

“Direct Struggle Against Capital”, or Anarchism and Syndicalism

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This is a write up of a talk I did at the 2012 London anarchist bookfair. It explores the interwoven nature of revolutionary anarchism and syndicalism, showing how the standard Leninist account of both is false. It shows how syndicalism evolved as a key anarchist tactic within the First International and how revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin advocated syndicalist ideas and tactics. Suffice to say, this is the talk I hoped to give – the actual one may not have equalled these hopes! The title is a Kropotkin quote, one much repeated in his works.

Introduction

Thanks for coming. First, some context. I'm a revolutionary anarchist, a trade unionist, and an elected union rep. Yet, for most Marxists I don't exist. Why? Because for most of them, only syndicalists, not anarchists, support unions and workers' struggles. This talk seeks to correct these Marxist myths by exploring the actual rise of syndicalist and anarchist ideas.

I've been an anarchist for 25 years and I still remember a SWPer giving me a pamphlet on Marxism by [David McNally](#) that included a chapter on anarchism. According to McNally, anarchism “represented the anguished cry of the small property owner against the inevitable advance of capitalism. For that reason, it glorified values from the past: individual property, the patriarchal family, racism.”

Never mind that Proudhon repeatedly proclaimed the equality of races (“Whatever a man's race or colour, he is really a native of the universe; he has citizen's rights everywhere”); explicitly denounced individual property (it “would be too retrograde” and “impossible” to wish “the division of labour, with machinery and manufactures, to be abandoned, and each family to return to the system of primitive indivision”; [and] advocated socialisation and workers' self-management (“under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership [...] We want [...] democratically organised workers' associations [...] and a] vast federation of companies and societies, joined together in the common bond of the democratic and social Republic”). And best not ask where [Emma Goldman](#) “glorified [...] the patriarchal family”!

Still, facts are rarely of consequence in these attacks as I've discovered from reading and hearing numerous similarly wanting diatribes on anarchism. And, like most of these, McNally contrasted anarchism to Syndicalism which, he asserted, “does believe in collective working class action to change society. Syndicalists look to trade union action... to overthrow capitalism [...] syndicalism is not truly a form of anarchism. By accepting the need for mass, collective action and decision-making, syndicalism is much superior to classical anarchism.” Strange, given this, that Marx admitted that Bakunin argued that the “working classes must not occupy itself with *politics*. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions.”

I will be exploring the obvious contradiction between these claims, discussing anarchism and syndicalism as they developed in reality rather than in Marxist ideology. I will be presenting a chronological account of anarchism and syndicalism, starting with Proudhon and ending with the rise of syndicalism in France in the late 1890s. This is important as the likes of William Godwin and Stirner (regardless of how interesting they may be) had no impact on development of anarchism. Both were rediscovered in the 1890s by a well-developed anarchist movement.

I'm also going to focus this talk around specific people and organisations. This is not hero worship. Anarchism is *not* Proudhonism, Bakuninism, or whoever-ism. I do so because they are a handy source of ideas, reflecting wider discussions with the labour movement. And, I must stress, anarchism was not born perfect and complete in 1840. It has evolved, developed, changed — as can be seen with syndicalism becoming a key libertarian

tactic. Nor am I suggesting syndicalist ideas did not develop until the 1860s. After all, British trade unionists developed syndicalistic ideas in the 1830s but these were lost in the crushing defeats of that decade.

Proudhon

While anarchistic ideas have surfaced repeatedly since states developed, anarchism as a named socio-economic theory and movement starts in 1840 with *What is Property?* by Proudhon. This work was not written in isolation and was part of a wider labour and socialist context, most obviously the agitation in France for workers associations as well as polemics with other socialists (e.g., Louis Blanc, Fourierists, St-Simonists).

Significantly, in that 1840 work Proudhon advocated industrial democracy (unlike the Utopian socialists) for “every industry needs [...] leaders, instructors, superintendents” and they “must be chosen from the workers by the workers themselves.” In 1842 [Proudhon] proclaimed workers’ self-liberation in his *Third Memoir* on property:

Workers, labourers, men of the people, whoever you may be, the initiative of reform is yours. It is you who will accomplish that synthesis of social composition which will be the masterpiece of creation, and you alone can accomplish it.

These ideas were developed in 1846’s *System of Economic Contradictions* in which he argued that “the problem of association consists in organising [...] the producers, and by this organisation subjecting capital and subordinating power. Such is the war that you have to sustain: a war of labour against capital; a war of liberty against authority; a war of the producer against the non-producer; a war of equality against privilege.” The state, he argued, “finds itself inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat” and so “it is of no use to change the holders of power or introduce some variation into its workings: an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave.”

However, unlike later anarchists, he did not see the *labour movement* as the basis for this “combination” — he opposed strikes, arguing that it was “not by such methods that the workers will attain to wealth and — what is a thousand times more precious than wealth — liberty.”

During the 1848 revolution he repeated this call and “propose[d] that a provisional committee be set up [...] amongst the workers”, “a body representative of the proletariat [...], a state within the state, in opposition to the bourgeois representatives.” In this way “a new society [would] be founded in the centre of the old society” by workers for “the government can do nothing for you. But you can do everything for yourselves.” The same year saw him be the first to raise the core principle of “proletarian democracy” (as applied in 1871) of mandating and recalling delegates:

we can follow [our deputies] step by step [...] we shall make them transmit our arguments and our documents; we shall indicate our will to them, and when we are discontented, we will revoke them [...] the imperative mandate, permanent revocability, are the most immediate, undeniable, consequences of the electoral principle. It is the inevitable program of all democracy.

On his deathbed he produced *On The Political Capacity of the Working Classes* in which he urged workers and peasants to reject all participation in bourgeois politics in favour of creating their own self-managed organisations and so become conscious of themselves as a class and their ability to replace the bourgeois regime with a mutualist one.

The followers of Proudhon inherited these politics, politics based on working-class self-emancipation (albeit reformist in Proudhon’s case), workers’ self-management (“industrial democracy”, to use his phrase), self-organisation for change on the economic terrain, and an awareness that the state cannot be captured and used, at best pressurised from outside. The goal was the creation of a socio-economic federal socialism based on mandated and recallable delegates, or an “agricultural-industrial federation” to complement a federation of communes.

The First International

This was the basis on which the French mutualists worked with British trade unionists to create the International Working Men's Association. I need to stress here that the body was *not* created by Marx (he turned up on the day). Sadly, the Marx-centric perspective [is] all too common in radical circles and so the IWMA itself is marginalised. So we do not know much about its debates, and what we do know is often wrong (most obviously, the debates on “collectivism” are misunderstood). This means that the likes of Eugene Varlin and Cesar de Paepe are unknown — in spite of their importance in the organisation and the evolution of socialist ideas.

Within the International, libertarians first applied Proudhon's ideas on “combination” in the labour movement. Here we discover for the first time the idea of unions as the means of both fighting capitalism and replacing it. Moreover, Proudhon's reformism anarchism gave way to revolutionary anarchism (the collectivism usually associated with Bakunin).

These ideas were first raised by delegates from the Belgium section at Brussels conference in 1868. Thus we discover them arguing that unions were for “the necessities of the present, but also the future social order,” “the embryos of the great workers' companies which will one day replace the capitalist companies with their thousands of wage-earners, at least in all industries in which collective force is used and there is no middle way between wage slavery and association.” The “productive societies arising from the trades unions will embrace whole industries [...] thus forming a NEW CORPORATION” and it would “be organised equitably, founded on mutuality and justice and open to all.”

This vision of a future economic regime based on federations of workers associations, it must be stressed, is pure Proudhon — *right down to the words used!*

At Basle in 1869 this was repeated: “Trade Unions will continue to exist after the suppression of the wage system [...] they will be the organisation of labour.” In this way “wage slavery [...] replaced by the free federation of free producers.” Moreover, they “will take the place of the old political structure” as “the grouping of different trades in the city will form the commune of the future.”

This was a common idea within the libertarian wing of the International. November 1869 was the Barcelona Internationalist paper *La Federación* argue that the International contains “within itself the seeds of social regeneration [...] it holds the embryo of all future institutions.” The next year saw French left-mutualist (and future Commune martyr) Eugene Varlin argue that unions “form the natural elements of the social edifice of the future; it is they who can be easily transformed into producers associations; it is they who can make the social ingredients and the organisation of production work.”

Bakunin

It was into this ferment of ideas stepped Bakunin and rather than invent a new doctrine (as some imply) simply helped develop *revolutionary* anarchism as a result of joining the IWMA. He first raised the idea of a federation of workers' groups in 1868:

the Alliance of all labour associations [...] will constitute the Commune [...] delegates [...] with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times [...] will found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces [...] to organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction.

Publicly he raised the idea in August 1869, just before the Basle congress, arguing that the “International will expand and organise itself [...] so that when the Revolution [...] breaks out, there will be [...] a serious international organisation of workers' associations [...] capable of replacing this departing world of states.” Two years later, in 1871, he stressed that the “organisation of the trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour [...] bear in themselves the living germs of *the social order*, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.”

This was part of a focus on workers economic struggle. He argued that “the natural organisation of the masses [...] is organisation based on [...] their various types of work [...] it is organisation by trade

association.” Workers had “but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*” which meant “workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses” by “*trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*.” This included advocating the General Strike: “a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin.”

Which brings me back to the SWP. One of their members, Pat Stack, asserted that the “huge advantage [syndicalists] had over other anarchists was their understanding of the power of the working class, the centrality of the point of production (the workplace) and the need for collective action.” Sadly he forgot to mention that Bakunin had proclaimed this in 1870:

Toilers count no longer on anyone but yourselves [...] Abstain from all participation in bourgeois Radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organisation [...] are the workshops and the federation of workshops [...] instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international [...]

According to Stack, for Bakunin “skilled artisans and organised factory workers, far from being the source of the destruction of capitalism, were ‘tainted by pretensions and aspirations’. Instead Bakunin looked to those cast aside by capitalism [...] [t]he lumpen proletariat, the outlaws [...] would be his agents for change.” Yet if you read Bakunin you find him repeatedly stressing that for their “own liberation” workers “must enter the International *en masse*, form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them” and “for the International to be a real power, it must be able to organise within its ranks the immense majority of the proletariat [...] of all lands.” He was quite explicit:

Organise always more and more the practical militant international solidarity of the toilers of all trades and of all countries, and remember [...] you will find an immense, an irresistible force in this universal collectivity.

Yet, according to Stack, Bakunin dismissed “the importance of the collective nature of change” as well as “collective struggle or advance” and “despises the collectivity”! He hid it well.

The Anti-Authoritarian International

Unsurprisingly, these syndicalist ideas came to the fore when what is often termed the Marxist-Anarchist split took place after the Paris Commune.

Thus we find the justly famous *Sonvillier Circular* of 1871 arguing that it was impossible for “an egalitarian and free society to emerge from an authoritarian organisation” and so the International must “faithfully mirror our principles of freedom and federation.” It raised the idea of workers’ organisations replacing the state, arguing that the “society of the future should be nothing other than the universalisation of the organisation with which the International will have endowed itself.” It must be “the embryo of the human society of the future.”

A similar vision was expounded in 1872 when the anarchists gathered at St. Imier. They rejected “political action” in favour of economic struggle, or the “Organisation of Labour Resistance” as they put it. The strike was “a precious weapon in the struggle” which prepares “the proletariat for the great and final revolutionary conquest” which ends “all class difference.” Socialism would be created by “proletariat itself, its trades bodies and the autonomous communes.”

This, of course, echoes Bakunin’s ideas and those raised in the libertarian (majority) wing of the IWMA since 1868.

The Chicago Martyrs

So by the 1880s, we see anarchists organising unions in Spain, Cuba, Mexico, and Argentina, and elsewhere across the globe. Most famously, of course, in Chicago and the birth of May Day.

Some, sadly, seek to downplay the anarchist element at work in Chicago. For example, Andrej Grubacic and Staughton Lynd in *Wobblies and Zapatistas* proclaim that the Chicago Martyrs created a “synthesis” of Anarchism and Marxism. Worse, an academic, James Green, tries to appropriate them for Marxism by

arguing that “ they increasingly looked to anarchist thinkers [...] and, at the same time, they were busy organising their own unions. In that sense, they didn’t stop being Marxists.” The implication is clear: if you organise unions, that is “being Marxists”! Green states that “Albert Parsons believed a strong socialist movement needed to follow the prescription put forward by Karl Marx [...] needed a mass working-class following.” As if that were not Bakunin’s position!

The position seems to be because the Chicago Martyrs argued for union based class struggle then they are “Marxists.” In that case Bakunin was a Marxist!

In reality, the Chicago Anarchists were precisely that. They were Marxists who turned to anarchism based on their experiences. They rejected “political action” and embraced economic struggle and organisation. Moreover, they argued that the unions would be the basis of a free socialist society. **Albert Parsons**, for example, argued that trades unions are “the embryonic group of the future ‘free society.’ Every trade union is [...] an autonomous commune in process of incubation” while his wife Lucy Parsons stressed that “trade-unions, Knights of Labour assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society.”

In short, the Chicago anarchists’ position was identical to Bakunin’s!

Kropotkin

Unsurprisingly, given these ideas and practices we find Kropotkin after his escape from a Russian Prison following Bakunin’s lead.

In one of his earliest texts, from 1879, he argued that libertarians “must take advantage of all opportunities which may lead to an economic agitation [...] on the basis of the struggle of the exploited against the exploiters [...] We think that the best method of shaking this edifice [of the state] would be to stir up the economic struggle [...] the expropriation [...] of the large landed estates, of the instruments of labour [...] by the cultivators, the workers’ organisations, and the [...] communes.” He reiterated this position two years later:

We have to organise the workers’ forces – not to make them into a fourth party in Parliament, but in order to make them a formidable MACHINE OF STRUGGLE AGAINST CAPITAL. We have to group workers of all trades under this single purpose: ‘War on capitalist exploitation’! And we must prosecute that war relentlessly, day by day, by the strike, by agitation, *by every revolutionary means*.

In 1890 he argued that “[w]hen one thinks what opposition the workers may put up against the exploiters, one will see that *nothing* can tilt the scales in their favour other than monster unions embracing millions of proletarians against the exploiters’ [...] millions in gold.” The following year saw him argue to a conference of British and French trade unions that just “as the rich ones [...] unite together to combat the workers as soon as these rise against the oppression of Capital — so the workers all over the world must constitute a formidable Federation [...] *in the direct struggle of Labour against Capital*.” The following year saw him stress the importance of unions in creating socialism:

No one can underrate the importance of this labour movement for the coming revolution. It will be those agglomerations of wealth producers which will have to reorganise production on new social bases [...] to organise the life of the nation [...] and means of production. They – the labourers, grouped together – not the politicians.

In 1906 it was the case that revolution needed “*the workers, organised by trades, to seize all branches of industry*, and [...] they themselves [...] *manage* these industries for the benefit of society.” Which, of course, repeated his arguments from 1879.

Strangely, Pat Stack seemed unaware of this. Kropotkin, he asserted, “far from seeing class conflict as the dynamic for social change as Marx did, saw co-operation being at the root of the social process.” Really, workers’ solidarity cannot change the world? Stack continued: “It follows that if class conflict is not the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means.” Yet Kropotkin was very clear on the need for working class collective struggle, for example stating in 1907:

Workmen's organisations are the real force capable of accomplishing the social revolution [...] by collective action, by strikes [...] the anarchists have always believed that the working class movement – organised in each trade for the *direct conflict* with Capital (today in France it is called Syndicalism and “direct action”) constitutes, true strength, and is capable of *leading up* to the Social Revolution and *realising* it.

Kropotkin was unlucky not to have Stack around to tell him what he *really* thought...

The rise of syndicalism in France

By the mid-1890s the work of Kropotkin, Malatesta, and numerous less well known anarchists work started to pay off. Anarchists entered the unions in France and syndicalist ideas started to be better known internationally — so well known that even Marxists are aware of it! Its rise in popularity was helped given the obvious reformism and bureaucracy of Social Democracy (as predicted by the likes of Bakunin).

As shown above, the links between anarchism and syndicalism are clear. So when the syndicalist CGT's 1906 *Charter of Amiens* stated that “the trade union today is an organisation of resistance” while “in the future [it will] be the organisation of production and distribution” it was simply repeating what anarchists had been arguing since the late 1860s.

Marxism and Syndicalism

Some fail to recognise this. Even those more acquainted with anarchism than your typical Marxist. For example, the historian Paul Avrich suggested that the syndicalists “went beyond Kropotkin by reconciling the principle of mutual assistance with the Marxian doctrine of class struggle. For the syndicalists, mutual aid did not embrace humanity as a whole, but existed only with the ranks of [...] the proletariat, enhancing its solidarity in the battle with the manufacturers.”

Yet **Kropotkin was well aware of the class war**. As he put it in one of his earliest articles: “What solidarity can exist between the capitalist and the worker he exploits? [...] Between the governing and the governed?” Bakunin also embraced the class struggle, so it is not specifically “Marxian.” This can be seen when Avrich quoted Kropotkin (on the very next page) arguing that unions were the “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future order”!

It should also be noted that Marx and Engels explicitly rejected these syndicalist ideas, including the General Strike (which Engels distorted and dismissed it, causing immense problems for poor **Rosa Luxemburg!**) and the focus on economic struggle and organisation, instead urging “Political action” (that is parties and electioneering — which only proved Bakunin right!). They also rejected the idea of International as “embryo” and there is nothing like workers' councils in Marx and Engels, unlike in Bakunin's works. In fact, for Engels the democratic republic was the “specific form” of the dictatorship of the proletariat while Marx continued to argue that workers could seize power by using the ballot after **the Paris Commune**.

So, syndicalism [is] *not* indebted to **Marx and Engels**.

Anarchism and Syndicalism

So syndicalism was born 30 years before 1896 by libertarians in the IWMA. As Kropotkin summarised: “The International was a great Syndicalist movement which determined everything that these gentlemen give out that they have discovered in Syndicalism.”

So syndicalism has been a key part of revolutionary anarchism from the start. Which raises the question, what are the differences between the two. Malatesta summarised differences between syndicalism and anarchism at **the 1907 International Anarchist Conference**.

First, unions are not automatically revolutionary, not “sufficient unto itself” as some syndicalists argued. Rather they are by nature reformist and generate bureaucracy. This means that there must be an organisation of anarchists to work within the unions. This means that anarchism is *not* absorbed into trade unionism. This, like syndicalism, can be found in Bakunin's work. He argued that the Alliance “is the necessary complement

to the International [...] while having the same ultimate aims, [they] perform different functions. The International endeavours to unify the working masses [...] the Alliance [...] tries to give these masses a really revolutionary direction.”

Second, the labour movement is important, but not the *sole* focus of anarchist struggle or the future free society. Thus we find Kropotkin arguing for “independent Communes for the territorial organisation... Trade Unions for the organisation of [...] different [productive] functions [...] and] societies [...] for the satisfaction of all possible [...] needs.” Syndicalists stressed just *one* of the three.

Third, a General Strike not enough, insurrection is needed. This now recognised by most syndicalists and has been since *How we will make the Revolution* by Pataud and Pouget in 1909.

In short, the difference is one between labour-*orientated* verses labour-*focused*. Or, to put it another way, revolutionary anarchism is not *anti*-syndicalism (as most Marxists claim or imply), but rather syndicalism-*plus*.

So historian James Joll could not have been more wrong to argue that “as far as effective action by the Anarchist movement was concerned, it was [the syndicalist] Monatte rather than Malatesta who was right” in 1907 during their famous exchange on syndicalism at the International Anarchist Congress. Anyone familiar with Malatesta’s ideas and activism know that he was hardly against anarchists working in unions! Quite the reverse — just compare his 1907 resolution to the one 35 years before at St. Imier! Malatesta’s basic point was that syndicalists turned an important *means* (work in unions) into an *end*.

Conclusions

So the standard Marxist narrative on anarchism and syndicalism is *wrong*. Which is obvious if you actually *read* anarchist thinkers — but **no Leninist** would do *that* (at least not just **to cherry-pick quotes!**). As Kropotkin summarised in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

since the foundation of the International Working Men’s Association [...] anarchists] have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.

He also noted, quite correctly, that “[w]ithin these federations [of the First International] developed [...] *modern anarchism*,” or what I would term revolutionary anarchism.

Kropotkin also summarised the key difference between anarchism and syndicalism in 1914:

The syndicate is absolutely necessary. It is the only form of workers group that permits [...] the direct struggle against capital, without falling into parliamentarianism. But evidently it does not do this automatically [...] The *other* element is necessary, the element [...] which Bakunin always practised.

So what now? Well, history for its own sake is fun, but it is better to use it to learn lessons for today’s struggles. And, just to state the obvious, this is **not** Barcelona in 1868. It is **not** Britain in the 1960s and 1970s. The question before us is how do we apply these core anarchist ideas on the class struggle today?

The answer to that question lies with us!

Additional Information

All links are from the original source.