

Methods of Struggle

Anarcho-Syndicalist Tactics

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The following text was written to help people discover, remind themselves or popularize the various syndicalist methods of struggle because in any battle, one must start from a few key ideas:

Hitting the enemy harder than they can hit you: or better yet — hitting them so they can't hit back.

Analysing the power balance:

How great are our numbers.

How much other workers and the general population will sympathise with or reject our struggle.

What are our financial constraints, ie. financial and material resources available to continue the fight.

Avoiding exhaustion: fighting too arduously from the start can be a weakness — the employers are prepared to overcome short term difficulties by transferring production, resuming production in other places, maintaining stocks, using scabs, financial reserves, etc.

Knowing how to stop a fight, avoiding fighting to the end when the situation is unfavourable. A continued minority occupation of a business ends up offering the boss discontented people who can he can turn against the strikers. Wages lost become so great that resuming a struggle becomes difficult. Disillusionment makes mobilisation harder.

Allowing for a return to the struggles or demands.

Analysing the history, strategy, and objectives of the forces in play:

Bosses/workers: moderate or hardline employers, combative or passive employees.

Organisation/struggles: whether the unions are weak or radical, if the fights benefit from autonomous experience, etc.

Struggles are defined by the employment category, territorial extent or by their content

Employment category: struggles of unskilled workers, skilled workers, postal workers or nurses, white collar workers, teachers, technicians, etc — called sectional struggles. If the struggle involves the entire company or institution and deals with claims for all staff, the struggle is industrial.

Territorial: if the struggle takes place in one particular location of a business, it is a local fight.

A fight at the **group level** is located in several places but within the same company.

The struggle may be in a sector or industry: for example, the health sector or education sector. The struggle can take place in all business lines and sites.

Content: content of the struggle can be material (wages, pensions, working conditions hours, health and safety), political (changing a law, a critique of anti social policy, gaining new union rights, the formation of worker counterpower within a company, etc). Of course it can also combine the two aspects, for example the simplification and standardisation over grades and

qualifications in a given industry. This material claim allows the unification of workers in the same industry and thus open the prospect of larger struggles.

The fight may also simply be held in **solidarity with other struggles**.

The different types of struggle

Verbal protest: this type of struggle is the most simple.

Petition: a written denunciation, a complaint, expressing a desire/disapproval. The petition can, sometimes, exert influence to obtain a list of benefits, often illusory, insubstantial or demagogic (designed for political power by appealing to rhetoric). Some unions which do or wish to do little or nothing engage in petitions for an election or to keep their conscience clean.

Walkout: the cessation of activity for a few hours at most. The stoppage expresses a greater dissatisfaction, the birth of a certain radicalisation.

The stoppage is used as pressure for negotiations on short term or minor claims. For example, the lack of ventilation or heating, breaks, bonus issues, problems with safety equipment, etc.

Partial strike: Workers stopping in rotation.

Advantage: minimum loss of wage to individuals whilst the company is practically paralysed and the company still pays its employees who are now less productive or indeed idle. Employers try to put to work non striking employees, supervisors, agency staff or contractors. If this proves insufficient it may close the company for a while, locking workers out rather than paying people to be idle.

Go slow: a reduction in the rate or work to become as unproductive as possible.

Work to rule: excessively strict observance of instructions and regulations which hinders the proper functioning of the work.

Limited strike: workers stop working for a specific amount of time.

Indefinite strike: cessation of work by employees until they have resolved the issues in the conflict (or otherwise decide to return).

Advantage: expresses a degree of radicalisation, involvement in struggle, blocks all or part of production.

Disadvantage: substantial loss of wages for the striking workers. The company may continue production with non striking workers, contracted staff or they may move production to another site.

Picket line: The creation of barriers to prevent non striking workers entering the workplace. The material conditions of pickets are often deplorable: no shelter, being subject to the weather. Some non striking workers sometimes manage to enter the premises or remain inside to ensure continued production.

Occupation: The striking workers occupy the workplace and evacuate all non striking workers. They take control of meeting rooms, canteens, dormitories, copiers, telephones and vehicles.

The internal action: limited to within the company, within the institution.

The exterior action: the invasion and occupation of institutions, establishments, administrations or government departments favourable to the employer: the Department for Work and

Pensions, courts, city halls, local political offices, newspaper headquarters, the Chamber of Commerce, management's living quarters, or a company to which production has been moved or which is linked to the conflict.

The fight should seek to obtain the support and collusion of the general public, explain the demands and avoid disturbing other workers and the public where possible.

Local demonstration: It publicises the conflict, popularizes the fight, maintains pressure, helps to assess the balance of power.

National or international demonstration: follows the same rules as local but on a large scale.

Rumours: spread rumours, information of all types to weaken the enemy.

Discredit: make public criticisms of the quality of the products or facilities of the business.

Sabotage: (See *Sabotage* by Emile Pouget). This ancient method of fighting is quick and direct. It is still practised but not publicised. It should be handled by people aware of the risks. Catastrophic destruction can even result in the closure of the company. Perhaps a scale of actions may be made to avoid major problems. Sabotage is very effective, low cost for the strikers whilst very damaging to the employer. Always remember that the action must be harmful to the employers but not to users themselves, eg. utilities, transport, electricity, healthcare, food, etc.

Re-appropriation: Recovery and control by workers of goods produced by the company — that is to say produced by the workers themselves.

(Unauthorised) Sale of stock: Selling the company's stock to build a warchest and compensate workers.

Autonomous production: The strikers use the company's machines to produce good which can be sold directly to the people at lower cost. This will satisfy everyone and bring funds to the strikers.

Unauthorised work: using their own tools strikers repair, manufacture or provide services to individuals for a fee. The proceeds are put into the strike fund. For example, hairdressers in Rennes cut people's hair in a public square. In Australia the tram drivers ran the trams freely for the population.

Boycott: On the request of workers struggling in a company people do not buy the products or services provided by that company.

Civil disobedience: refusal to comply with the laws of the state. To support and assist repressed people. Refusal to pay taxes, to show identification, etc.

Generalised strike: A strike situation which affects one or several sectors of production (or commerce) in a region, country or several countries.

General strike: A strike which crosses sectors in a region, country or internationally. It is a conscious and concerted action, which differentiates it from the generalised strike. It is the weapon desired by and defended by anarcho-syndicalists. It is an act by the masses, the population, which is anarcho-syndicalist whether they understand it or not. Indeed, at this stage, people want and intend to fight and challenge their adversaries. They do not rely upon governmental elections, or promises for the future, to effect reform. The people struggle, here and now, relying on direct action, intend to resolve their demands. The general strike expresses the conflict of opposed classes clearly. If it is large, the balance of power is favourable and new choices may appear.

The insurrectionary general strike: for various reasons the strikers form barricades, create disorder and riots. Everywhere the people rise up in arms, opening the prospect of the expropriation of the capitalists.

The expropriatory general strike: the strikers, masters of the street, seize the means of production, exchange and communication. Businesses, commerce, governments are under the control of the committees of struggle. This is the prelude to a profound social change which, in our opinion, will lead to libertarian communism.

Some advice

A number of techniques of struggle from syndicalist history and practise have been presented. **It is necessary for everyone to judge their usefulness.**

Each technique must match the stake. It is not necessary to deploy heavy means for a small gain. Example: for a small struggle, walkouts, partial strikes, go-slows and work to rule are sufficient.

After applying a technique, evaluate it. If it proves to be insufficient, **graduate to a more radical method.** Always keep the pressure applied. Starting at too high a level and stepping back may expose, or be considered to be, weakness which the enemy can take advantage of.

Beware of false radicals: consider whether those who spread radicalism are sincere or not (even if they are right at that moment in what they say). There are those who come forward and push for unsuitable conflict, they try to play hard in order to stick with and gain the trust of the strikers, eventually to do away with the movement or kill the fight, or knowing that defeat is assured, they wish to capitalise on the trust they have gained in an election. If they are in collusion with the enemy, they will start a tough and ultimately doomed struggle which will weigh heavily when the boss attacks later (with restructualisation, redundancies, etc.), because the previous defeat will make it hard for the workers to fight back.

Analyse the relationships of power: for example, upcoming union or political elections which will pressure the powers that be to avoid conflict.

Analyse the level of public discontent, and the financial and economic situation at the company where the strike action is to occur.

Analyse the status of stock held by the company: if they have large amounts the employers will continue to sell their products whilst simultaneously reducing their payroll due to the strike. In contrast, low levels of stocks, or perishable stocks will disadvantage the employers a great deal. Note that after the strike the employer may attempt to force increased overtime work in order to make up for losses suffered during the strike and catch up on delayed orders.

Review the status of upcoming orders, the extent of financial reserves, possibilities for transferring production to other locations. We can prepare the ground for a fight by using a combination of techniques such as a go slow, limited strikes, sabotage, work to rule, or absenteeism to reduce production.

Avoid retaliation by ensuring that the identities of those taking action remain unknown. Make sure the employer knows as little as possible about who is who and who does what. Obscure the number of people involved in the conflict, as well as dates and locations of meetings. Agree to actions at the last minute to avoid disclosure.

Opt for a strike committee which is wider than the union branches.

The strike committee must emanate from and be directed by the general assembly of the strikers.

Multiply the base of your actions: media, propaganda, finance, independent production and unauthorised work in support. This forces the enemy to draw upon more of their resources to fight the strike.

Apply direct democracy in the general meetings to avoid having a small group seizing control for purposes other than those decided upon by the general assembly. Close attention is required when people advocate a vanguard party or trade union: even if legal it cannot serve the interests of the people. If conspiracies are suspected, or closed meetings, document and report them.

It is useless to send people to negotiate with the boss, the director or the board of directors. Nor is it useful to send staff representatives or ‘experts’ in negotiation. They serve no purpose except make you believe in them, and impose a delegation of responsibility, persuading people of the necessity of reformist unions. The bourgeoisie knows how to use tools to analyse unrest. For example, production slows or quality falls, absenteeism and sabotage increase. The employers will quickly understand that the workers are unhappy, even if they try to deny or hide this. The management knows the grievance and what it will propose to the workers: **representatives are useless.**

Send to the press, the population and the employer a list of demands signed by the strike committee.

If the employer wants to negotiate or offer to meet some demands, they can make their proposals known through the media, publishing them in the press, by posting a notice or by speaking to the workers at an assembly. The committee will respond in writing. There is no need to send delegates to a negotiation who risk being satisfied with crumbs, or will defend their own ideas instead of remaining with the agenda of demands, especially if they are representatives of a reformist trade union.

Force the opponent to sign an agreement not to engage in repression after the conflict. Require pay for strike days. Try to minimise the financial impact of the conflict for employees, so if the management decided to counter attack, the employees are not weakened and can bring about a new conflict.

With the same thing in mind, **raise funds, hold concerts and festivals to gain financial support** for the fight. Take action to seek material support for the fight.

Legalism – illegalism

You should stay within the law as far as possible in order to avoid repression. But we should note that **the law does not support our interests.** Very quickly, workers have to act illegally in order to meet their goals: picketing, occupations, independent production. But we need to analyse calmly the advantages and implications. You’ll quickly discover that the law, legitimised by the state, is not neutral and serves the interests of the bourgeoisie above all.

Based on Bakunin’s idea “Law is merely the state of affairs backed by force,” what we impose will become legal.

Violence – non violence

The situation doesn't necessarily have to be one or the other, it could be a largely non-violent struggle with occasional violent incidents, or vice versa. Sometimes a non violent and determined conflict can be effective, sometimes not. A large well behaved protest can be effective, but a rowdy one can be even more so. It's a question of context and the choice of the people engaged in the struggle.

However, be cautious about violence and who is provoking it (whether it is the strikers or their opponents).

Anarcho syndicalists are supporters of a world without violence, without weapons: this is our goal. But we also see that aggressive resistance of employees can be legitimate violence against the violence of the bourgeoisie: repression, prisons, exploitation, lay-offs, wars, pollution, etc.

Organising ourselves

We must now consider the **type of organisation appropriate to the fight.**

Does the unionist left defend the interests of the workers, or other interests? Does it prepare for the fight, defend it, without introducing models of conciliation and mediation favourable to the bourgeoisie? Does it pacify struggle? Can it be radicalised? Is the legal protection of trade union representatives effective? Do recognised unions guarantee the protection of union members?

Apparently, given the thousands of union members who have been laid off – no. In any case, recognised or not, protected or not, participating in illegal actions will expose you to lay-offs. So the protection is in this case useless.

Worse, trying to protect themselves through legal means leads the supporters of these methods to comply with laws which are favourable to the employers, to not engage in fights outside the legal framework and therefore to defend the bourgeois legality become counter-revolutionary.

Engaging in double talk: having the facade of legality whilst acting illegally is unsustainable because union officials will be obliged, consciously or unconsciously, to defend the legal framework, strengthening themselves whilst weakening their critics in order to maintain the legal protections they enjoy. Furthermore, when the legal framework protects some individuals it becomes difficult to reject it.

And don't doubt: if the struggle threatens the bourgeoisie's position they will ignore the law, and union officials will be left to reflect upon their supposed rights under the law.

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