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The Lessons of History

Albert Meltzer

June 1952

The Syndicalist (The syndicalist for workers' control) was a monthly anarchist newspaper published from May 1952 to April 1953 by the Anarcho-Syndicalist Committee (including Albert Grace, Albert Meltzer and Philip Sansom). It was an agitational paper, hence the need for this article explaining the point of putting pieces on history in. We've written elsewhere about "Albert Meltzer and the fight for working class history" (KSL bulletin 76, October 2013. www.katesharpleylibrary.net. This is an early appearance of his concern with history as inspiration for future struggles (which led him to play a central role in the Kate Sharpley Library).

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The series of articles on syndicalism in various countries has been short, both for reasons of space, and limitations of knowledge. It is unfortunate that many of the revolutionary movements of vital concern to us have not received sufficient documentation. It should be our constant aim to add to this knowledge, as there is something positive to be gained from it.

The cursory reader might regard it as being remote from his interest that such-and-such a revolutionary strike took place in such-and-such a country. Likewise, as most of the material which comes to be published on it in English is in the nature of protests against repression, he might draw the one-sided conclusion that all such revolts are doomed to failure, and find, perhaps, sympathy but not inspiration.¹

It is in the nature of revolts that many have been successful in lifting countries out of a morass of feudalism that persisted in modern times, but naturally none has finally achieved a free society which exists unchallenged and flourishing. This could not possibly be the case in the political circumstances of the world to-day, with an unabated trend to dictatorship and monopoly. If one thing had not caused a libertarian achievement to go under, another would have followed. Hence the record of foreign intervention in countries like Spain and Mexico on occasions when it was possible that the authoritarian society might collapse.

From the industrial struggles and revolutionary attempts that have taken place we can, however, draw many conclusions. That a consciously Anarcho-Syndicalist movement can be built up is proved by the Spanish experience, and that workers' control can be put into practice was seen in the collectivised undertakings of 1936. We have also found that political influence can creep in (which can be seen in Mexico, when twice the anarchists have abandoned syndicalist movements they had built up, which had later been corrupted, in order to build again on a libertarian basis). The example of the Argentine shows how political influence can be kept out, and the struggles of the F.O.R.A. are closely parallel to those of the I.W.W. in North America. In both cases, however, we have seen the unavoidable wane of influence when militant workers turned

¹ The 'protests against repression' Meltzer mentions probably include those against the executions of anarchist militants of the Tallion group on 14 March 1952. See A Leaflet [protesting the execution of members of the Tallion group] www.katesharpleylibrary.net

to the Communists under the "glamour value" of the Russian Revolution.

The spontaneous possibilities of the workers, even without a positive syndicalist movement, are seen in the struggles in Germany after the fall of the Kaiser [1918–19]. There the workers were in a position to seize their workplaces, and likewise establish free communes. The latter, a typically anarchistic conception as opposed to the conquest of State power, was something seen in Spain which was a rebellion against the Marxist tradition in Germany.

Syndicalism as an industrial weapon was perfected in France, but with the decline of influence of the Anarchists owing to the rise of social-democracy and chauvinism, such syndicalism became corrupted and used against the workers, both by social-democrats, and later, by communists. In England we have seen that syndicalism faced the possibility of becoming merely a "trend in the labour movement". This proved fatal to it, for revolutionary syndicalism has flourished when it is separate and apart from the reformist labour movement. It might be pointed out to those who wail about "splitting the workers" that in many cases it has been the reformists who set up the dual union (often at governmental instigation or with the blessing of companies) because of the activities of the revolutionary syndicalists (e.g. Italy, Spain, and many South American countries). At other times the revolutionary union has been the challenger, but it has not split the workers according to crafts, as the reformist unionists take for granted.

A libertarian idea cannot be one that rests upon preconceived philosophies and written theories, but one that has been fashioned by experience. It is hoped, therefore, that a historical series such as the present has contributed towards the clarification of the theory of anarcho-syndicalism.