

Syndicalism: An Anarchist Critique

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Topics: general strike, armed insurrection, union officials, political affiliation

I wish to state straight away that I will only deal here with those areas in which I am in disagreement with the previous speakers, and in particular Monatte. Otherwise I would be needlessly inflicting you with pointless repetition, something that we can allow ourselves to do at a rally, for example, faced with a hostile or indifferent audience. But here we are amongst comrades and I am sure that on hearing me criticize what there is to be criticized in syndicalism none of you will be tempted to take me for an enemy of organization and workers' action; were that to happen it would mean you do not know me very well!

The conclusion Monatte has reached is that syndicalism is a necessary and sufficient means of social revolution. In other words, Monatte has proclaimed *that syndicalism is sufficient unto itself*. And that, in my view, is a radically false doctrine, to combating which I shall devote this discourse.

Syndicalism, or more exactly the working-class movement (for the working-class movement is a *fact* nobody can ignore, while syndicalism is a doctrine, a system, and we should avoid confounding the two), the working-class movement, I say, has always found in me a resolute but unblinded defender. I see it as particularly promising soil for our revolutionary propaganda, and also as a point of contact between the masses and ourselves. I have no need to insist on that. You must do me the justice of granting that I have never been one of those intellectual anarchists who, when the old International was dissolved, benevolently withdrew into the ivory tower of pure speculation; that wherever I have encountered it, in Italy, in France, in England and elsewhere, I have never ceased to combat that attitude of haughty isolation, and have never ceased to urge the comrades into that direction which the syndicalists, forgetting the past, call *new*, even though it was already glimpsed and followed, in the International, by the first of the anarchists.

Today, as in the past, I would like to see the anarchists entering the working-class movement. Today, as yesterday, I am a syndicalist in the sense that I am an upholder of the syndicates. I do not ask for anarchist syndicates, which would immediately give legitimacy to social-democratic, republican, royalist and all other kinds of syndicates, and which would divide the working class more than ever against itself. I do not even want to see *red* syndicates, because I do not want to see *yellow* syndicates. I would like far more to see syndicates wide open to all workers without regard for opinions, syndicates that are absolutely *neutral*.

Therefore I favour the most active participation in the working-class movement. But I do so above all in the interests of our propaganda whose scope in this way will be greatly widened. But in no way should that participation be considered as tantamount to a renunciation of our most cherished ideals. Within the syndicate we must remain anarchists, in all the strength and breadth of that definition. The working-class movement, in my eyes, is no more than a means — though doubtless it is the best of all the means that are available to us. But I refuse to take that means as an end, and in the same way I would not want us to lose sight of the totality of anarchist conceptions, or, to put it more simply, our other means of propaganda and agitation.

The syndicalists, on the other hand, are inclined to turn the means into an end, to regard the part as the whole. And in this way, in the minds of some of our comrades, syndicalism is in the process of becoming a new doctrine and of threatening the very existence of anarchism.

Yet, even if it fortifies itself with the somewhat useless epithet of revolutionary, syndicalism is no more — and will never be more — than a legalitarian and even conservative movement, with no other accessible end but the amelioration of the conditions of work. I need not look for any further proof than that which is offered to us by the great North American unions. Having shown themselves, when they were still weak, as imbued with the most radical revolutionism, these unions have become, in so far as they have gained power and wealth, completely conservative organizations, entirely concerned with making their members into the aristocrats of the factory, the workshop or the mine, and far less hostile to paternalistic capitalism than they

are to non-organized workers, to that proletariat in rags so condemned by the social democrat! But that ever-growing unemployed proletariat, which is of no account to syndicalism, or which — rather — is merely an obstacle to it, we — the other anarchists — cannot forget, and it is our duty to defend it because its members have most to suffer.

Let me repeat: the anarchists must enter the working-class unions, first of all to carry on anarchist propaganda there, and then because it is the only way in which — on the day we all hope for — we may have at our disposition groups who are capable of taking over the direction of production; we must enter the unions, finally, to struggle energetically against that detestable state of mind that makes the syndicates disinclined to defend anything but special interests.

In my view, the basic error of Monatte and of all the revolutionary syndicalists arises from a much too simplistic conception of the class struggle. It is the conception according to which the economic interests of all the workers — of the working-class — are identical, the conception according to which it is enough for workers to take in hand the defence of their own interests, and the interests of the whole proletariat will be at the same time defended against capitalism.

I suggest that the reality is quite different. Like the bourgeoisie, like everyone else, the workers are subject to that law of universal competition which derives from the existence of government and private property and which will only disappear when they are extinguished. Thus, in the true sense of the word, there are no classes because there are no class interests. In the heart of the working “class”, as in the heart of the bourgeoisie, competition and struggle continue. The economic interests of one category of workers will be irrevocably opposed to those of another category. And everywhere one sees workers who both economically and morally are far nearer to the bourgeoisie than they are to the proletariat. Cornelissen has given us examples of this taken from this very country of Holland, and there are plenty of others. I don’t need to remind you how often in strikes the workers employ violence — against the police and the managers? Not in the least, but against the *blacklegs* who nevertheless are workers just as exploited as themselves and even more humiliated, while the true enemies of the workers, the real obstacles to social equality, are still the police and the employers.

Nevertheless, moral solidarity is possible among the workers even in the absence of economic solidarity. The workers who isolate themselves in the defence of their corporate interests may not be aware of it, but it will emerge on the day when a common will towards social transformation turns them into new men. In present-day society, solidarity can only result from a communion that develops under the aegis of a shared ideal. It is the role of the anarchists to awaken the syndicates to that ideal, to orient them gradually towards the social revolution — at the risk of harm to those “immediate advantages” to which at the present they seem so partial.

One cannot deny that syndicalist action involves us in certain perils. The greatest of these perils undoubtedly lies in the acceptance by the militant of office in the syndicates, particularly when it is paid office. Let us take it as a general rule: the anarchist who becomes a permanent and paid official in a syndicate is lost to propaganda, lost to anarchism! Henceforward he is under obligation to those who pay him and, since these are not all anarchists, the salaried official — placed between his conscience and his interest — must either follow his conscience and lose his position, or follow his interest — and then, goodbye to anarchism!

The presence of the official in the working-class movement is a danger comparable only to that of parliamentarism: both of them lead to corruption, and from corruption to death is not a very long step.

And now, let us consider the general strike. Personally, I accept the principle and for years I have been propagating it to the best of my powers. The general strike has always seemed to me an excellent means for starting the social revolution. Yet we must be on our guard against falling into the disastrous illusion that the general strike makes armed insurrection unnecessary.

We are told that by means of halting production abruptly the workers will succeed in a few days in starving out the bourgeoisie who, dying with hunger, will be obliged to surrender. I can think of no more grandiose absurdity. The first to die of hunger during a general strike would not be the bourgeois, who dispose of all the stores, but the workers who have only their toil on which to live.

The general strike as it is foretold to us is a pure utopia. Either the worker, dying with hunger after three days of striking, will go back with bowed head to the workshop, and we can chalk up yet another defeat. Or he will seek to take over production by main force. Who will he find waiting to stop him? Soldiers, policemen, apart from the bourgeois themselves, and then the matter cannot help resolving into shooting and bombs. It will be insurrection, and victory will be to the strongest.

Let us therefore prepare for that inevitable insurrection instead of limiting ourselves to looking forward to the general strike as a panacea for all ills. And do not let anyone argue that governments are armed to the teeth and always stronger than those who rebel. In Barcelona in 1902 the soldiers were not very numerous. But nobody was ready for armed struggle and the workers, failing to understand that the political power was the real adversary, sent their delegates to the governor to ask him to force the employers to give in.

But even if we consider it in realistic terms, the general strike is still one of the weapons with two edges which it is necessary to employ with great caution. The provision of subsistence cannot be suspended indefinitely. Sooner or later it will be necessary to seize the means of feeding people, and for that we cannot wait until the strike has developed into an insurrection.

It is not so much to cease work that we should call on the workers, but rather to continue it for their own benefit. Without that, the general strike will soon be transformed into a general famine, even though one might have been energetic enough to seize hold immediately of all the produce accumulated in the shops. Basically, the idea of the general strike emerges from a totally erroneous belief: the belief that by taking over the products accumulated by the bourgeoisie, humanity can continue consuming, without producing, for no-one knows how many months and years. Such a belief inspired the authors of two propaganda pamphlets published twenty years ago and entitled *Les Produits de la Terre* and *Les Produits d'Industrie*, and these pamphlets, in my view, have done far more harm than good. Existing society is not in fact so rich as many believe. Kropotkin has shown somewhere or other that in the event of an abrupt cessation of production England would have no more than a month's produce; London would have only enough for three days. I know all about the phenomenon known as over-production. But over-production has its immediate corrective in the crises that quickly establish order in industry. Over-production is never more than temporary and relative.

I must now end. In the past I deplored that the comrades isolated themselves from the working-class movement. Today I deplore that many of us, falling into the contrary extreme, let themselves be swallowed up in the same movement. Once again, working-class organization, the strike, the general strike, direct action, boycott, sabotage and armed insurrection itself, are only *means*. Anarchy is the *end*. The anarchist revolution which we desire far exceeds the interests of a single class: it proposes the complete liberation of enslaved humanity, from the triple viewpoint, economic, political and moral. And let us therefore be on our guard against any unilateral and simplistic plan of action. Syndicalism is an excellent means of action by reason of the working-class forces which it puts at our disposition, but it cannot be our sole means. Even less must we lose sight of the one end that is worth our effort: Anarchy!

Additional Information

This speech, which was translated from French by [George Woodcock](#) and appeared in his 1977 edited volume [The Anarchist Reader](#), is a response to [Pierre Monatte's speech](#) given the prior evening of the [International Anarchist Congress in Amsterdam](#).

The initial paragraph of the text shown here was not included in Woodcock's text; we added it from an English translation (by Nestor McNab, Black Cat Press, 2009) of Maurizio Antonioli's Italian translation (1978) of the same French source (from 1908) that Woodcock used. (We favor the Woodcock translation in general because it's a direct translation from the French rather than a translation of a translation.)