

# Syndicalism and Workers' Committees

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In case the critics of revolutionary industrial unionism — Syndicalism — wish to know what it is about, let us recapitulate the main idea. What the historians of labour call the “Syndicalist Tendency” in the English-speaking world must include the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World and, in Britain, we cannot ignore the work of the old Socialist Labour Party in popularising the ideas of industrial unionism, particularly in Scotland.

At the end of the 19th Century, the socially-conscious workers were faced by a host of unions which organised disunity in the industrial struggle. Even by 1939 there were 40 unions in engineering and most of them might be in one factory. Worse, most of the time, most of the unions were craft unions, such as still exist, organised not only against the employer, but, too often, against other workers, men of rival unions, rival crafts, and unskilled workers, who might encroach on the preserves of the craft organisation.

At that critical time, according to the historians, Syndicalism was able to arouse to revolt the latent discontent of the unskilled and, in an elementary, but potent way organise struggles which gained great advances and inspired the forgotten men and women of industry with self-confidence.

But Syndicalists were few and only the elementary lessons of class struggle were learned by the workers, so the unskilled became organised in mass unions, which resembled crowds rather than organisations. Most of these unions became amalgamated into the Transport and General Workers' Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, embracing between them the gas workers, the tramwaymen, the dockers, engineering workers, roadmen, and hosts of others.

So we saw the workers divided into more than a thousand unions, skilled against semi-skilled and unskilled, craft against craft — even between men in one trade, but separate unions in rivalry. Iron moulders on strike, while the machine shop worked; boilermakers locked out, while their mates in another union worked on.

Against this disunity, Syndicalism has posed the idea of scientific organisation, revolutionary industrial unionism. Starting where the class struggle starts, in the factory, or other place of work, all workers, of whatever craft, so-called semi-skilled or unskilled, male or female, draughtsmen, clerks or storemen are organised in a branch of one union, based on the commodity made or the service rendered.

The affairs particular to that factory would be tackled by the workers there, in mass meetings making major decisions and electing their delegates and committee, always with the right of recall. But there must arise problems which also concern other workshops in the same district and the factory branch must be federated to its kindred in the same district, so we might have federations of, say, the South Wales miners, shipyard workers of the Clyde, cotton workers of Lancashire, or newspaper workers of London.

Further, there are matters which are not peculiar only to the district of the industry, but concern all throughout the area, temporarily historically speaking, enclosed by national boundaries. Thus the Miners' Industrial Union, the Port Workers' Industrial Union and so on, thirty or so unions would cover most of the jobs.

Further, each industrial union is dependent on the others, as a man is dependent on his fellows, and each union would be federated to a National Confederation of Labour, which would deal with the general labour questions and render aid to weaker unions, or those on strike.

Of course, within this framework there is room for other federations as and when necessary, such as federations of dockers and seamen and, in London, a traffic federation of railmen, busmen, and underground workers. The greatest strength of this form of organisation is its flexibility; one weakness of trade unionism is its rigidity.

Let the man whose reasoning power is too weak to see the obvious superiority of such a system, read labour history, let him look about and see the obvious advantages of this potent idea, even when limited in application.

Revolutionary syndicates are the means, once we brush the cobwebs of prejudice from our minds, to wage struggles with much less hurt to our people and with much greater chance of victory. But wage demands are not enough. The day will come when the workers must decide not to ask for another loaf, but to take over the bakery; to take, hold, own, and control the means of production, not by walking out, but by staying in and locking out the capitalist class. The ultimate aim of Syndicalism is common ownership of the means of production and distribution, abolition of the wages system, and a true democracy, the industrial democracy of Workers' Control.

Our critics include Labourites, Trotskyites, Stalinists, and other sorts of Bolsheviks and almost as many varieties of Socialists as there are permutations on the Treble Chance, as well as open supporters of capitalism. But they have so much in common that we can deal with the main objections, without breaking every butterfly on the wheel. It is well to note that most, though not all, the alleged Labour and Socialist critics, are supporters of trade unionism of the present sort, craft and general unions.

“Syndicalism is old fashioned, it sounds like Something out of the 19th Century.” The speaker is often a person who supports a union founded about 100 years ago, or a craft union based on a mediaeval guild and an industrial process which vanished with the Industrial Revolution. Sometimes the statement is accompanied by a chunk of the “Communist Manifesto” of 1848, or some other contemporary work (contemporary with the first Duke of Wellington) hot off the press.

The point is not whether Syndicalism is old or new fashioned, but whether it is likely to be efficacious in solving our present problems, which, after all, are as old as class society. Fashion we can leave to the House of Dior. The question of efficacy is rarely, if ever, tackled by our opponents.

We turn now to a body of criticism which is quite different, stemming from the belief that all that is necessary are “workers’ or factory committees”, without the continuous and thought-out organisation forms of industrial unionism. Just workers’ committees, that is all.

But if we rule out Syndicalism and agree to committees only, then surely the committees must have some form and some relationship to one another. Are the councils just formed, say, in factories, or parts of factories, to live a tiny, corporative life without forming part of a natural or deliberate pattern? If, however, these primary bosses are to be cohesive parts of a greater public whole, has that whole a form and pattern and aims? Or is it amorphous?

If the committees are to have social form and pattern, then it seems to us that they cannot attain these attributes unless they adopt the principles of Syndicalism. The Syndicalist pattern, here outlined briefly, and its further and more intricate forms, are splendidly suitable for adoption by a workers’ council movement, and if our aims be the same, there is really no conflict of means.

Syndicalists have never said that everyone must first hold a ticket in his appropriate industrial union before anything can be done, but advocate continuous organisation for propaganda, for learning, teaching, demonstrating, and handing on the torch. Techniques cannot exist without field and workshop practice and social techniques do not come from intellectual test tubes. Truly we learn in struggle.

But always we remember that the working class are greater than the union membership, who are the vanguard. The influence of the Syndicalists has always been immensely greater than their numbers. The IWW moved millions of workers in the USA, whatever its state of membership.

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### **Additional Information**

Taken from Kate Sharpley Library’s “[British Syndicalism: Pages of Labour History](#)” (1994).