

Review: Anarcho-Syndicalism: History and Action

By Jack McArdle

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The ideas of anarcho-syndicalism (anarchism applied to the workers' movement) invariably bring forth either slavish adoration or churlish dismissal from within the ranks of the anarchist movement today – both responses doing an equal injustice to a subject of critical importance in the battle for a free society. A much more objective and thought-out attempt to apply the *essence* of anarchism to the class struggle, without getting bogged down in arguments over the *forms* it should take, is long overdue.

Traditionally, the choice has been posed as being between a loose network of workers' councils which (it is hoped) arise more or less “spontaneously” during times of struggle (“Councilism”, or “[Council Communism](#)”), and a more premeditated variation of that, where the workers' councils are organised, before the struggle escalates, into a permanent (union) structure (“Anarcho-Syndicalism”). But in essence, there is very little to distinguish the one from the other when it comes down to principles translated into practice. In Spain (the best living example of anarcho-syndicalism in practice) the anarchist movement always drew its strength from the fact that it was a *workers* movement (the [CNT](#)), and the most revolutionary and influential section of the workers' movement at that! Though not everyone in the CNT was anarchist (by its rulebook the CNT is “apolitical”, though always libertarian in nature), the more consciously anarchist elements within the organisation (grouped around the FAI) always ensured it remained true to its libertarian conception by resisting take-overs from authoritarian parties. Today in Spain, the CNT (even though there are now two of them!) is still a mass working class organisation, though there now exists, also, an anarchist movement probably of equal size *outside* the CNT. In Britain we are not in that happy situation, and have the job of having to start virtually from scratch.

Encouraged by the re-emergence of the CNT in Spain during the late 1970s, “a number of class struggle anarchists (including members of the Syndicalist Workers Federation) who felt it was time to leave behind the irrelevant, disorganised nature of most of the British anarchist movement and go on to create a national working class anarchist organisation”, came together in March 1979 to form the [Direct Action Movement](#) (DAM). Since then DAM has established a network of local groups and become accepted as the British section of the [AIT](#) (the anarcho-syndicalist International). Its activities have concentrated mainly on producing anarcho-syndicalist propaganda material (through its national bulletin, *Direct Action*, and a collection of interesting regionally based papers and pamphlets) which have enjoyed a wide circulation – although as this pamphlet freely admits, “In fact unemployed workers are proportionally the largest group within the organisation”, and DAM has yet to make any real impact on the industrial scene (though this is a problem that faces the whole of the libertarian movement, and not just DAM).

Anarcho-Syndicalism: History and Action mentions, but fails to really tackle properly, the problem of why “Anarcho-Syndicalism has a small following and little influence in this country” beyond some brief references to the historical influences, on its sharp decline as a movement, of the [first World War](#) and the triumph of Bolshevik state socialism in Russia. Rather unfairly, it dismisses any objections to whether it is a practical proposition for us to emulate the Spanish experience, and form a “British CNT”, as being the product of “the uncommitted reader or cynic”.¹ To the DAM's credit, they are at least amongst the few people who are trying seriously to go beyond the “little cliques crying in the wind” that passes for an “anarchist movement”. But perhaps they should stop confusing the problem of re-organising the anarchists with organising the workers. Both are vital and need doing, though past attempts have floundered from putting the organisation-building before the activity-doing — witness ORA-AWA-LCG, et al. — but in Britain they are recognisably separate issues, and need to be tackled differently.

Whether or not the DAM will manage to move beyond its propagandist stage, into actually building up an anarcho-syndicalist union here, remains a question for the future to decide. Meanwhile, this latest pamphlet

of theirs is recommended for providing a simple, clearly written digest of basic anarcho-syndicalist ideas and history, and deserves to be widely read and discussed.

Endnotes

1. We think this is rather unfair ourselves, as DAM didn't really say this, but rather used the sentence "At this point the uncommitted reader or cynic might say: 'What happened in Spain in 1936 is all very well, but this is Britain in the 1980s, surely things are different now, anarcho-syndicalism is out of date'" as a jumping-off point to argue that anarcho-syndicalism was still relevant. —Syndicalism.org eds.

Additional Information

A review of Direct Action Movement's pamphlet, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: History and Action*.

Taken from Libcom.org.