

**SYNDICALISM**

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**IN MYTH AND REALITY**

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## THE MYTHS OF SYNDICALISM

Syndicalism died after WWI. Syndicalism was finished as a revolutionary movement by 1910. Syndicalism was finished off by Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Syndicalism was a primitive millennial movement which evolved into modern social democratic unionism. - Or so the academic labor historians will tell you. The purpose of this pamphlet is to show that these conceptions are myths.

Before going any further however, syndicalism should be defined. In France, where the term originated, syndicalism means simply trade unionism and has no particularly radical or anarchistic connotations. French speakers refer to libertarian syndicalism, revolutionary syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism when distinguishing the radical current from traditional trade unionism.

This pamphlet uses the term in its English sense - libertarian trade unionism - unions stressing direct action rather than parliamentary action and the goal of self-management. Direct democracy and the maximum of local autonomy are also characteristic of the day to day life of a syndicalist organization. While all syndicalists share these attitudes, they are divided ideologically. Those who call themselves anarcho-syndicalists are inspired by anarchist theorists. Those who derive their views from a form of libertarian marxism are often called revolutionary syndicalists. There are also divergent opinions on violence and revolution which stretches all the way from from insurrectionists to the moderate followers of P.J. Proudhon.



### THE GOLDEN AGE OF SYNDICALISM

The oft-stated opinion that syndicalism flourished in the years prior to WWI is a myth of the golden age of syndicalism. As with all myths, a certain grain of truth exists. During the first decade of the 20th Century a form of syndicalism having faith in insurrectional violence dominated in some areas. By 1910 this tendency had run out of steam and continued to be influential only in Spain. In North America and Northern Europe the insurrectionists were never influential.

Nor were the unions particularly large organizations. Membership tended to be small and fluctuating. The CGT which claimed 360,000 members in 1910 may have had as few as 6000 members four years later. By 1913 the Canadian IWW had almost ceased to exist.

Union	Year	Membership
FORA (Arg.)	1911	70,000
CGT (France)	1910	360,000
IWW (Canada)	1910	9,000
USI (Italy)	1912	80,000
IWW (USA)	1912	18,400
CNT (Spain)	1911	50,000

#### PRE-WWI MEMBERSHIP

These figures are an underestimation as they do not include the British movement.<sup>1</sup> However, far from being a Golden

Age, membership was small, and this was only a formative period.

### POST-WAR SYNDICALISM

Union	Country	Membership
FORA	Argentina	200,000
FORA IX	Argentina	70,000
CGT	France	600,000
OBU	Canada	41,000
IWW	USA	40,000
CNT	Spain	500,000
IWW	Chile	20,000
FAU	Germany	120,000
NAS	Holland	22,500
CGT	Mexico	30,000
CGT	Portugal	150,000
FORU	Uruguay	25,000

#### MEMBERSHIP IN 1922

WWI was a disasterous set-back for syndicalism. Unions split into pro and anti-war factions and in some countries such as Canada and the US syndicalist organizations were proscribed and persecuted. But the movement came out of the war stronger than ever. More than two million workers joined the CGT in 1919 and the Italian USI had about 500,000 members. Unions mushroomed and syndicalism spread throughout Latin America and Eastern Europe.



For some unions like the CGT and the USI this year marked the high point of their strength, as the former split into two factions and the latter was crushed by the fascists. The Bolsheviks also destroyed the burgeoning Russian syndicalist movement. But for the rest of the world the early 1920's marks syndicalism's zenith.

This membership list grossly underestimates syndicalist strength worldwide. Statistics on the Australian and Brazilian movements are fragmentary and inconclusive, yet the majority of Australian workers were members of the One Big Union and the Brazilian anarcho-syndicalist movement was strong enough to support a daily newspaper. There were also federations in all the South and Central American countries as well as in Eastern Europe. Many syndicalists also stayed outside of the federations in independent unions. Others, such as those in Great Britain, worked as radical caucuses within the social democratic unions.

A word on the inclusion of the French CGT. About this time, the revolutionaries within the federation were pushed out and formed the CGT-U, having about the same number of members as the old CGT. The CGT-U, was, however, controlled by the Communists and hence cannot be considered syndicalist, even though many militants remained faithful to the cause. Within two years the anarchist faction of the CGT-U had had enough of their Leninist "allies" and broke away to form a third CGT, the CGT Social Revolutionary. The old CGT, while purged of its revolutionary faction, did not opt for social democracy, but for Proudhonism. Hence, it still represented a form of syndicalism, albeit a quite moderate one.

The year 1922 also marked the formation of the syndicalist international, the International Workers Association which formed a libertarian counterweight to the Communist and Social Democratic Internationals. Most of the national federations joined except the OBU movements, the North American IWW and the Proudhonist CGT.

### **SYNDICALISM AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION**

By the onset of the Great Depression, the syndicalist movement had lost a great deal of its influence and membership. The Argentine FORA, in the middle of an internal wrangle in 1931, was suppressed by the military, never to regain its importance within the trade union movement. The Chilean IWW was beaten into the ground by the Ibanez dictatorship. (But re-formed under a different name a few years later) The Mexican CGT split into fragments. The Spanish CNT stagnated after the bleeding it took from the employer-sponsored gun thugs (*pistoleros*) and the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. But the social democratic unions did not fare much better. (In Great Britain the TUC had 6.5 million members in 1919 and only 3.7 million in 1928.) The situation was similar in most countries.

As the 1930's dragged on, the situation worsened for syndicalism. The German movement was liquidated by the Nazis and a left-right combination of Stalinists and Falangists destroyed the Spanish CNT in 1938-39. (The CNT had more than two million members in 1936) Salazar wiped out the Portugese movement. Brazilian syndicalists felt the lash of the Vargas regime. The French CGT Proudhonists made the mistake of



uniting with the Communist CGT-U and with historical irony were swallowed up just as

Union	Country	Membership
FORA	Argentina	100,000
CGT-SR	France	10,000
CGT	France	750,000
OBU	Canada	24,000
IWW	Canada	4,000
IWW	USA	26,000
CNT	Spain	500,000
FAU	Germany	50,000
CGT	Mexico	80,000
SAC	Sweden	35,000

MEMBERSHIP IN 1930

the revolutionary anarchists had been devoured fifteen years previously.

The following list underestimates the syndicalist forces in the post-1939 period. The Dutch NAS still existed and the Cuban syndicalists had managed to survive the Machado dictatorship and were a major force on the island. In France about 280,000 workers were enrolled in unions dominated by revolutionary syndicalists - in spite of Communist efforts. Syndicalism remained an influence in Chile, Bolivia and other Latin American countries. But even after taking this into account there is little doubt that the movement had been fatally weakened.

Union	Country	Membership
OBU	Canada	9000
IWW	Canada	3700
IWW	USA	20,000
SAC	Sweden	40,000
CNT-B	Bulgaria	10,000

MEMBERSHIP AFTER 1939

**WWII AND THE POST-WAR ERA**

After WWII Stalinism benefitted most from labour militancy. The countries liberated from Fascism did not see a return to the syndicalist unions. Those that did re-form were mere shadows of the past. The IWW had a brief and minor renaissance only to lose all its organized shops by 1950. In France, the old Proudhonists split from the Stalinist CGT in 1947 to form *Force Ouvrier*, but by no stretch of the imagination could this union be considered syndicalist, though it clung to some syndicalist concepts. Even these it would lose in its evolution into a kind of French Gomperism.

In 1956 the Canadian OBU joined the AFL-CIO dominated Canadian Labour Congress. Four years later the Castro regime finished off the Cuban syndicalists - something neither the Machado nor the Batista regimes were able to do. The last functioning unions were the Swedish SAC and the Dutch OVB. Possibly some unions remained in Latin America, most probably in Chile and Bolivia. For the rest



of the world the syndicalists were reduced to tiny caucuses or aging remnants of once proud organizations.

### **PRIMITIVE UTOPIANS?**

Labour historians are at last challenging the view that syndicalists were violent, impractical millenarians. One of the best examples of this trend is Barbara Mitchell's *The Practical Revolutionaries*, an analysis of French anarcho-syndicalism. Professor Mitchell shows how most descriptions of syndicalism have been tainted by a hostile marxist bias and that far from being woolly-headed utopians the French unionists were extremely practical.

The "revolution now or nothing" types were few in number, regarded as "fanatics", and were mainly intellectuals. (Exemplified by Georges Sorel who had almost no influence on the membership.)

Syndicalism grew out of the history, needs and aspirations of the working population and was not a set of ideas imported from outside by an intellectual elite. Militants were not particularly interested in philosophy or ideology, but sought practical means to improve the lot of the working class. It was best accomplished through direct action. This had little to do with violence and was a way of uniting workers who would otherwise be divided by trade or creed. Workers, whether Catholic or atheist, Socialist or Republican, tended to unite around practical matters such as forming a co-operative, joining a boycott or supporting a union, whereas on the other hand, they would be divided by an ideology or party.

Direct action also made immediate changes

possible, for syndicalists never made the mistake of splitting reform and revolution into two water-tight compartments. Unlike parliamentary reforms which empowered the state, direct action empowered the workers and therefore each successful action was like a little revolution.

### **Why Syndicalism Declined.**

Syndicalism's demise did not come about through evolution from "primitivism" to "sensible" business unionism. The major reasons for its defeat were external. Communist, fascist and military dictatorships crushed the movement in Argentina, Brazil, Russia, Germany Italy, Bulgaria, Spain and Portugal.

Government repression also played a part in the weakening of the Chilean and American IWW and the Mexican CGT. It is important to point out that the syndicalist unions which survived into the 1950's only did so in countries with democratic governments - such as Holland, Sweden and Canada. Tyranny killed syndicalism.

A second reason was the Communist Party. It attempted either to destroy or take over syndicalist unions and the result was a weakening of these organizations. Everywhere Communism was harmful to syndicalism. Some unions suffered more than others at their hands. In France the CGT was split in two by their machinations and in Brazil they used strike-breaking and violence against the anarchists. The back-stabbing role of the Communists in Spain is well known.

In countries where syndicalists were a minority faction of the workers' movement, conservative unions were a major source of opposition. This is especially true of



Canada and the United States where the AF of L. worked to destroy the One Big Union and IWW. The Australian OBU found a stumbling block in the right-wing (and racist) Australian Workers Union.

Another factor; all trade unions, syndicalist, communist, and social democratic, suffered major defeats in the 1920's and early 1930's. Syndicalism's decline was part of a tendency which effected all trade unions. Employer and governmental opposition played a major role in this, but other reasons existed as well. One was the decline of older industries such as mining - a major area of trade union support. So too, was the continuing decline of the skilled trades and the resulting losses for the craft unions. The migratory workers upon which the IWW depended to a large degree were replaced by a sedentary and stable work force. New industries developed (automobiles and electronics) which were not unionized. The working class grew in numbers, but the unions were unable to organize them. The economy had undergone a shift leaving the unions based upon the old economy high and dry. Much like today, one might add.

The situation changed in the late 1930's. Unions were formed in the mass production industries and soon the labour movement equalled and then surpassed its 1920's membership in Canada, the USA and France.

The question must then be posed as to why syndicalists were not able to take advantage of this new movement and re-establish themselves as a major force. The Wobblies certainly played a role in the auto plants prior to the coming of the CIO. They prepared the way and even started the first sit-down strike. (Perhaps French anarcho-

syndicalists had a similar role.) The answer lies with the Communists, who by then had the organization and manpower to control the new movement - far more so than the syndicalists. There was also a generational factor. The syndicalist leaders were middle aged men and women who fought their major battles 15 to 20 years previously. Communism "represented youth." They could also point to their "successful revolution", something the anarchists could not. Anarcho-syndicalism was deemed "old hat" and was not seen as a dynamic force like Stalinism.

Syndicalism's problems were also of its own making. One of the most important was sectarianism. Factions arose which sought to dominate the movement and condemned their rivals in intolerant and often violent language. The IWW, just after recovering from the communists and government repression, was riven by such a dispute in the mid 1920's. At one time the Argentine movement was represented by several groups claiming the same name. The Spanish CNT was full of factions. The only accomplishment of these sectarian battles was to weaken the movement.

In every country but Britain, farmers comprised at least 30% of the population. A successful mass movement would have to include this sector. Yet, syndicalists insisted on the collectivisation of land. In countries with a long history of agricultural collectivism, such as Spain or the Ukraine, such policies did not meet with opposition. However, in France or America where individual ownership was traditional, syndicalist propaganda understandably met with hostility from farmers.

Attitudes toward religion caused many



problems. In most Catholic countries syndicalists were militantly anti-clerical and atheist. This virtually guaranteed their minority status. Rather than splitting Catholic workers from the hierarchy, the syndicalists split the work force between the religious and the anti-religious.

The tragic results of anti-clericalism are best illustrated by the Mexican Revolution. Syndicalists were a powerful faction in Mexico City. Zapata and his peasant anarchists had surrounded the capital. Rather than making common cause with the Zapatistas, the syndicalists aided the military in driving them off. The reason? They were carrying icons of the Virgin and were therefore "reactionaries".

Anarcho-syndicalism suffered from the problem of being out of step with history. Centralisation of political and economic power was the overwhelming tendency at the beginning of the 20th Century. Scientism proclaimed the rule of experts and ordinary people were deemed incompetent to run their affairs. Society was "too complicated" to remain decentralized, let alone indulge in self-management. Marxism-Leninism and Fascism were only the most brutal aspects of this militaristic tendency. Anarcho-syndicalism ran totally contrary to the tide of history. Little wonder it was swallowed up.

**A FUTURE FOR SYNDICALISM?**

Although syndicalist unions were at their lowest ebb by the 1960s, paradoxically, many of their ideas were being taken seriously for the first since the 1920's. The concepts borrowed from syndicalism were direct action and *autogestion*. Several national

federations such as Quebec's CSN and the French CFTD adopted these concepts.

<u>Union</u>	<u>Country</u>	<u>Membership</u>
CNT-AIT	Spain	63,000
CNT-U	Spain	11,000
SAC	Sweden	15,000
IWW	USA	500
COB	Brazil	500
OVB	Holland	10,000
CNT-F	France	500

MEMBERSHIP IN 1987

There were several reasons for this. One was the decline in Stalinist influence and the anti-authoritarian feeling among the youth. But one must not discount the work of anarchist militants, who though few in number, were effective in promoting workers' control. This was especially true in Great Britain and France in the early 1960's.

The harsher economic environment of the 1970's and '80's seems to have dampened the enthusiasm for syndicalism. *Autogestion*, was abandoned by the CFTD in 1974. The Solidarnosc Movement in Poland incorporated many syndicalist ideas but most of this has since been lost. In the meantime, the democratization of Spain after the death of Franco saw the rebirth of the CNT, which briefly gave hope for a return to strength of traditional syndicalism. In 1979 they had 300,000 members, but within two years most



of these were lost and the CNT faced a serious faction fight. With the 1990's recession, the Spanish membership figures are probably lower than in 1987.

The collapse of Stalinism brought about an influx of syndicalist activity in Eastern Europe, but this is confined to small groups. All things considered, there has been no real rebirth of syndicalist unions since the nadir point of the early 1960's. These groups remain a small fringe of the trade union movement.

Thus, a revitalization of traditional syndicalism (i.e. separate unions) seems an unlikely future prospect. But this does not mean that many syndicalist ideas will not be influential. The latest economic developments may make this possible.

Management consultants are now talking about the key to productivity lying in empowering the work force - giving workers a real say and interest in the work place. However, most of those few industries where empowerment is a reality are those in which a trade union has pushed for it. Empowerment is too radical a step (and too threatening) for most managers to pursue and therefore (as always) democratization has to be fought for from below.

In a highly interdependent world problems can no longer be treated in isolation. Nor can trade unions continue to adopt the attitudes of the past that pitted one group against another. A broad-based solidarity has to develop to overcome the host of social, economic and environmental problems.

The decline of the state makes necessary a revitalization of the notions of direct action and mutual aid. Without Mama State to do it for us, we must create our own social services through mutual aid societies.

The globalization of capital threatens local industries. A way has to be found to keep capital at home and so preserve the jobs and the communities that depend upon them. Protectionism is both undesirable and unworkable. But worker-ownership or workers' co-operatives are alternatives.

To make existing trade unions (and other popular groups) more effective, a continual pressure must be exerted to overcome bureaucratization. This is best done by adopting direct democracy, recallable delegates, a minimum of paid functionaries and the autonomy of local units.

There is also the possibility that a new form of syndicalism may arise. The modern knowledge-based economy depends upon a highly educated work force. Such people do not easily accept hierarchy and authoritarianism, whether in the work place or in the trade union. As a result small, locally based and directly controlled "professional associations" have proliferated. These may well be forced by events to band together, but it seems unlikely that such unity would occur in a hierarchical form or produce a bureaucratic stratum of highly paid officials. These associations may also become a force for de-bureaucratization and workers' control.

The modern economy is also creating major changes in how work is accomplished. For the first time in 200 years the working class is declining in numbers and is being replaced by the self-employed. This is a result of the personal computer, for work which once had to be done in an office can now be subcontracted to people working out of their homes. We are seeing a return of the artisan, in cybernetic form. To avoid the possibility of exploitation they will be



forced to combine and practice mutual aid. Furthermore, the Internet will give "One Big Union" a new meaning.

The old syndicalism ran against the tide of history. Today, the tide runs in the opposite direction - toward decentralization and a weakening of the state. Given this sea change, many of the ideas of the old syndicalists may at last find their realization in the coming century.

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### **FOOTNOTE**

1. The British movement is an example of the difficulties encountered when trying to compile statistics on syndicalist strength. (British syndicalists worked within existing unions) Nevertheless they were responsible for the formation of the shop stewards movement, the South Wales Miners' movement and the 1913 Dublin General Strike.