

Reflections on Revolution

“Anarcho-Syndicalism” by Rudolf Rocker

AbolitionistWrites

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In today's world, the effects of living in a highly stratified society is a reality that can be felt as a constant stress upon the marginalized. While we have relatively high standards of living in so-called "Western" countries, those living conditions are only present for those already well-off and are based on the exploitation of workers locally and globally. The world seems trapped in a spiral of ecological destruction, and constant economic crises that only ever seem to benefit the rich. I've noticed more and more of a trend in my generation, Gen-Z, that we are becoming increasingly aware of these issues and want to pursue change, but are lacking in our methods and structures for transforming society. This is where Reflections on Revolution is situated, where I review and assess texts about historical and contemporary currents in liberation movements.

In this first Reflection on Revolution, I'll be reflecting on the text "Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice" written by Rudolf Rocker and published in 1938. This text was published during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939, a hard-fought conflict between an alliance of Fascists, Monarchists and Nationalists, and an alliance of Republicans, Socialists, Communists, and Anarchists. In addition to being a civil war, this was also a period during which an Anarchist revolution was occurring. The main Anarchist presence in Spain at the time was the CNT-FAI, a federation of Anarcho-Syndicalist trade unions where workers collectively managed their production and distribution of goods. The acronym CNT-FAI is commonly understood to be the close relationship between two organizations; the Confederación Nacional del Trabajo/National Confederation of Labour (CNT), and the Federación Anarquista Ibérica/Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI). While the specifics of the CNT-FAI play an important role in this text for contextualizing the structure and methodology of Anarcho-Syndicalism, a deep dive into the CNT-FAI is fit for a different reading in the future. For now, let's talk about that word; "Anarcho-Syndicalism".

What is Anarcho-Syndicalism?



Ana Garbín Alonso, the militiawoman portrayed by Antoni Campaña in Barcelona in 1936.⁽¹⁾

Anarcho-syndicalism is a fusion of two terms that describe distinct political tendencies; Anarchism and Syndicalism. In this text¹, Rudolf Rocker gives a definition of the first term

“Anarchism is a definite intellectual current in the life of our times, whose adherents advocate the abolition of economic monopolies and of all political and social coercive institutions within society. In place of the present capitalistic economic order Anarchists would have a free association of all productive forces based upon co-operative labour, which would have as its sole purpose the satisfying of the necessary requirements of every member of society...”

Syndicalism refers to the organization of workers into trade unions (unions organized along the lines of a specific trade), which use direct action such as strikes, boycotts, sabotage, and protest to better the conditions of workers as a class.

Anarcho-syndicalism brings together these two frameworks of thought, into a set of practical methods and structures for revolution. It views the role of trade unions as not just improving workers conditions within the existing capitalist system, but also as a vessel for transforming society as a whole. It is based on the fundamental idea that by engaging in the revolutionary practices of class struggle, workers not only change the society around them but also transform themselves into the type of people that can collectively manage the economy.

Why Anarcho-Syndicalism?

In his text, Rocker attributes the formation of Anarcho-Syndicalism as a political current to the culmination of the experiences of union organizers during the 19th and 20th century. A particular focus here is in England, which in the 19th century was at a time of extreme repression for workers. Laws were blatantly targeted at criminalizing and executing union organizers and radical workers. This included the outlawing of “combinations” (now called unions), which were eventually repealed. Early Syndicalism in England heavily intersected with Chartism, a movement which sought political reform. However, the political reform movement resulted in marginal changes to law, which would be repeatedly repealed or go unenforced to cater to the profits of industrial corporations. This resulted in the following shift in thinking as Rocker describes:

“Political rights do not exist because they have been legally set down on a piece of paper, but only when they have become the ingrown habit of a people, and when any attempt to impair them will meet with the violent resistance of the populace.”

This quote to me, is reminiscent of a recent case of freedoms being limited in Canada. In November 2022, the Canadian province of Ontario used the notwithstanding clause to pass Bill 28, which limited the freedom of association of Canadians to force striking education workers back to work. Several days later, the use of the notwithstanding clause was revoked, and the bill was never put into effect. The revocation of Bill 28 was not due to Ontario’s government magically gaining a conscience. Ontario’s Premier Doug Ford is universally known for suppressing resistance to his profiteering off of privatizing public infrastructure. No, Bill 28 was revoked after an illegal

¹ Rocker, R. (1938) Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice. Martin Seeker and Warburg Ltd.

strike and protest by CUPE, a union of 50,000 public sector education workers²³. CUPE was also open to the possibility of a “general strike”, where other unions across different trades strike in solidarity to bring the economy to a grinding halt⁴. This militant force is what ensured the right of workers to freedom of association, and what Rocker generally means in that quotation.

Continuing with Rocker’s description, Anarcho-Syndicalism was gaining a foothold in several countries as well as the International Workingmens’ Association (commonly referred to as the “First International”). The international characteristic of the labour movement in the 19th and 20th century was focused initially on libertarian socialism, as opposed to state socialism. In addition to the aforementioned negative experiences of workers’ organizations with States, Rocker also attributes this initial libertarian characteristic to the observation that

“...the various schools of state-socialism of that time attributed to the trade unions either no importance at all or at best only a subordinate one”.

At the 1868 Hague congress of the First International, the influence of Marx and Engels resulted in a split in the organization into two camps:

1. Anarchists who believed in bottom-up organizing through working class organizations while rejecting electoralism as a strategy.
2. Marxists who believed in top-down control of working class organizations through running communist parties in state elections.

In this text, further attention is also given to the continued harsh experiences of Syndicalist unions with state socialism after the Russian Revolution. A particular focus here is given to Lenin, who under the guise of “Internationalism” attempted to form a Third International to bring together workers and trade unions after the dissolution of the Second International during WW1. But such an International was compromised from the start by Lenin’s underlying ideology surrounding the role of trade unionism which pushed away the major Syndicalist unions from joining. As Rocker puts:

“The foundation of the Third International, with its dictatorial apparatus of organisation and its effort to make the whole labour movement of Europe into an instrument of the foreign policy of the Bolshevik state, quickly made plain to the Syndicalists that there was no place for them in that organisation.”

For Lenin, the Syndicalist trade unions were not for workers to institute self-management, but were to be subordinated to communist party leadership. This resulted in the split of many major Syndicalist unions from the Third International to form a separate international organization centred not on party politics, but on the principles of direct action and the free association of workers.

² Seebruch, N. (2022, November 4). *Unions rally to support striking education support workers*. Rabble.ca. <https://rabble.ca/labour/unions-support-cupe-strike-for-ed-workers/>.

³ Carson, J. & Siemiatycki, M. (2022, November 15). *CUPE education workers defeat a government bully*. Rabble.ca. <https://rabble.ca/labour/cupe-education-workers-defeat-a-government-bully/>.

⁴ Seebruch, N. (2022, November 2). *CUPE Ontario President says general strike ‘absolutely a possibility’*. Rabble.ca.

How Anarcho-Syndicalism?

In this section, I'll be explaining those specific methods that Rocker details in this text. Be advised that I will also be inserting some of my own reasoning in here about the specific things that he states as I understand them. I have modified the wording to something I think is more clear, but if you are interested to read his explanation you can find it on pgs. 38–40 of the text.

Anarcho-Syndicalism as explained by Rocker is concerned with both structure and methodology. The structure revolves around the two types of organizations:

1. The Labour Cartels, which are the combination of all trade unions within a specific locality/city.
2. The Industrial Alliances, which is the combination of all similar trades across the entire nation.

An important principle within Anarcho-Syndicalism which extends to current strategies is **federalism**. Federalism refers to the affiliation of separate organizations to one organization, with the Anarchist caveat here that the separate organizations retain significant local autonomy and cannot vetoed by any central body. Thus, all Labour Cartels across the nation are allied/federated together into a National Federation of Labour Cartels, and all Industrial Alliances across all trades are federated together into a National Federation of Industrial Alliances. This differs significantly from parliamentary notions of federalism as the Labour Cartels and Industrial Alliances don't hold any legislative capacity, but are the result of mutual agreements between workers themselves to organize their own production.

There are a three basic questions about revolution which must addressed in this model:

1. How does one organize resistance to the current state of society?
2. How does one disrupt and cause a transformation to the current state of society?
3. How does one organize production and consumption after such a transformation?

These four structures; the Labour Cartels, the Industrial Alliances, the National Federation of Labour Cartels, and the National Federation of Industrial Alliances, are answers to the first and third question. The second question is a concern of methodology, which Rocker addresses on a separate page.

1. During the period of movement building, Labour Cartels are local bodies that educate workers and carry through local resistance. The National Federation of Labour Cartels is the body in which the Labour Cartels collectively form effective strategies for resistance across all localities. Similarly, the Industrial Alliances are specific bodies that educate and agitate within separate trade unions, and the National Federation of Industrial Alliances is the body in which these separate Industrial Alliances collectively form effective strategies for resistance across all trades.

<https://rabble.ca/labour/cupe-president-strike-a-possibility/>.

2. There are several methods for resistance which are worth mentioning, such as boycotts, strikes, protests, sit-ins, and so on. But one which is given a particular importance by Rocker and Anarcho-Syndicalists is the general strike, which refers to the withholding of labour from capitalists by the working class as a whole. Subsequently, this results in the collapse of the structures by which capitalists and capitalists exploit and extract value from workers. It's common in general strikes to instead redirect labour towards sustaining the needs of communities. An example being agricultural unions producing and distributing food into community-run food stores rather than selling it to capitalists.
3. As this disruption and transformation occurs, the four structures from before now take on transformed functions. The Labour Cartels now assess the consumption needs of their locality, and the National Federation of Labour Cartels can then assess the needs of the entire nation through the co-operation of the Labour Cartels. The Industrial Alliances organize the production of each trade to meet the needs of the localities and nation, and the National Federation of Industrial Alliances then organizes production across all trades through the co-operation of the Industrial Alliances. At the level of worksites/factories/farms, one particular form this has historically taken is councils of workers that manage production through general assembly and rotating managerial positions.

It's important to note here that Rocker is a synthesist. Meaning that (perhaps out of a sense of practicality), he believes that various forms of socialist economies would co-exist. They may be based on a market economy, a communist economy, or a collectivist economy, or co-existing together in different combinations. The reasoning for this is as he puts it:

“Mutualism, Collectivism and Communism are not to be regarded as closed systems permitting no further development, but merely as economic assumptions as to the means of safeguarding a free community.”

Anarcho-Syndicalist Present and Futures

While the book contains important historical information for contextualizing and understanding Anarcho-Syndicalism, I would briefly like to touch on the current state of Anarcho-Syndicalism to put this book into perspective.

One aspect which has found in modern Anarcho-Syndicalism an important characteristic is that of Internationalism. The international current during the period of the Spanish Civil War was the International Workers Association (IWA), founded in 1922 at a Berlin conference. The IWA is still currently active, with members consisting of Anarchist federations from Australia, Spain, Norway, France, Italy, and Germany (to name a few out of the 21 total affiliated organizations). Something which piqued my interest while reading through the IWA's May 2023 External Bulletin was the case of 11 workers at an Ansell (an Australian multinational manufacturer) factory in Sri Lanka that were fired for organizing a union at their workplace.⁵ Their union tried fighting for compensation through the courts and won, but Ansell appealed the court decision in order to drag the issue on as long as they could. This went on for 10 long years. The sacked workers

⁵ IWA-AIT. (2023, May). *IWA External Bulletin May 2023. (A4 Version)*. IWA-AIT. <https://iwa-ait.org/content/iwa-external-bulletin-may-2023-a4-version>.

got into contact with the IWA Asia Pacific Sub-Secretariat, and their call out for assistance was forwarded to the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation (ASF), which is an IWA Section based in Australia. The ASF local unions then organized pickets of the Ansell HQ in Melbourne, and began an international campaign assisted by the Workers' Solidarity Federation (WSF) in the US and the CNT-AIT in France to get Ansell to concede. This international campaign resulted in all the workers being fully compensated by Ansell for being unjustly fired.⁶ Such an international characteristic is now essential, as capitalism is increasingly defined through global markets where corporations place a false antagonism between workers across the arbitrary borders of nation-states. That false antagonism can be broken by creating international solidarity among workers' organizations.

Another critical feature in the current context of Anarcho-Syndicalism is the emerging radical ecology in syndicalist organizations. This topic is explored in the text "Green Syndicalism" by Jeff Shantz⁷ who explores the rising concern of climate crisis among IWW organizers. Jeff Shantz states:

"Green syndicalists recognise that ecological crises have only become possible within social relations whose articulation has engendered a weakening of people's capacities to fight a co-ordinated defence of the planet's ecological communities."

Here, another issue can be dismantled. There is a false antagonism constructed between environmentalists and industrial labour. When we step outside of the narrow mindset of capitalism and instead view unions as vessels for transforming society rather than simply winning concessions, we can see that the need for ecological living and workplaces organized by workers are intimately entangled concepts. Both are concerned with the restructuring of society away from private ownership, and towards collective self-management. Green Syndicalism is notably becoming an increasing perspective within international organizations like the IWA. From the report on the recent 28th Congress of the IWA in Alcoy, Spain⁸:

We were interested to know which organisations are discussing this topic [climate crisis], if they are involved in any activities (and opportunities and obstacles they see), how they view the topic in general and if they are interested in participating further in the activities of the working group... The discussion positively surprised us and was one of the longest at the Congress. While in 2019 this topic was approached in a way that we did not quite like, now the situation was completely different. It turned out that many groups are or would like to be active around this topic.

A notable report was from the Workers' Solidarity Federation (WSF) in Pakistan where workers used direct action and mutual aid with the help of international solidarity to respond to a flooding disaster. These work doubly as a way for Anarchists to be actively vocal and involved in

⁶ Lugijs. (2023, October 3). *Victory! Sacked workers receive compensation at last*. ASF-IWA. <https://asf-iwa.org.au/victory-sacked-workers-receive-compensation/>.

⁷ Shantz, J. (2011, April 7). *Green Syndicalism — An Alternative Red-Green Vision*. IWW Environmental Unionism Caucus. <https://ecology.iww.org/texts/JeffShantz/Green%20Syndicalism%20%E2%80%93%20An%20Alternative%20Red-Green%20Vision>.

⁸ pa. (2022, December 19). *Great news from the 28th Congress of the International Workers' Association*. IWA-AIT. <https://www.iwa-ait.org/content/great-news-28th-congress-international-workers-association>.

radical ecological practices while simultaneously spreading the influence of Anarchist organizing methodology and structure within ecological movements.

Closing Remarks

Overall, I've found that reading through "Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice" has reinvigorated my interest in understanding and building models for collective self-management. Not just seeing labour movements as ones that have passed a long time ago, but exploring the forms in which they still exist and are modifying themselves. There are shortcomings to note in this text when it comes to building connections between Anarcho-Syndicalism and writings from other Anarchists. For instance, I've found two readings recently that satiate my other curiosities about liberation which receive only a passing mention in this text. One is "Anarchism, and Other Essays" by Emma Goldman that addresses the specific social forms of domination that coincide with economic domination, and the second is "Conquest of Bread" by Peter Kropotkin which centres the satisfying of human needs as the first priority of any revolution. Outside of this criticism, I'm pleasantly surprised by the content and delivery of Rocker's writing here, and I plan on going through more of his readings.

If there's one thing that I can take away from this text, it wouldn't necessarily even be the specifics of Anarcho-Syndicalism as a model (even though it is practically useful to learn). Moreso, what motivated me in reading this text was understanding the resilience of working class struggles and the connections to contemporary working class struggles. After a period of severe repression, working class movements are beginning to reconstruct themselves and asking what it means for the future of society to engage in class struggle.

After the installation of nationalist dictator Franco following the Spanish Civil War, the CNT-FAI disappeared from public life. Yet after decades of a dictatorship hell bent on crushing any remaining forces of resistance, the CNT and FAI both re-emerged in the 1970s after Franco's death. Still alive. Still breathing. Still fighting. It is that continual reanimation of Anarchism through the collective will and knowledge base of workers, which shows Anarchism to not only be a set of theoretical commitments but a practice which refuses to dissolve in the face of repression and reaction.

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