

# Syndicalism: Its Theory and Practice

By Emma Goldman

Published in two parts in the January and February 1913 issues of Mother Earth (Vol. VII, Nos. 11 and 12)

Topics: [general strike](#), [France](#), [CGT](#), [USA](#), [IWW](#), [sabotage](#), [intro](#)

---

In view of the fact that the ideas embodied in Syndicalism have been practised by the workers for the last half century, even if without the background of social consciousness; that in this country five men had to pay with their lives because they advocated Syndicalist methods as the most effective in the struggle of labor against capital;<sup>1</sup> and that, furthermore, Syndicalism has been consciously practised by the workers of France, Italy, and Spain since 1895, it is rather amusing to witness some people in America and England now swooping down upon Syndicalism as a perfectly new and never before heard-of proposition.

It is astonishing how very naïve Americans are, how crude and immature in matters of international importance. For all his boasted practical aptitude, the average American is the very last to learn of the modern means and tactics employed in the great struggles of his day. Always he lags behind in ideas and methods that the European workers have for years past been applying with great success.

It may be contended, of course, that this is merely a sign of youth on the part of the American. And it is indeed beautiful to possess a young mind, fresh to receive and perceive. But unfortunately the American mind seems never to grow, to mature and crystallize its views.

Perhaps that is why an American revolutionist can at the same time be a politician. That is also the reason why leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World continue in the Socialist party, which is antagonistic to the principles as well as to the activities of the I.W.W. Also why a rigid Marxian may propose that the Anarchists work together with the faction that began its career by a most bitter and malicious persecution of one of the pioneers of Anarchism, Michael Bakunin. In short, to the indefinite, uncertain mind of the American radical the most contradictory ideas and methods are possible. The result is a sad chaos in the radical movement, a sort of intellectual hash, which has neither taste nor character.

Just at present Syndicalism is the pastime of a great many Americans, so-called intellectuals. Not that they know anything about it, except that some great authorities — Sorel, Bergson, and others — stand for it: because the American needs the seal of authority, or he would not accept an idea, no matter how true and valuable it might be.

Our bourgeois magazines are full of dissertations on Syndicalism. One of our most conservative colleges has even gone to the extent of publishing a work of one of its students on the subject, which has the approval of a professor. And all this, not because Syndicalism is a force and is being successfully practised by the workers of Europe, but because — as I said before — it has official authoritative sanction.

As if Syndicalism had been discovered by the philosophy of Bergson or the theoretic discourses of Sorel and Berth, and had not existed and lived among the workers long before these men wrote about it. The feature which distinguishes Syndicalism from most philosophies is that it represents the revolutionary philosophy of labor conceived and born in the actual struggle and experience of the workers themselves — not in universities, colleges, libraries, or in the brain of some scientists. *The revolutionary philosophy of labor*, that is the true and vital meaning of Syndicalism.

Already as far back as 1848 a large section of the workers realized the utter futility of political activity as a means of helping them in their economic struggle. At that time already the demand went forth for direct economic measures, as against the useless waste of energy along political lines. This was the case not only in France, but even prior to that in England, where Robert Owen, the true revolutionary Socialist, propagated similar ideas.

After years of agitation and experiment the idea was incorporated by the first convention of the *Internationale* in 1867, in the resolution that the economic emancipation of the workers must be the principal aim of all revolutionists, to which everything else is to be subordinated.

In fact, it was this determined radical stand which eventually brought about the split in the revolutionary movement of that day, and its division into two factions: the one, under Marx and Engels, aiming at political conquest; the other, under Bakunin and the Latin workers, forging ahead along industrial and Syndicalist lines. The further development of those two wings is familiar to every thinking man and woman: the one has gradually centralized into a huge machine, with the sole purpose of conquering political power within the existing capitalist State; the other is becoming an ever more vital revolutionary factor, dreaded by the enemy as the greatest menace to its rule.

It was in the year 1900, while a delegate to the Anarchist Congress in Paris, that I first came in contact with Syndicalism in operation. The Anarchist press had been discussing the subject for years prior to that; therefore we Anarchists knew something about Syndicalism. But those of us who lived in America had to content themselves with the theoretic side of it.

In 1900, however, I saw its effect upon labor in France: the strength, the enthusiasm, and hope with which Syndicalism inspired the workers. It was also my good fortune to learn of the man who more than anyone else had directed Syndicalism into definite working channels, **Fernand Pelloutier**. Unfortunately, I could not meet this remarkable young man, as he was at that time already very ill with cancer. But wherever I went, with whomever I spoke, the love and devotion for Pelloutier was wonderful, all agreeing that it was he who had gathered the discontented forces in the French labor movement and imbued them with new life and a new purpose, that of Syndicalism.

On my return to America I immediately began to propagate Syndicalist ideas, especially Direct Action and the General Strike. But it was like talking to the Rocky Mountains — no understanding, even among the more radical elements, and complete indifference in labor ranks.

In 1907 I went as a delegate to the Anarchist Congress at Amsterdam<sup>2</sup> and, while in Paris, met the most active Syndicalists in the *Confédération Générale du Travail*: Pouget, Delesalle, **Monatte**, and many others. More than that, I had the opportunity to see Syndicalism in daily operation, in its most constructive and inspiring forms.

I allude to this, to indicate that my knowledge of Syndicalism does not come from Sorel, Bergson, or Berth, but from actual contact with and observation of the tremendous work carried on by the workers of Paris within the ranks of the *Confédération*. It would require a volume to explain in detail what Syndicalism is doing for the French workers. In the American press you read only of its resistive methods, of strikes and sabotage, of the conflicts of labor with capital. These are no doubt very important matters, and yet the chief value of Syndicalism lies much deeper. It lies in the constructive and educational effect upon the life and thought of the masses.

The fundamental difference between Syndicalism and the old trade union methods is this: while the old trade unions, without exception, move within the wage system and capitalism, recognizing the latter as inevitable, Syndicalism repudiates and condemns present industrial arrangements as unjust and criminal, and holds out no hope to the worker for lasting results from this system.

Of course Syndicalism, like the old trade unions, fights for immediate gains, but it is not stupid enough to pretend that labor can expect humane conditions from inhuman economic arrangements in society. Thus it merely wrests from the enemy what it can force him to yield; on the whole, however, Syndicalism aims at, and concentrates its energies upon, the complete overthrow of the wage system. Indeed, Syndicalism goes further: it aims to liberate labor from every institution that has not for its object the free development of production for the benefit of all humanity. In short, the ultimate purpose of Syndicalism is to reconstruct society from its present centralized, authoritative, and brutal state to one based upon the free, federated grouping of the workers along lines of economic and social liberty.

With this object in view, Syndicalism works in two directions: first, by undermining the existing institutions; secondly, by developing and educating the workers and cultivating their spirit of solidarity, to prepare them for a full, free life, when capitalism shall have been abolished.

Syndicalism is, in essence, the economic expression of Anarchism. That circumstance accounts for the presence of so many Anarchists in the Syndicalist movement. Like Anarchism, Syndicalism prepares the workers

along direct economic lines, as conscious factors in the great struggles of to-day, as well as conscious factors in the task of reconstructing society along autonomous industrial lines, as against the paralyzing spirit of centralization with its bureaucratic machinery of corruption, inherent in all political parties.

Realizing that the diametrically opposed interests of capital and labor can never be reconciled, Syndicalism must needs repudiate the old rusticated, worn-out methods of trade unionism, and declare for an open war against the capitalist régime, as well as against every institution which to-day supports and protects capitalism.

As a logical sequence Syndicalism, in its daily warfare against capitalism, rejects the contract system, because it does not consider labor and capital equals, hence cannot consent to an agreement which the one has the power to break, while the other must submit to without redress.

For similar reasons Syndicalism rejects negotiations in labor disputes, because such a procedure serves only to give the enemy time to prepare his end of the fight, thus defeating the very object the workers set out to accomplish. Also, Syndicalism stands for spontaneity, both as a preserver of the fighting strength of labor and also because it takes the enemy unawares, hence compels him to a speedy settlement or causes him great loss.

Syndicalism objects to a large union treasury, because money is as corrupting an element in the ranks of labor as it is in those of capitalism. We in America know this to be only too true. If the labor movement in this country were not backed by such large funds, it would not be as conservative as it is, nor would the leaders be so readily corrupted. However, the main reason for the opposition of Syndicalism to large treasuries consists in the fact that they create class distinctions and jealousies within the ranks of labor, so detrimental to the spirit of solidarity. The worker whose organization has a large purse considers himself superior to his poorer brother, just as he regards himself better than the man who earns fifty cents less per day.

The chief ethical value of Syndicalism consists in the stress it lays upon the necessity of labor getting rid of the element of dissension, parasitism, and corruption in its ranks. It seeks to cultivate devotion, solidarity, and enthusiasm, which are far more essential and vital in the economic struggle than money.

As I have already stated, Syndicalism has grown out of the disappointment of the workers with politics and parliamentary methods. In the course of its development Syndicalism has learned to see in the State — with its mouthpiece, the representative system — one of the strongest supports of capitalism; just as it has learned that the army and the church are the chief pillars of the State. It is therefore that Syndicalism has turned its back upon parliamentarism and political machines, and has set its face toward the economic arena wherein alone gladiator Labor can meet his foe successfully.

Historic experience sustains the Syndicalists in their uncompromising opposition to parliamentarism. Many had entered political life and, unwilling to be corrupted by the atmosphere, withdrew from office, to devote themselves to the economic struggle — Proudhon, the Dutch revolutionist [Domela] Nieuwenhuis, John Most, and numerous others. While those who remained in the parliamentary quagmire ended by betraying their trust, without having gained anything for labor. But it is unnecessary to discuss here political history. Suffice to say that Syndicalists are anti-parliamentarians as a result of bitter experience.

Equally so has experience determined their anti-military attitude. Time and again has the army been used to shoot down strikers and to inculcate the sickening idea of patriotism, for the purpose of dividing the workers against themselves and helping the masters to the spoils. The inroads that Syndicalist agitation has made into the superstition of patriotism are evident from the dread of the ruling class for the loyalty of the army, and the rigid persecution of the anti-militarists. Naturally, for the ruling class realizes much better than the workers that when the soldiers will refuse to obey their superiors, the whole system of capitalism will be doomed.

Indeed, why should the workers sacrifice their children that the latter may be used to shoot their own parents? Therefore Syndicalism is not merely logical in its anti-military agitation; it is most practical and far-reaching, inasmuch as it robs the enemy of his strongest weapon against labor.

Now, as to the methods employed by Syndicalism — Direct Action, Sabotage, and the General Strike.

DIRECT ACTION.— Conscious individual or collective effort to protest against, or remedy, social conditions through the systematic assertion of the economic power of the workers.

Sabotage has been decried as criminal, even by so-called revolutionary Socialists. Of course, if you believe that property, which excludes the producer from its use, is justifiable, then sabotage is indeed a crime. But unless a Socialist continues to be under the influence of our bourgeois morality — a morality which enables the few to monopolize the earth at the expense of the many — he cannot consistently maintain that capitalist property is inviolate. Sabotage undermines this form of private possession. Can it therefore be considered criminal? On the contrary, it is ethical in the best sense, since it helps society to get rid of its worst foe, the most detrimental factor of social life.

Sabotage is mainly concerned with obstructing, by every possible method, the regular process of production, thereby demonstrating the determination of the workers to give according to what they receive, and no more. For instance, at the time of the French railroad strike of 1910, perishable goods were sent in slow trains, or in an opposite direction from the one intended. Who but the most ordinary philistine will call that a crime? If the railway men themselves go hungry, and the “innocent” public has not enough feeling of solidarity to insist that these men should get enough to live on, the public has forfeited the sympathy of the strikers and must take the consequences.

Another form of sabotage consisted, during this strike, in placing heavy boxes on goods marked “Handle with care,” cut glass and china and precious wines. From the standpoint of the law this may have been a crime, but from the standpoint of common humanity it was a very sensible thing. The same is true of disarranging a loom in a weaving mill, or living up to the letter of the law with all its red tape, as the Italian railway men did, thereby causing confusion in the railway service. In other words, sabotage is merely a weapon of defense in the industrial warfare, which is the more effective, because it touches capitalism in its most vital spot, the pocket.

By the General Strike, Syndicalism means a stoppage of work, the cessation of labor. Nor need such a strike be postponed until all the workers of a particular place or country are ready for it. As has been pointed out by Pelloutier, Pouget, as well as others, and particularly by recent events in England, the General Strike may be started by one industry and exert a tremendous force. It is as if one man suddenly raised the cry “Stop the thief!” Immediately others will take up the cry, till the air rings with it. The General Strike, initiated by one determined organization, by one industry or by a small, conscious minority among the workers, is the industrial cry of “Stop the thief,” which is soon taken up by many other industries, spreading like wildfire in a very short time.

One of the objections of politicians to the General Strike is that the workers also would suffer for the necessities of life. In the first place, the workers are past masters in going hungry; secondly, it is certain that a General Strike is surer of prompt settlement than an ordinary strike. Witness the transport and miner strikes in England: how quickly the lords of State and capital were forced to make peace. Besides, Syndicalism recognizes the right of the producers to the things which they have created; namely, the right of the workers to help themselves if the strike does not meet with speedy settlement.

When Sorel maintains that the General Strike is an inspiration necessary for the people to give their life meaning, he is expressing a thought which the Anarchists have never tired of emphasizing. Yet I do not hold with Sorel that the General Strike is a “social myth,” that may never be realized. I think that the General Strike will become a fact the moment labor understands its full value — its destructive as well as constructive value, as indeed many workers all over the world are beginning to realize.

These ideas and methods of Syndicalism some may consider entirely negative, though they are far from it in their effect upon society to-day. But Syndicalism has also a directly positive aspect. In fact, much more time and effort is being devoted to that phase than to the others. Various forms of Syndicalist activity are designed to prepare the workers, even within present social and industrial conditions, for the life of a new and better society. To that end the masses are trained in the spirit of mutual aid and brotherhood, their initiative and self-reliance developed, and an *esprit de corps* maintained whose very soul is solidarity of purpose and the community of interests of the international proletariat.

Chief among these activities are the *mutualités*, or mutual aid societies, established by the French Syndicalists.

Their object is, foremost, to secure work for unemployed members, and to further that spirit of mutual assistance which rests upon the consciousness of labor's identity of interests throughout the world.

In his "The Labor Movement in France,"<sup>3</sup> Mr. L. Levine states that during the year 1902 over 74,000 workers, out of a total of 99,000 applicants, were provided with work by these societies, without being compelled to submit to the extortion of the employment bureau sharks.

These latter are a source of the deepest degradation, as well as of most shameless exploitation, of the worker. Especially does it hold true of America, where the employment agencies are in many cases also masked detective agencies, supplying workers in need of employment to strike regions, under false promises of steady, remunerative employment.

The French Confédération had long realized the vicious rôle of employment agencies as leeches upon the jobless worker and nurseries of scabbery. By the threat of a General Strike the French Syndicalists forced the government to abolish the employment bureau sharks, and the workers' own *mutualités* have almost entirely superseded them, to the great economic and moral advantage of labor.

Besides the *mutualités*, the French Syndicalists have established other activities tending to weld labor in closer bonds of solidarity and mutual aid. Among these are the efforts to assist workingmen journeying from place to place. The practical as well as ethical value of such assistance is inestimable. It serves to instill the spirit of fellowship and gives a sense of security in the feeling of oneness with the large family of labor. This is one of the vital effects of the Syndicalist spirit in France and other Latin countries. What a tremendous need there is for just such efforts in this country! Can anyone doubt the significance of the consciousness of workingmen coming from Chicago, for instance, to New York, sure to find there among their comrades welcome lodging and food until they have secured employment? This form of activity is entirely foreign to the labor bodies of this country, and as a result the traveling workman in search of a job — the "blanket stiff" — is constantly at the mercy of the constable and policeman, a victim of the vagrancy laws, and the unfortunate material whence is recruited, through stress of necessity, the army of scabdom.

I have repeatedly witnessed, while at the headquarters of the Confédération, the cases of workingmen who came with their union cards from various parts of France, and even from other countries of Europe, and were supplied with meals and lodging, and encouraged by every evidence of brotherly spirit, and made to feel at home by their fellow workers of the Confédération. It is due, to a great extent, to these activities of the Syndicalists that the French government is forced to employ the army for strikebreaking, because few workers are willing to lend themselves for such service, thanks to the efforts and tactics of Syndicalism.

No less in importance than the mutual aid activities of the Syndicalists is the cooperation established by them between the city and the country, the factory worker and the peasant or farmer, the latter providing the workers with food supplies during strikes, or taking care of the strikers' children. This form of practical solidarity has for the first time been tried in this country during the Lawrence strike, with inspiring results.

And all these Syndicalist activities are permeated with the spirit of educational work, carried on systematically by evening classes on all vital subjects treated from an unbiased, libertarian standpoint — not the adulterated "knowledge" with which the minds are stuffed in our public schools. The scope of the education is truly phenomenal, including sex hygiene, the care of women during pregnancy and confinement, the care of home and children, sanitation and general hygiene; in fact, every branch of human knowledge — science, history, art — receives thorough attention, together with the practical application in the established workingmen's libraries, dispensaries, concerts, and festivals, in which the greatest artists and literateurs of Paris consider it an honor to participate.

One of the most vital efforts of Syndicalism is to prepare the workers, *now*, for their rôle in a free society. Thus the Syndicalist organizations supply its members with textbooks on every trade and industry, of a character that is calculated to make the worker an adept in his chosen line, a master of his craft, for the purpose of familiarizing him with all the branches of his industry, so that when labor finally takes over production and distribution, the people will be fully prepared to manage successfully their own affairs.

A demonstration of the effectiveness of this educational campaign of Syndicalism is given by the railroad men of Italy, whose mastery of all the details of transportation is so great that they could offer to the Italian

government to take over the railroads of the country and guarantee their operation with greater economy and fewer accidents than is at present done by the government.

Their ability to carry on production has been strikingly proved by the Syndicalists, in connection with the glass blowers' strike in Italy. There the strikers, instead of remaining idle during the progress of the strike, decided themselves to carry on the production of glass. The wonderful spirit of solidarity resulting from the Syndicalist propaganda enabled them to build a glass factory within an incredibly short time. An old building, rented for the purpose and which would have ordinarily required months to be put into proper condition, was turned into a glass factory within a few weeks, by the solidaric efforts of the strikers aided by their comrades who toiled with them after working hours. Then the strikers began operating the glass-blowing factory, and their cooperative plan of work and distribution during the strike has proved so satisfactory in every way that the experimental factory has been made permanent and a part of the glass-blowing industry in Italy [and] is now in the hands of the cooperative organization of the workers.

This method of applied education not only trains the worker in his daily struggle, but serves also to equip him for the battle royal and the future, when he is to assume his place in society as an intelligent, conscious being and useful producer, once capitalism is abolished.

Nearly all leading Syndicalists agree with the Anarchists that a free society can exist only through voluntary association, and that its ultimate success will depend upon the intellectual and moral development of the workers who will supplant the wage system with a new social arrangement, based on solidarity and economic well-being for all. That is Syndicalism, in theory and practice.

---

### Endnotes

1. Goldman is referring to the Haymarket martyrs. —Syndicalism.org eds.
2. See [our extract](#) of the proceedings. —Syndicalism.org eds.
3. See Hippolyte Havel's [review of the book](#). —Syndicalism.org eds.

---

### Additional Information

Taken from [HathiTrust](#).