

Anarcho-Syndicalism and the IWW

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I.

Revolutionary syndicalism, as a socio-economic system, provides a theoretical basis for the direct action of the organized mass movement of the working class. At the present time revolutionary syndicalism has been embraced by the proletariat only in some of the Romance countries. A similar situation obtained when this system had its origins during the epoch of the **First International**, and partly also in the period of regeneration of the revolutionary labour movement at the beginning of the 20th century. In the form of “industrialism,”¹ this tendency has also become a significant factor in recent years for the labour movements of the United States, England, and Australia.

But the “industrial” movement in the Anglo-Saxon countries (the IWW) is essentially different from the revolutionary syndicalism of the Romance countries. This difference is explained by the significantly higher stage of development of capitalism in the Anglo-Saxon countries, as well as the influence of a completely different ideological environment.

In France and the other Romance countries of Europe, revolutionary syndicalism was, as is well known, a legacy of the ideas of the left, Bakuninist wing of the International Workingmen’s Association, advocating direct, revolutionary action by the working class organized in trade unions; the annihilation of the state; and the replacement of the contemporary economic system by federations of unions of producers organized from below. Contemporary revolutionary syndicalism represents the practical application of the tactical and organizational goals of the left wing of the International and their subsequent development based on the experience accumulated by the proletariat during the half-century since the time of the collapse of the International.

In France, as in other countries, the bearers of the ideas of the left wing of the International were anarchists, some of whom, however, during the epoch of long-lasting reaction, deviated from the broad path of the organized class movement and locked themselves up in their own circles and groups. But a significant number of the anarchists remained true to the precepts of the Bakuninist current, and it is they who were the organized ideological element that laid the foundations of contemporary revolutionary syndicalism in the 1890s. And just as the trade union in France was getting back on its feet after a long period of reaction, resulting from the destruction of the Paris Commune, these anarchists, advocates of organized mass action, took a vigorous part in it. They were not put off by the peace-loving, reformist, petty character of the French trade union movement of the day. They joined these reformist unions, and, acting on the inside, they gradually transformed the whole character of the movement. Their achievement was that for a comparatively brief period of time, revolutionary syndicalism became the dominant tendency in the labour movement of France.

In that struggle waged by the pioneers of the French revolutionary-syndicalist movement who joined the trade unions, of foremost importance was defining the **final goal** for the proletariat, organized on an economic basis, and, in connection with this, the inculcation of the method of direct action as the fundamental principle of class struggle. The **general strike**, transitioning to an **armed revolt** — this is the maximum manifestation of mass direct action, by means of which the proletariat should carry out a social revolution. The general strike became the leading tactic of revolutionary syndicalism. The social revolution was envisaged by revolutionary syndicalism as the result of the seizure — following a successful general strike that transitions to an uprising — of plants, factories, mines, etc., by unionized workers who would then organize production and consumption on new foundations. This is the origin of the view of union locals as the “cells of the future society.”

Proceeding in this manner, revolutionary syndicalists from the very beginning were inevitably opponents of

parliamentary socialists, who proselytized the seizure of power by means of political organizations supported by the working class. Thus revolutionary syndicalism adopted more or less the same position in relation to parliamentary socialism as the position taken by the Bakuninist wing of the International with respect to the Marxist wing.

The socio-economic and ideological context in which American “industrial unionism” arose was completely different.

II.

Revolutionary syndicalism was created in France, as we have seen, owing to the revolutionizing of conciliatory, reformist **trade** unions. During the epoch of the birth of French revolutionary syndicalism, trade unions were the best form of labour organization, completely compatible with that stage of development in which French capitalism found itself. When the industry of a country is based on skilled labour, the natural form of labour organization is the trade union, composed of trained workers of a single trade.

It’s not surprising, then, that the pioneers of revolutionary syndicalism recognized as natural the craft-based type of labour union already existing at that time. But in due course, in connection with the significant growth of French capitalism, a section of the revolutionary syndicalists began to advocate for the industrial principle of organization. The rise of “machinism” in industry severely curtailed the role of skilled labour: workers trained in a specialized trade more and more began to give way to “industrial workers.” All this indicated the need for a gradual transition to an industrial form of organization. For various reasons, some of the activists of the syndicalist movement continued to defend the former organizational principles. But this question, which in the future will undoubtedly become one of the most important questions of the **French** labour movement, played no role at all in the period when revolutionary syndicalism was first born in France.

Meanwhile, in the United States, this same question — about the necessity of replacing the trade principle of organizing with the industrial principle — gave an initial impetus to the creation of an organized revolutionary-economic movement.

In the second half of the 19th century, American capitalism was still based mainly on the labour of skilled workers. The interests of the everyday economic struggles of individual workplaces at that time demanded the organization of labour unions according to craft. Only then did there begin to emerge the contemporary form of industrial enterprise that embraces a whole variety of branches of labour. For that time the natural form of labour organization, having as its goal the improvement of the situation of its own members, was the trade union. Lacking any broad, class-based goals and concerned only with the defense of its own narrow, shop-based interests, the trade unions, united mainly in the American Federation of Labour (AFL), developed the principles of its moderate tactics, which in essence it still preserves to this day.

But already in the 1880s it was clear that in some branches of industry, the principle of craft-based, trade union organizations was virtually inapplicable. This was especially obvious in the mining and brewing industries, where the artificial division of workers into unions according to craft was already completely irrational due to practical considerations.

For the mass of workers of these branches of industry, the new industrial form of organization was a logical result of the demands of the practical struggle. The bosses were united in a single association, so therefore the workers had to do the same. But among the class-conscious activists of the labour movement there were those who understood the enormous significance of this new form of labour organization for the subsequent fate of the American proletarian movement. The organized part of the labour movement of the United States was bogged down in the slime of petty, shop-based squabbles, without any evident way of emerging into the broad arena of the proletarian class movement. And those activists of the labour movement who were trying to encourage the American proletariat to engage in conscious class struggle, saw in the industrial form of organization a more powerful means for breaching the barriers between crafts and bringing about a more cohesive unification of the proletariat. The industrial form of organization became the goal of the more revolutionary elements of the proletariat. In the United States “industrialism” soon became a synonym for class unity and action.

III.

The new, industrial type of labour organization initially emerged in a more or less large-scale form in the 1890s, mainly in the West. During this period in the Western states a whole series of industrial labour organizations were formed; the most significant of them was the Western Federation of Miners. Towards the end of the 19th century, this federation included miners in Colorado, Nevada, Montana, Arizona, and other Western states with mining industries.

The industrial type of labour organization was favoured by a significant number of the workers of the West, mainly because, as already mentioned, the industrial enterprises in which they worked had already outgrown the framework of specialized branches of industry and had adopted the character of industrial enterprises, embracing a variety of branches of production. A change in the principle of organization was the inevitable result of the demands of the daily struggle for the improvement of the conditions of labour.

But with these new forms of production, it became much clearer than previously that there was a close connection between economic exploitation and political power. The frequently repeated bitter conflicts with state and municipal authorities, invariably openly supporting the powerful capitalist corporations in all labour disputes, gradually opened the eyes of the workers. These episodes of bitter socio-economic struggle not only strengthened the desire for the industrial form of organization among the Western workers, but was also strongly conducive to deepening their class consciousness, by graphically showing them how superficial and short-sighted were the tactics of the AFL and other, similar, labour organizations, that were trying to improve the situation of workers exclusively within the framework of the existing system. Advanced elements of the Western proletariat recognized, finally, the necessity of class struggle for the complete liberation of the proletariat.

It would seem that the revolutionary-economic movement of the Western proletariat should have already at this stage of its development raised the question about the forms of class struggle from the point of view of revolutionary syndicalism. This, however, happened only a few years later. At that time, the ideas of French syndicalism were not yet well known outside France; in North America, they were completely unknown. It's not surprising, therefore, that the aspirations of the emerging organized working class movement of that time were initially made use of by parliamentary socialists. The latter succeeded to the extent that the "American Labour Union," formed in the West in 1902, adopted a socialist platform at its first congress. This revolutionary labour organization believed that socialism would come about as the result of the activity of socialist parties; in the process of social upheaval, labour unions would play a secondary role.

This deviation of the organized revolutionary-economic movement towards parliamentary socialism — towards acknowledging Marxist formulas according to which "class struggle is political struggle" — could be only temporary. Naturally inclined to **direct** economic struggle against capitalism and political power, as soon as the advanced elements of this movement became acquainted with the ideas of revolutionary syndicalism, they inevitably adopted its basic features.

The fundamental idea of revolutionary syndicalism is, as is well known, the doctrine that labour unions, constructed on an economic basis, in the event of a social upheaval should be not only destructive but creative factors. This doctrine, according to which labour unions, whether industrial or craft, are cells of the future society, is in fundamental contradiction with the teaching of the social-democrats about the **political** dictatorship of the proletariat, which seizes control of the apparatus of the state by means of "its own" political party.

The assimilation of this doctrine about "cells" by the advance elements of the revolutionary-economic movement in the United States started the conscious evolution of this movement from the acceptance of parliamentary socialism to embracing the ideas of revolutionary syndicalism.

IV.

The view of labour unions as cells of the future society — the basic idea of French revolutionary syndicalism — was first formulated in the American revolutionary-economic movement in 1903 by one of its most prominent activists — **William Trautmann**, editor of the organ of the brewery workers' union. In his own theoretical opinions, Trautmann was generally inclined to Marxism, but he was also well acquainted with French

syndicalism, which had a strong influence on him. The doctrine about “cells” he borrowed directly from the French syndicalists and transferred it completely to American soil, changing only some of the syndicalist formulas to correspond with the specific conditions of the American revolutionary-economic movement, and, in particular, assigning enormous significance to the **industrial** principle of labour organization. According to Trautmann’s formulation: “Industrial organizations are the precursors of a society based on socialist foundations: within these organizations are found elements being prepared for a more scientific management of production and distribution.”

This syndicalist idea arose in a natural way as a result of the everyday economic struggles of labour organizations in France, arriving in the course of time at the point of view of direct class struggle — struggle for the all-sided liberation of the proletariat. It’s completely natural, therefore, that in being transferred to American revolutionary labour organizations, this idea should encounter a very favourable reception. The huge role of this doctrine about “cells,” rapidly absorbed by industrial organizations in America, was made clear in 1905 in Chicago, at the convention of industrial unionists at which was founded the Industrial Workers of the World.

Before absorbing the doctrine about cells, according to which the labour union is an all-round instrument for the economic and political liberation of the proletariat, the industrial organizations of America inevitably experienced a temporary predilection for parliamentary socialism, heralded as necessary for the annihilation of the capitalist system, rather than trade unionism. But the influence of the parliamentary socialists quickly waned once the industrial organizations adopted the view of the labour union as an instrument that was quite sufficient in itself for the liberation of the proletariat.

Relying on this doctrine, the opponents of the parliamentary method were able to conduct a successful struggle against the attempts of both socialist parties of the country² to dominate the new revolutionary labour movement. When the members of the industrial organizations became more familiar with the views of the leaders of both socialist parties, they were convinced that these people were essentially trying to use the industrial unions only to advance the interests of their own parties. The parliamentary socialists, upon entering the new movement, as usual promoted the view that their parties must play the main role in bringing about the socialist revolution; the industrial unions were destined to play a secondary role in preparing and carrying out the social revolution. Meanwhile, the workers, joining industrial organizations, were becoming more and more convinced that the revolutionary industrial union is an incomparably more powerful weapon of social struggle than socialist organizations that are in practice completely impotent and suitable only for the requirements of election campaigns. The continual strife between members of the SLP and the SP, fighting between themselves for influence inside the industrial organizations, was even more conducive to strengthening the influence of the anarcho-syndicalist elements.

Deliverance from the influence of both socialist parties and a more decisive turn towards revolutionary syndicalism became increasingly inevitable. And, finally, this step took place in 1908 at a congress of the IWW in Chicago.

V.

The ideological influence of French revolutionary syndicalism on the most class-conscious elements of the IWW became even stronger after 1908, when this organization completely divested itself from the **direct** influence of parliamentary socialists. The convergence of ideologies between French syndicalism and the IWW was hastened by the circumstance that some of the activists of the American revolutionary labour movement spent time in France and formed close relations with the leaders of the **Confederation of Labour**.

With the course of time, however, among the official leaders of the IWW there emerged a desire, which became increasingly acute, to differentiate themselves more distinctly from anarcho-syndicalism. In the journal *Solidarity*, an official organ of the IWW, there regularly appeared articles in which it was strongly emphasized that the IWW movement was developing completely independently, without any influence on the part of any other movement or ideology.

The authors of these articles tried to play down the significance of anarcho-syndicalist elements that have long been a part of the program of the IWW. They always characterized communist anarchism as a philosophical

doctrine having nothing in common with the labour movement; by doing so, they consciously closed their eyes to the fact that the theoreticians of communist anarchism (Bakunin, Kropotkin, etc.) based their theories on the experience of the labour movement and believed that their theories had value only to the extent that the masses, organizing themselves in the process of class struggle, recognized in these theories the systematization of their own hopes and dreams.

As regards revolutionary syndicalism as a social-revolutionary system combining the practical needs of the organized labour movement with the basic positions of the anarcho-communist worldview — well, many of the leaders of the IWW have dissociated themselves from any ideological dependence on this system, trying to convince everyone in the total “independence” of their revolutionary views.

It’s necessary, of course, to acknowledge — seeing as many of the socialist writers have identified the IWW with anarchists or anarcho-syndicalists “pure and simple” — that these protests on the part of the leaders of the IWW have a serious basis. We have already pointed out above that the original, ideologically still not completely formed, “industrial” movement in America arose independently out of the special conditions of economic and social struggle prevailing in several of the Western states. This “industrial” movement was not a conscious anarcho-syndicalist movement, and, to a significant degree, is not so now, **since it is still at the stage of being formed.** (The ideological immaturity of the IWW is acknowledged by the most “anti-anarchist” leaders of the movement. See, for example, the article by Carroll: “The Tactics of the IWW and the Political Question” in *Solidarity* of November 25, 1916.)

But while the practical revolutionary-economic movement, which subsequently provided the foundation of the IWW, emerged completely independently, it’s nevertheless absurd to deny the well known fact that the current program of the IWW and the social views of that organization regarding the tasks of the revolutionary proletarian movement have taken shape to a very significant degree under the influence of the anarcho-syndicalist elements which, over the course of time, have joined the “industrial” movement in increasing numbers. It’s absurd to deny that it’s only thanks to its assimilation of some of the basic positions of anarcho-syndicalist ideology (theory of “cells,” general strike, method of direct action, opposition to parliamentarism) that the IWW has been able to liberate itself — so far, not entirely, however — from an obsession with the theories of state socialism.

It stands to reason that the terrain for embracing these ideas existed beforehand. The proletarian organizations were imbued with revolutionary spirit, owing to the special conditions of those industries in which their members were employed. The members of these organizations put into practice, without outside influence, **sabotage**; and these organizations often experienced serious clashes with local political authorities. So they were psychologically prepared by objective conditions to be receptive to anarcho-syndicalist ideas. But there’s no doubt that while anarcho-syndicalist ideas had emerged by that time in Europe, the American “industrial” organizations wandered for a long time in the dark, falling under the spell of one or other of the “revolutionary” political parties, until they finally, independently, developed that ideology which they are following at the present time.

VI.

We shall now dwell on the points of difference between the IWW and French revolutionary syndicalism. Above, we indicated which basic principles of revolutionary syndicalism have been **assimilated** by the IWW. These principles are the following: the doctrine about the social role of labour unions (cells of the future society); the general strike, as the main weapon of social revolution; the method of direct action, in contradistinction to parliamentarism; and, finally, the nurturing in the proletariat of a rebellious spirit and a yearning for an all-encompassing liberation as the main goal of everyday economic and social struggle. The assimilation by the IWW of these principles provides the justification for calling the “industrial” movement the American, or, more correctly, the Anglo-Saxon, form of revolutionary syndicalism.

But, nevertheless, there exist a whole series of points of difference between French revolutionary syndicalism and the IWW, that compels us to draw a sharp, although, in our view, by no means insurmountable, boundary between these two tendencies.

From our point of view, the most essential point of difference is the following: French revolutionary syndicalism,

emerging and growing up under the direct influence of communist anarchism, is well aware of the final goal of its efforts. This movement is committed to realizing a completely well-defined social ideal, and its tactics constitute a clearly and thoroughly developed system, in correspondence with the requirements of its defined tasks. While being avowedly anti-parliamentary, revolutionary syndicalism (anarcho-syndicalism) at the same time does not limit itself to revolutionary-economic struggle, but in its everyday battles never forgets its **social**-revolutionary tasks. Anarcho-syndicalists categorically deny the usefulness of the parliamentary method of struggle, but at the same time they believe that direct action against the state is just as important a part of social-revolutionary struggle as the struggle with capitalism.

For the Wobblies, whose movement has up to now lacked a solid theoretical foundation and a clearly defined final goal, the question of political participation is extremely unclear. On the one hand, they haven't adopted a position of clear-cut rejection of parliamentarism (approaching in this regard the more moderate, "pure" current in French revolutionary syndicalism); on the other hand, they have a tendency to sink into narrow revolutionary economism, like our Makhaevists.³ They are interested almost exclusively in the struggle with capitalism; they struggle with political power only to the extent that they are exposed to its repressive measures in the course of economic strife.

Only by this narrow understanding of the liberatory tactics of the proletarian movement is it possible, for example, to explain the "neutral" position occupied by the IWW up until recently regarding anti-militarism. As is well known, the Wobblies at their last convention in Chicago adopted a resolution about the necessity of anti-militarist propaganda in peacetime and a general strike in case of war. One must note that from the anarcho-syndicalist point of view, there wasn't a word in this resolution about anti-patriotic propaganda, which was insisted upon by the congress of the French Confederation of Labour and which was actually put into practice quite energetically before the war by the French revolutionary syndicalists.

There is, however, a sufficiently serious basis for hoping that the "industrial" movement, in its subsequent development, will differentiate itself sooner or later from narrow economism. In spite of its incompleteness, the anti-militarist resolution of the Chicago convention of the IWW provides evidence for the advance of this organization beyond the narrowly economic point of view. Even more significant in this respect is the anti-militarist and antipatriotic position taken by the Australian IWW since the very beginning of the War.

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Of the other points of divergence between French revolutionary syndicalism and the IWW, the most important is the different relationship to the question of the "split" in the organized labour movement of the country.

As is well known, the French syndicalists emphatically pronounced themselves against revolutionary syndicates withdrawing from the regular labour organizations of the country. They recognize as appropriate only revolutionary work within the regular labour organizations. By pursuing this tactic, the achievement of the French syndicalists was that the Confederation of Labour, composed of a variety of components, adopted a revolutionary program.

Some individual American syndicalists take the point of view that this tactic, i.e. revolutionary activity inside regular labour organizations, if applied to the AFL, will sooner or later lead to the same results in America as in France.

The Wobblies believe that such a plan is utopian, and one must recognize that the conditions of work in the depths of the AFL are really not conducive to successful syndicalist activity. Anarcho-syndicalists must willy-nilly come to the conclusion that there remains little hope for the reorganization of the AFL from within by way of a gradual and relentless struggle in the unions against the conservative predilections of their leaders. But this still doesn't mean that any struggle inside the AFL is futile, as the Wobblies seem to think.

There's no doubt that the IWW played a major role in pushing the AFL to the left, by demonstrating to the broad proletarian masses that revolutionary tactics can be more effective in the everyday struggle than the conciliatory tactics of the union leaders. But along with this there are deep rumblings inside the AFL, caused by the recent heightening of class contradictions — rumblings that create the soil for revolutionary work even inside the AFL, or at least inside some of its constituent organizations. It's hard to believe that such activity could lead by itself to fundamental changes in the program and tactics of the AFL, but the

results of this work will undoubtedly have an impact that will be shown when that moment arrives that the AFL, as a result of objective conditions, enters a period of profound organizational and tactical crises.

As a result of these considerations, anarcho-syndicalists can not adopt wholesale, even under the conditions of American reality, the organizational views of the IWW. Influencing the AFL and other large conservative labour organizations from outside has been the more effective tactic up till now. But it's impossible, proceeding from doctrinal considerations, to deny the fact that at a certain historical moment, new conditions can arise which will allow internal work inside these organizations to play its own, productive role.

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In talking about the views of the Wobblies, we always have in mind the views of the official leaders of this movement. But, as is well known, within the ranks of the IWW there are many revolutionary syndicalists close to our point of view, and their participation in this movement is undoubtedly rendering a strong influence on its direction. We, of course, consider it extremely desirable that anarcho-syndicalists participate in this movement, [and we encourage] anarcho-syndicalist comrades to join “industrial” organizations. A greater number of anarcho-syndicalists in the IWW means we have stronger hopes that this movement will eventually acknowledge as its own the principles of anarcho-syndicalism.

Endnotes

1. The term “industrialism” is used here to refer to the principle of organizing workers according to industry, rather than craft. Since this meaning of the word is now archaic, we have replaced “industrialist” throughout with “Wobbly,” a term not used by the author. —Archibald
2. The Socialist Labor Party of America and the Socialist Party of America. —Syndicalism.org eds.
3. Makhaevism is the ideology of followers of Jan Waclaw Machajski (1866-1926), who encouraged workers to concentrate on economic demands and oppose the domination of intellectuals in the revolutionary movement. —Archibald

Additional Information

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