to contingent needs and the enthusiasts of the first hour either adapt themselves or just make way for the 'practical' men, who pay attention to the present without worrying about the future". (1925).

Anarcho-syndicalist unions must always try to become a power in society, in industrial and political relations, because for an organisation that aims to protect workers' interests, and improve on them, it must have an influence of its own, that influence must be based on its ability to control the rank and file membership.

Anarchism has always taught, especially in the theory of direct action, that workers must collectively look after their own interests.

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The above article raises some serious questions about the nature of anarcho-syndicalism. A member of the Direct Action Movement has been invited to reply.