

Syndicalism Defined

By [George Woodcock](#)

Published in 1943

Topics: [transportation and warehousing](#), [structure](#), [intro](#)

Syndicalism is a method of industrial organization which goes away from all the traditional conceptions of authority and government, of capitalism and the State. While communism, in abolishing individual capitalism, creates a worse monster in its place in the form of the economic state, syndicalism leaves all the patterns of administration which in the past have resulted only in the oppression and exploitation of man by man, and sets out to build an organizational form based on the natural needs of men rather than on the interests of the ruling classes, based not on the dictates of authority, but on the voluntary cooperation of free and equal individuals in satisfying the economic needs of the men who form society.

Syndicalism is the industrial manifestation of anarchism. Anarchism advocates, instead of the governmental coercion of the individual, which exists in the most democratic society that still retains the State, a society based on the free cooperation of individual men and women for the fulfilment of their social and economic needs. Organization, on a voluntary basis, is necessary for the operation of the means of production and the desirable public services, but no kind of superior body of authority, with its parliaments, police, bureaucracies, codes of law, taxes, armies, and secretive intrigues in internal and foreign politics, has any place or value in a society based on justice and reason. In anarchy, once he has fulfilled his contractual economic functions, an individual can live as he will, provided he does not interfere with the freedom of his fellows.

Anarchists believe that the means of production should be the property of society, held in common, and that only by such an arrangement will the restricting influence of private property be removed and the resources of nature and science be used to their full extent for the benefit of humanity. In order that there may be no possibility of such private interest arising, they advocate that, once the means of production have been taken out of the hands of their usurping controllers, they shall be run not by any authority or elite of leaders, but by the people who are themselves concerned in production, i.e. by the workers in each industry.

Syndicalism, as I have already said, is the method by which such control by the workers would be organized. It is, moreover, the method by which the workers under a property society would organize themselves for the attainment of the free classless society.

The syndicate is a form of union which differs from the ordinary trade union in that it aims, not only at the gaining of improvements in wages and conditions under the present system, but also at the overthrow of that system by a social revolution based on the economic direct action of the workers. This is not to say that it ignores the day-to-day struggle, but its members recognize that only by a complete destruction of the structure of property and authority can justice and security ever be attained by the workers.

The syndicate differs also from the ordinary trade union in its method of organization. The ordinary trade union follows the pattern of governmental society in that it has a centralized form, with authority at the centre and a permanent bureaucracy who, like any other bureaucracy, rapidly gain privilege and power and rise into a class with an economic position considerably higher than that of the workers who pay them and whom they are supposed to serve. The syndicate, on the other hand, is based on the organization of the workers by industry at the place of work. The workers of each factory or depot or farm are an autonomous unit, who govern their own affairs and who make all the decisions as to the work they will do. These units are joined federally in a syndicate which serves to coordinate the actions of the workers in each industry. The federal organization has no authority over the workers in any branch, and cannot impose a veto on action like a trade union executive. It has no permanent bureaucracy, and the few voluntary officials are chosen on a short term basis, have no privileges which raise their standard of living above that of the workers, and wield no authority of any kind.

Being governed from below and untainted by the ideas or institutions of authority, the syndicate represents more truly than any other type of organization the will of the workers and the good of society. Its lack of

centralization and bureaucracy, of any kind of privilege or vested interest in the present order of society, give it a flexibility of action and a real solidarity which make it the ideal instrument for canalizing and influencing in the right way the spontaneous revolutionary activity of the people.

In the social revolution the syndicates will play their part by organizing the economic direct action of the workers. On the railways, for example, they would lead the workers in the expropriation of lines, stations, and rolling stock and their use for the purposes of the revolutionary movement and not for those of the dispossessed masters.

After the revolution the syndicates will form the framework on which the first phase of the free society will be built. Anarchists do not make any plans for the free society in its maturity, as they believe in the open and continual growth of social institutions, and recognize that any hard-and-fast plan of development will create only a rigid and sterile society. Nevertheless, they recognize that after the old society has been abolished some kind of social structure should be built immediately to take over the means of production and change the economic basis of society from that of a class order to one more appropriate to a free world. This means of organization they find in the syndicate.

The organization of industry, transport, and farming under the syndicates will follow the same lines as the organization of the workers in the days before the end of the property society, except that now, instead of organizing for struggle, the workers will organize for the construction of an economic basis compatible with freedom and justice. Each working unit, a factory or a railway yard, will be run by the workers who actually operate it. There will be no authority, no management, and each worker will be jointly and equally responsible with the rest for the proper functioning of the industrial unit in which he works.

It should not be assumed from this that the syndicalist regards the operation of industry as a simple matter. On the contrary, he knows from experience its complexity, and regards a bureaucracy divorced from the actual work as being incapable of operating to its maximum efficiency so involved an organization as that of a railway. The workers are the men who have the knowledge of the actual operating of the railways, and if they were to study the problems of operation and coordination of their functions, they would be able to work the railways far more efficiently than the bureaucrats. The opportunity of gaining this knowledge is, of course, kept from the ordinary railway workers. In this connection I am using the word "worker" in a broad sense, to include technical staff associated with civil engineering and locomotive construction, and also the clerical staff concerned with coordinating train operating, as these are both vitally necessary for the proper working of the railways and upon their direct cooperation with their fellow workers, eliminating the bureaucrats, will come a real workers' control of railways. It is therefore vitally necessary that such men should be brought into any industrial movement among the railwaymen.

In each industry the various units or sections will be joined in federations so as to coordinate operations throughout a country. The industrial federations or syndicates will in turn be united in a national federation of industry, which will coordinate activities in the various fields of work -- of production and distribution and service.

The old motives of profit and self-interest will cease to dominate economic life. Instead, the incentive will be the good of the members of society, without distinction. In such circumstances there will be no impediment in the exploitation of the resources of nature and science to the full extent to which men and women desire it. People will decide the standard of life they desire and will work to attain it. It is hardly to be supposed that they will be content with what they endure today, and the possibility of better circumstances combined with the natural human inclination to work will serve to ensure that, left to themselves, the workers will find the means to operate industry a good deal more efficiently than has been the case under capitalism.

Hierarchical management, of course, would cease. Instead, administration would be vested in the workers themselves and, wherever it was impossible for all the workers to participate directly in administration, in delegates who would administer the functioning of the various services in accordance with the wishes of the workers who chose them. These delegates would have no authority, nor would they make any decision on questions of policy. Their task would be merely to coordinate work carried out entirely on a voluntary basis.

Such delegates would be in no way superior to their fellow workers, in power, privilege or position. Under anarchism the wages system, one of the prime means by which the rulers coerce the workers, would be

abolished, and the workers, giving the labour necessary to carry on the functions of society, would in turn receive the goods they needed for a sufficient and happy life. No worker would get more than his mate because tradition said that his craft was worth twice as much a week, and there would be no directors or managers to live in high luxury while their lower-paid employees starved. Men would get, not according to their worth, for social worth cannot be estimated, but according to their need, which is the only just means of sharing the goods of society.

Additional Information

This text is a slightly edited selection from Woodcock's short book/pamphlet titled *Railways and Society: For Workers' Control of Railways*, published by Freedom Press (London) in 1943. The version here is from a collection of anarchist writings, *The Anarchist Reader*, edited by Woodcock and published in 1977.

The piece has also been referred to as "What is Anarcho-syndicalism?" (*Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library*, No. 18) and "Syndicalism, the Industrial Expression of Anarchism" (in a 1966 collection called *Patterns of Anarchy*).