

Syndicalism and Anarchism

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Topics: [political affiliation](#)

The question of the relation between the labor movement and the progressive parties is an old and everlasting one. This question still is, however, and will remain of interest as long as there exists, on the one hand, a large portion of the masses tormented by unsatisfied needs and incited by sometimes fiery, but always vague and indefinite, aspirations to a better life, and, on the other hand, men and political parties who, having a particular conception of a better form of society and of the best means of establishing same, endeavor to obtain the consent of the masses, whose support is necessary for the realization of their projects. This question is of still greater importance now that, after the catastrophes brought about by the war and its aftermath, everyone is preparing, even if only spiritually, for a revival of activity which is to follow the fall of the still pugnacious though already tottering tyrannies.¹

This is why I shall endeavor to show clearly what, in my opinion, the attitude of the Anarchists should be towards the labor organizations.

I do not think that, today, there still exists among us any one who would deny the usefulness and necessity of the organization of labor as a means of material and moral betterment of the masses, as a fertile field for propaganda and as a force indispensable to the social transformation we are aiming for. No one any longer doubts the importance of the organization of labor, which matters more to us Anarchists than to anyone else, for we believe that the new social order must not and can not be forcibly imposed by a new government, but must of needs result of the free and concerted effort of all. Moreover, the labor movement is now a powerfully and universally established fact; fighting against it would be joining hands with the oppressors, ignoring it would be remaining outside of the people's life and forever being condemned to impotency.

Still, although we all, or almost all, agree as to the usefulness and necessity of the Anarchists' taking an active part in the labor movement, acting as its initiators and its supporters, we, nevertheless, disagree as to the form, the conditions and the limits of such participation.

Many comrades aspire to fuse into one the Labor and Anarchist movements; and, wherever they are able to do so, as for instance in Spain and Argentina, and also to a certain extent in Italy, France, Germany, etc. they do their utmost to give the labor organizations a purely anarchistic program. These are the comrades who call themselves "Anarcho-Syndicalists," or those who, uniting with others who in reality are not Anarchists, take the name of "Revolutionary Syndicalists."

It is necessary clearly to explain what is meant by "Syndicalism."

If it is the "future society" we desire, i.e.: if by "syndicalism," we mean the form of social organization which is to take the place of the capitalist society and of the state, then, either "syndicalism" is the same as "Anarchy" and is nothing but a confusing word, or it is something different from "Anarchy" and, for this very reason, it cannot be accepted by Anarchists. As a matter of fact, among the various ideas and plans concerning the future society, as expounded by this or that syndicalist, some are genuine anarchistic ideas and plans, but others are only duplicating, under different names and with different modalities, the same authoritarian structure, which is, to-day, causing the evils we deplore; they have, consequently, nothing whatever in common with "Anarchy."

But I am not going to deal here with syndicalism as a social system, for, as such, it cannot be of any value in determining the present action of the Anarchists with regard to the labor movement.

What we are concerned with, here, is the labor movement under a state and capitalist regime; and, under the name of "Syndicalism," are included all labor organizations, all unions which were created in order to resist oppression by employers and to lessen or, if possible, bring to an end, the exploitation of human labor by those who have taken hold of the raw materials and the instruments of labor.

Now, my contention is that these organizations cannot be anarchistic and that it is not right to want them to be such, for if they were, they would not any longer fulfill their aim and could not be used for the ends Anarchists have in view when taking part in them.

Unions are created with a view to defend, today, the present interests of the toilers, and to better their condition as much as possible until they are in a position to make the social revolution, which will change the present wage slaves into free workers, freely associated for the benefit of all.

In order for the union to accomplish its aim and to be, at the same time, a means of education and a field for propaganda tending to cause a future and radical social transformation, it must include all the workers or, at least, all those who aspire to better their condition, and enable them to offer some kind of resistance to their exploiters. Are we to wait until all workers have become anarchists before we invite them to organize themselves, and before we accept them as members of organizations, thus inverting the natural course of propaganda and of the psychological development of the individuals — organizing the resistance when resistance is no longer needed, the masses already being able to accomplish the revolution? In this case a union would be the very same thing as an anarchist group and would remain unable either to obtain better conditions or to bring about the revolution. Or, do we want to have the Anarchist Program written on paper and be satisfied with a formal, unconscious recognition of its principles, and thus gather together a flock sheepishly following their organizers and ready to scatter or go to the enemy when the first opportunity arises to prove that they are anarchists in earnest?

Syndicalism (I mean “practical syndicalism,” not “theoretical syndicalism,” of which each one has a different conception) is reformist by its very nature. All that we can expect of it is that the reforms it aims at and obtains be such and be obtained in such a way as to help education and revolutionary preparation and leave the door open for always greater demands.

Each fusion or confusion between Anarchist and Revolutionary movement and that of Syndicalism results either in rendering the union powerless to attain its specific aim, or in attenuating, falsifying and extinguishing the spirit of Anarchism.

A union may be founded with a socialistic, revolutionary or anarchistic program and, in fact, the various labor organizations generally were born with such programs. But they remain true to their program only so long as they are weak and powerless, that is, so long as they still are groups of propaganda, initiated and animated by a few enthusiastic and convinced individuals rather than organisms capable of any efficient action. Then, as they succeed in attracting the masses into their midst and in acquiring sufficient strength to demand and command ameliorations, their original program becomes nothing but an empty formula to which nobody pays any more attention; the tactics adapt themselves to the necessities as they arise and the enthusiasts of the first hour must either adapt themselves or give up their place to “practical” men, who pay attention to the present only, without giving any thought to the future.

Certainly, there are comrades, who, though they stand at the very head of the syndicalist movement, remain sincere and enthusiastic Anarchists. Just so are there labor organizations inspired by Anarchist thoughts. But bringing forth the thousands of cases in which these men and these organizations act in contradiction to the Anarchist principles, in every day practice, would be too easy criticism. A pitiful necessity, we admit! One cannot act purely as an Anarchist when one is compelled to bargain with employers and the authorities; one cannot make the masses do things for themselves when the masses refuse to do them and request, nay, insist on having leaders. But why confuse Anarchism with what is not Anarchism; and why assume, as Anarchists, responsibility for compromises made necessary by the very fact that the mass is not anarchistic even if it has written an Anarchist program into the constitution of its organizations?

In my opinion, Anarchists should not want the unions to be anarchistic; they should only work in them for anarchistic purposes as individuals, as groups and as federations of groups. Just as there are, or there should be, groups for study and discussion, groups for written or spoken propaganda among the masses, co-operative groups, groups working in offices, in the fields, in the barracks, in the schools, etc., special groups should also be created in the various organizations interested in the class struggle.

Naturally, the ideal would be that every one be an Anarchist and that the organizations function in an anarchistic manner; but then it is obvious that if this would be the case it would no longer be necessary to organize for the struggle against the exploiters, as there would be no more exploiters. Present conditions being what they are, the development of the masses in which we are working being as it is, Anarchist groups should not demand of the organizations that they act as if they were anarchistic; they should only endeavor to make these organizations use tactics as near the Anarchist tactics as possible. If, for the sake of the organization's life and needs, they find it truly necessary to come to terms, give in and come in foul contact with the authorities and with the exploiters, so be it; but let the others and not the Anarchists do it, for their mission is to demonstrate the insufficiency and precarious character of all ameliorations that can be obtained under the capitalist regime, and to steer the struggle toward ever more radical solutions.

In the unions, Anarchists should fight so that these remain open for all the workers, whatever opinion they may hold and to whatever party they may belong, the only provision being that they agree to unite with the others in the struggle against exploitation. Anarchists should oppose the narrow trade-union spirit and all pretexts to monopolize the organizations and the work. They should prevent the members of the unions from becoming mere tools in the hands of politicians for electoral or otherwise authoritarian ends; they should preach and practice direct action, decentralization, autonomy, free initiative; they should endeavor to make the members of the unions directly take part in the life of the organizations without the need of leaders and permanent functionaries.

They should, in a word, remain Anarchists, always keep in contact with the Anarchists and remember that the labor organizations do not constitute the end but only one of the various means, no matter how important it may be, of preparing the advent of Anarchy.

Endnotes

1. The reader should remember that Malatesta is writing under the yoke of fascism. Several of the previous issues of his journal had been seized. Therefore he is forced to use a vague language and avoid any direct reference to fascism. [—Turcato]

Additional Information

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