

Syndicalism, Marxist Myth and Anarchist Reality

Anarcho

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“In drawing up theses for the international workers’ movement we must not begin with theoretical, preconceived assumptions... If we forsake the empirical road and take one that is doctrinaire, we cannot create an International of struggle.”

Augustin Souchy at the Second Congress of the Communist International¹

Introduction

Revolutionary syndicalism and related movements (such as Industrial Unionism) in its heyday of the first two decades of the twentieth century was a militant working class tendency which gathered around it millions of activists and union members. Its influence was international and from being a product of libertarian influence in the French labour movement spread into the wider socialist movement, drawing in many Marxist activists and thinkers (such as Daniel de Leon, James Connolly and Big Bill Haywood). However, by the 1930s it had been eclipsed by Leninism or crushed by fascism in most countries (with the exception of Spain). Many former syndicalists, particularly in France, Britain, Ireland and the USA, had embraced Bolshevism (some after visiting Russia).

Ralph Darlington’s *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism* seeks to explain both the rise of syndicalism and why Leninism replaced it within the revolutionary left. As such, it is in two parts. The first is an attempt to explain what syndicalism is, its origins and influences, its internal discussion (or “divisions”), its growth and decline. The second presents the Leninist critique of syndicalism, based on the Bolsheviks’ attempts at “trying to win [the syndicalists] over to Marxism” (183) in the Comintern.

Sadly, his book fails on both counts. This is precisely because the author is a Leninist, a member of the British SWP or sympathetic to it.² Thus we find Darlington stating that “from a Marxist perspective there are a number of serious limitations in syndicalist theory and practice” (183) yet he fails to entertain the notion that Leninist practice and theory has serious limitations and that the syndicalist/libertarian critique of it has validity. With his Marxist prejudices, Darlington fails to seriously investigate obvious sources on the origins of syndicalism in the libertarian wing of the IWMA and instead postulates Marxism as one of its core elements. Yet to proclaim that syndicalism had “core elements of anarchism, Marxism and trade unionism” (76) cannot be done once Bakunin’s ideas on the labour movement are acknowledged.

As such, his account of the origins of syndicalism shows the usual Leninist ignorance about anarchism, his account of syndicalist ideas is squeezed into an ideological straightjacket and his overall perspective is skewed with the assumption that the Bolsheviks were right. This produces a deeply flawed work. At its best, it presents discussions within syndicalism reasonably well. At its worse, it simply repeats Marxist ideology and eschews serious analysis. Ironically, Darlington himself provides more than enough evidence to refute his own Marxist assumptions.

Darlington’s work is also flawed by a complete failure to discuss the outcome of the Russian Revolution. While he is correct to state that Leninism “was attractive to syndicalists” because “the success of the Bolshevik Revolution offered them an alternative” (200) it is also correct to state that this “success” was more apparent than real – if, by success, it is meant a move towards

¹ *Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, p. 175

² Given Darlington’s favourable references to Tony Cliff and use of SWP material as references this seems fair conclusion to draw.

socialism. Today, with far more awareness of what Alexander Berkman termed *The Bolshevik Myth* in radical circles, it seems unlikely that simply repeating the Comintern line will convince many – particularly given Darlington’s unwillingness to admit the reality of Bolshevik Russia and the correctness of libertarian critiques of its “success.”

Sadly, this book will undoubtedly become the standard work used by Leninists to critique syndicalism. Give this, it is worthwhile to document its problems and show how they express preconceived assumptions rather than facts.

Marxist Myths versus Anarchist Reality

A key problem with Darlington’s work is that he completely fails to question his Marxist assumptions about anarchism. This can best be seen when he references SWP articles and publications as if they were unproblematic works of scholarship.

The flaws in this are exposed when Darlington discusses Italian Anarchism in the 1870s and proclaims that anarchist support rested “in the towns and countryside of the South and had relatively little following in the northern cities.” (70) To provide some academic respectability to this claim, he references an SWP book. However, consulting *that* book shows that its author makes no attempt to bolster the claim with anything as trivial as empirical evidence. So rather than make an assertion he references another Leninist who makes an assertion.

This is unsurprising, given that Marxist ideology assumes anarchists reject proletarian organisation and so, by definition, they must have been based in the peasantry. That assumption is false and so we find that in reality (rather than ideology) the “real stronghold of Italian anarchism was north-central Italy” and “salaried workers, journeymen artisans, and independent artisans predominated” (this “reflected the Italian economy of the 1870s”). In reality, the peasantry was the one “with the least representation.” This summary is based on an analysis of membership of the Italian sections of the IWMA.³

This blindness to the reality of anarchism can also be seen when Darlington discusses Spain. He writes of how “*syndicalist* principles of revolutionary unionism combined with *anarchist* notions” (53) but then later notes how the Spanish anarchists in the 1870s “organised mainly in working men’s associations” and “recommended their supporters to join trade unions and take a forceful role in their activities and direction.” (71) So Darlington *himself* shows how *revolutionary* anarchists had raised “principles of revolutionary unionism” decades before the term syndicalism was coined.

This can also be seen when, after proclaiming that “anarchists increasingly began to look to trade unions as a potential base for support” in the 1890s (70), Darlington destroys his own assertion by stating that in “Italy anarcho-syndicalism became a potent force after the Russian anarchist Bakunin had arrived in the country in the late 1860s.” (70) He then notes that Italian anarchist Errico Malatesta “became an almost legendary figure for his advocacy of revolutionary action by the trade unions” (71) before pointing to how Spanish anarchists in the 1870s took an active role in the labour movement. (71) Finally, he sketches how the Chicago anarchists in the 1880s “contributed to the building of a Central Labour Union which won the support of most of organised labour in the city.” (73)

³ Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism: 1864–1892*, p. 76, p. 78, p. 79

If Bakunin and Malatesta (“classical anarchists” by definition, surely?) advocated syndicalism then how can “classical” anarchism be differentiated from syndicalism as Darlington tries? It makes little sense to proclaim that the CNT’s “establishment in 1911 combined *syndicalist* principles of revolutionary unionism with the more traditional Spanish *anarchist* principles” (72) after sketching anarchist influence in Spanish unions since the IWMA, but that is what Darlington does. In short, he is wrong to state that “the core of syndicalist philosophy was not explicitly anarchist in character.” (73) While this may reflect his Marxist assumptions, it does not reflect the facts of anarchist unionism in Italy, Spain and America he himself provides *before* the rise of syndicalism in France in the 1890s.

This tendency to repeat ideological assumptions rather than investigate the facts can be seen from other aspects of Darlington’s account of anarchism. Thus we get the ritualistic invocation of “spontaneity” with the claim that anarchists “placed their faith in spontaneous uprisings and insurrections in the course of which the state would be abolished.” (69) If that were the case then why did Bakunin advocate taking an active part in the labour movement? Thus we find the Russian anarchist stressing that “when the revolution – brought about by the force of circumstances – breaks out, the International will be a real force and know what it has to do”, namely to “take the revolution into its own hands” and become “an earnest international organisation of workers’ associations from all countries” which will be “capable of replacing this departing political world of States and bourgeoisie.”⁴

Regardless of Marxist myths, anarchists have long stressed the need for working class organisation and struggle as well as the necessity for insurrection. This was usually combined with a recognition that anarchists organise *as anarchists*, into a political association to propagate our ideas within society. Indeed, this was one area of disagreement between anarchists and some syndicalists who discounted that need and instead argued unions made it redundant.⁵

Refuting the “spontaneity” myth highlights another one Darlington invokes, namely the usual Marxist assertion that anarchists do not view the proletariat as an agent of social change. So keen to bolster his assertion that syndicalism “was far from an anarchist invention” (73), Darlington proclaims that “[u]nlike the classical anarchists, who sought a social basis for the revolutionary movement amongst the peasants, lumpen-proletariat and petty-bourgeois elements, syndicalists looked to mass working class collective action at the point of production in the workplace to change society” and “to transform the trade unions into revolutionary instruments of the proletariat in its struggle against the bourgeoisie, in the process making the unions, rather than communes, the basic units of a future socialist order.” (73, 73–4)

Sadly for Darlington, it is easy to discover that anarchists held the positions he labels syndicalist and did not hold the ones labelled as anarchist. In the works of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and a host of other “classical” anarchists we discover a focus on the working class, economic class struggle and unions as both a means of struggle and as an unit of a (libertarian) socialist system. As Kropotkin summarised:

⁴ *The Basic Bakunin*, p. 110

⁵ This raises the issue of the relation of anarchism to syndicalism. While revolutionary anarchism had raised syndicalism as a strategy from its birth in the IWMA, not all syndicalists are anarchists while some anarchists rejected syndicalism. Most, however, were sympathetic to it, with Malatesta (for example) criticising aspects of syndicalism while embracing it as a *tactic*. He objected to those libertarians (syndicalists) who “take this means as an end” and allowed themselves “to be absorbed” by the labour movement. (*The International Anarchist Congress*, p. 122, p.126). Also see *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* by Schmidt and van der Walt.

“the anarchists... do not seek to constitute, and invite the working men not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly, since the foundation of the International Working Men’s Association [IWMA] in 1864–1866, they have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.”⁶

Thus we find historian Nunzio Pernicone stating that “[r]ather than support political action, the anarchists at Saint-Imier [in 1872] declared themselves in favour of labour organisation and economic resistance... labour organisations helped stimulate worker solidarity and class consciousness.” Unsurprisingly, then that “many anarchists, including Bakunin, had long recognised the revolutionary potential of syndicalism.”⁷

To quote the anarchists active in the IWMA who gathered at Saint-Imier, “the proletarians of every land should establish solidarity of revolutionary action outside of all bourgeois politicking.” Instead they advocated the “Organisation of Labour Resistance” as it created “a community of interests, trains [the proletariat] in collective living and prepares it for the supreme struggle.” The strike was regarded “as a precious weapon in the struggle” and “a product of the antagonism between labour and capital.” These “ordinary economic struggles” prepare “the proletariat for the great and final revolutionary conquest” which will destroy “all class difference.” The future socialist society would be created by the “proletariat itself, its trades bodies and the autonomous communes.”⁸

In this they repeated Bakunin who had argued for the “organisation of the trade sections and their representation by the Chambers of Labour” as these “bear in themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world. They are creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself.” The “very essence of socialism” lies in “the irrepressible conflict between the workers and the exploiters of labour.” A “living, powerful, socialist movement” can “be made a reality only by the awakened revolutionary consciousness, the collective will, and the organisation of the working masses themselves.” Socialism will be attained only “through the development and organisation of the non-political or anti-political social power of the working classes in city and country.”⁹

For Kropotkin, “the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers’ organisations which carry on the *direct* struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector, – the State.” This struggle “permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil that is done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.” Workers would become “the managers of production” in a system “of independent Communes

⁶ *Anarchism*, p. 287. Kropotkin’s support for revolutionary unionism is ably explored by Caroline Cahm in *Kropotkin and the rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886*.

⁷ Pernicone, *Op. Cit.*, p. 61, p. 117

⁸ Robert Graham (Ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas* Vol. 1, pp. 99–100. Malatesta attended this conference and so it is useful to compare this resolution to the one he submitted 35 years later in Amsterdam: “the Syndicates [are] organisations fighting in the class war for amelioration of the conditions of labour, and as unions of productive workers which can help in the transformation of capitalist society into Anarchist Communist society... it [is] the duty of Anarchists to constitute the revolutionary element in those organisations... the Syndicalist movement [is] a powerful means of revolution, but not... a substitute for revolution... [that is] armed insurrection and expropriation by force.” (*International Anarchist Conference*, pp. 132–2)

⁹ *Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 255, p. 191, p. 212, p. 263

for the territorial organisation, and of federations of Trade Unions for the organisation of men in accordance with their different functions.” This was the “concrete conception of society regenerated by a social revolution.”[10] Thus unions were both “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future order.”¹⁰

The clear and obvious similarities of the ideas expressed by these “classical” anarchists with the syndicalist positions Darlington lists shows the weakness of his case.¹¹

Darlington does at one point get close to the anarchist position. He states that “the anarchists were critical of the Marxist belief that the proletariat was the ‘revolutionary’ class. Believing class exploitation to be merely one form of oppression they highlighted the revolutionary potential of a wide variety of other social groups, including the rural peasantry and the urban underclass.” (69) That is true to some degree, but key word is *the* – recognising the “revolutionary potential” of, say, the peasantry never meant that anarchists rejected the revolutionary potential (and importance) of the proletariat.

Thus we find Bakunin arguing that the “initiative in the new movement will belong to the people... in Western Europe, to the city and factory workers – in Russia, Poland, and most of the Slavic countries, to the peasants.” However, “in order that the peasants rise up, it is absolutely necessary that the initiative in this revolutionary movement be taken up by the city workers... who combine in themselves the instincts, ideas, and conscious will of the Social Revolution.” He stressed that revolutionaries must “[o]rganise the city proletariat in the name of revolutionary Socialism” and “unite it into one preparatory organisation together with the peasantry.”¹²

Marxist selective quoting notwithstanding, for Bakunin “it seemed self-evident that the revolution, even in Eastern Europe, required the unity of peasantry and city workers because of the latter’s more advanced consciousness.” The notion that Bakunin stressed the role of the lumpen-proletariat is a “popular stereotype” but is one “more distorted by its decisive omissions than in what it says.” Marx “accented the revolutionary role of the urban proletariat and tended to deprecate the peasantry, while Bakunin, although *accepting* the vanguard role of the proletariat in the revolution, felt that the peasantry, too, approached correctly, also had great potential for revolution.” In short, Bakunin’s actual position is “is a far cry... from the Marxist stereotype of Bakunin-the-anarchist who relied exclusively on the backward peasantry and ignored the proletariat.”¹³

We could provide more quotes on this issue, but that would get tedious. Suffice to say, there are many resources available to consult for those still subscribing to Marxist Myths on this issue.¹⁴ Simply put, Darlington replaces analysis with assertions and assumptions.

Here it is important to stress that it is *revolutionary* anarchism that is being discussed here. Darlington mentions that “Proudhon had not been an advocate of class warfare, or indeed a committed supporter of the working class” (73) yet as Kropotkin stressed “[w]ithin these federations

¹⁰ quoted by Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p. 81

¹¹ As Malatesta noted in 1907 the syndicalists were following “the path” which “the first anarchists had already established and followed within the International.” (*The International Anarchist Congress*, p. 122)

¹² *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 375, p. 378

¹³ Alvin W. Gouldner, “Marx’s Last Battle: Bakunin and the First International”, pp. 853–884, *Theory and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 6, p. 871, p. 869, p. 870

¹⁴ For example: section H.2.2 (*Do anarchists reject the need for collective working class struggle?*), section H.2.7 (*Who do anarchists see as their “agents of social change”?*) and section H.2.8 (*What is the relationship of anarchism to syndicalism?*) of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

[of the IWMA] developed... what may be described as *modern anarchism*.¹⁵ While Proudhon did reject unions and strikes,¹⁶ the same cannot be said of revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin. While it is fair to note that syndicalism differs considerably from Proudhon's *reformist* anarchism in terms of tactics (while being influenced by it), ignoring the very obvious and clear links and similarities between Bakunin's *revolutionary* anarchism and syndicalism suggests a tendency to ignore facts in favour of ideology.

All this suggests that Darlington's claim that "the traditional assumption" that syndicalism "as simply an outgrowth of anarchism would be an over-simplification although the two were certainly directly related" (68) is false. Revolutionary anarchists had been advocating a syndicalist strategy since Bakunin and the IWMA.

Marxism and Syndicalism

As well as attempting to downplay the well-known and well-established links between syndicalism and anarchism, he is keen to stress that "*Marxism* also influenced [syndicalism] significantly." Syndicalism, he suggests, "inherited some central components of the Marxist tradition" (with the useful qualifier of "in however a diffuse form") including "the necessity and desirability of class struggle (of which strikes were the primary expression)", "the need for workers to take power *themselves*" and "theories of the exploitation of labour based on the extraction of surplus value" (75)

However, none of these "components" are inherently Marxist. Proudhon, for example, had an analysis of exploitation occurring in the labour process that has distinct similarities with Marx's later theory.¹⁷ In terms of "the necessity and desirability of class struggle", this was recognised by Bakunin and other "classical" anarchists.

Thus we find Bakunin stressing that "war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable" and for the worker to "become strong" he "must unite" with other workers and form "the union of all local and national workers' associations into a world-wide association, *the great International Working-Men's Association*". Only "through practice and collective experience" and "the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle" will the worker come "to recognise his true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes." There was "but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*" which "has only one meaning. It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*."¹⁸ Thus "unions create that conscious power

¹⁵ *Anarchism*, p. 294

¹⁶ It is necessary to point out that Proudhon's opposition to strikes and unions does not automatically mean a lack of commitment to the working class. As he proclaimed to the French National Assembly in 1848: "When I used those pronouns *you* and *we*, it was self-evident that at that point I was identifying *myself* with the proletariat and identifying *you* with the bourgeois class." He was against strikes because he did not think the working class could liberate itself by those means. This did not stop him urging the creation of "an agricultural and industrial combination" in order to wage "a war of labour against capital; a war of liberty against authority; a war of the producer against the non-producer; a war of equality against privilege." (*Property is Theft!*, p. 351, p. 225) Given Proudhon's support for working class self-organisation and self-liberation, it is not surprising that many French syndicalists, like Bakunin, were happy to invoke his ideas even if they rejected certain aspects of them.

¹⁷ See the Introduction of *Property is Theft!* for details.

¹⁸ *The Basic Bakunin*, pp. 97–8, p. 103

without which no victory is possible” while strikes “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.”¹⁹

If “the necessity and desirability of class struggle (of which strikes were the primary expression)” defines Marxism then Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and other revolutionary anarchists are Marxists!

As for the need for workers “to take power” themselves rather than relying on leaders, this was *precisely* Bakunin’s critique of Marx. Anarchists do “not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.” Rather, the revolution “everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.”²⁰ This was because “every state, even the pseudo-People’s State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves.”²¹

As the Russian Revolution shows, Bakunin’s critique of Marxism has been vindicated.

To bolster his case, Darlington points to IWW and syndicalism in Ireland (75) as well as noting that many Italian syndicalists had been in the Socialist Party.²² (60) However, this confuses a spread of syndicalist ideas into Marxist circles with a pre-existing influence. In other words, that *some* Marxists accepted syndicalist ideas *after* they became better known internationally does not mean that Marxism was a core element in its development.

This is particularly the case given that the official Marxist movement of the time, Social Democracy, was wedded to distinctly non-syndicalist notions. Darlington notes that the rise in syndicalist influence across the world was “reflecting a widespread disaffection with parliamentary politics and reformist socialist parties” (57) but he singularly fails to note who argued that workers should organise in political parties and take part in “political action” in the IWMA – Marx and Engels!

For Marx, universal suffrage was “the equivalent of political power for the working class” and its “inevitable result” would be “the political supremacy of the working class.”²³ In countries “like

¹⁹ *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 379, pp. 384–5

²⁰ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 237, p. 172

²¹ *Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 338

²² Needless so say, Darlington ignores the awkward fact that in Italy many Marxist-syndicalists became fascists. He suggests there “was not a direct line of descent from syndicalism to fascism” and those expelled from the USI for being pro-war in 1915 “should probably be termed populists rather than fascists.” (165) Darlington forgets that he had already admitted that “many leaders of the Italian syndicalist movement had initially operated from within the Socialist Party.” (131) As the standard academic work on this notes, in Italy “the syndicalist doctrine was more clearly the product of a group of intellectuals, operating within the Socialist party and seeking an alternative to reformism.” They “explicitly denounced anarchism” and “insisted on a variety of Marxist orthodoxy.” The “syndicalists genuinely desired – and tried – to work within the Marxist tradition.” (David D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism*, p. 66, p. 72, p. 57, p. 79) And best not mention Mussolini’s pre-war role as leader of the Marxist-left in Socialist Party.

²³ *Collected Works*, vol. 11, pp. 335–6

America, England... the workers may achieve their aims by peaceful means.”²⁴ Engels expanded on this, arguing that in Britain, “democracy means the dominion of the working class” and so workers should “use the power already in their hands, the actual majority they possess... to send to Parliament men of their own order.” The worker “struggles for political power, for direct representation of his class in the legislature” for in “every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power.”²⁵ In America, the workers must form a political party with “the conquest of the Capitol and the White House for its goal.”²⁶

In short, if the syndicalists rejected “what they saw as the dead-end of electoral and parliamentary politics advocated by the dominant wing of labour and socialist parties” (235) it had become “dominant” in no small thanks to Marx and Engels. Similarly, if as Darlington notes, Social Democracy had become reformist this suggests that Bakunin, not Marx, had been vindicated. As the anarchist had predicted, when “common workers” are sent “to Legislative Assemblies” the result is that the “worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois... For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.”²⁷

Somewhat ironically given this confirmation of Bakunin against Marx, Darlington sides with the Bolsheviks over the debates on “revolutionary” parliamentarism in the Comintern. As German anarcho-syndicalist Augustin Souchy pointed out at the time, the Comintern “position on parliamentarism is being offered as new, revolutionary parliamentarism. But this new parliamentarism turns out to be the old mistake that the Social Democracy made in its first years, for Social Democracy took exactly the same position at its inception.”²⁸

Even worse for Darlington’s case, both Marx and Engels explicitly opposed syndicalist ideas when they were raised by libertarians in the IWMA. Marx, for example, attacked Bakunin for thinking that the “working classes must not occupy itself with *politics*. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions.”²⁹ Engels dismissed the general strike as “the lever employed by which the social revolution is started” in the “Bakuninist programme” while suggesting they admitted “this required a well-formed organisation of the working class”³⁰ (that is, Bakunin aimed to “organise, and when *all* the workers... are won over... abolish the state and replace it with the organisation of the International”³¹). Engels mocked the notion, popular in the libertarian wing of the organisation, that the International should both prefigure and become the future structure of a socialist society by suggesting the Bakuninists told the proletariat “to organise not in accordance with the requirements of the struggle... but according to the vague notions of a future society entertained by some dreamers.”³²

²⁴ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 23, p. 255

²⁵ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 24, p. 405, p. 386

²⁶ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 26, p. 435

²⁷ *The Basic Bakunin*, p. 108

²⁸ *Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, p. 456

²⁹ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 43, p. 490

³⁰ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 23, pp. 584–5. Section H.3.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* compares what Engels wrote about the “Bakuninist” general strike and what the “Bakuninists” themselves actually advocated.

³¹ *Op. Cit.* vol. 44, p. 305

³² *Op. Cit.* vol. 23, p. 66. See section H.1.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ* for more discussion.

If syndicalism is based on direct economic struggle by unions which aimed at establishing a society based upon unions then this is found in Bakunin, not Marx and Engels. Indeed, they highlighted these aspects of Bakunin's ideas – the centrality of union organisation and struggle (including the general strike) – and expressed their *opposition* to them. Hence Darlington's admission that the Comintern discussions of 1920 on syndicalism saw the "acceptance by Marxists, for the first time, of an *industrial* component in their strategy for revolution." (200)

Syndicalism and Insurrection

Darlington praises the Bolsheviks for recognising the necessity for insurrection, "[u]nlike the syndicalists, who identified the general strike with social revolution." (249) He stresses that for the Comintern, while a general strike and the seizure of workplaces may be a good way to start a revolution, this was insufficient as the state could use armed force to break the revolt: "Only if the general strike progressed to the level of an insurrection to seize state power, could it prevent an inevitable counter-attack that would paralyse the unions." (250)

Yet we are not indebted to the Bolsheviks for this insight, given that Malatesta had raised it in 1907 at the International Anarchist Conference in his debate with Monatte (Darlington quotes this speech (248)). This is yet another example of Marxists paying catch-up with revolutionary anarchism.

Yet there are problems with Darlington's account. He quotes, for example, Rudolf Rocker's *Anarcho-Syndicalism* to suggest that for many syndicalists failed to recognise the necessity of insurrection: "For the workers the general strike takes the place of the barricades of the political uprising."³³ He then comments: "In other words, simply taking control of the workplace, by means of the general strike, would be enough to topple the existing order and effect a revolutionary transformation of society." (41)

Strangely Darlington fails to mention that in the same chapter Rocker states that by "direct action" anarcho-syndicalists included "the general strike" and "in particularly critical cases, such, for example, as that in Spain today, armed resistance of the people for the protection of life and liberty." Rocker also noted how "the widespread strike movement among the workers and peasants after the Fascist revolt in July, 1936, developed into a 'social general strike' (huelga general) and led to armed resistance."³⁴ Clearly Rocker's work cannot be used to bolster a case that syndicalists ignored the need for insurrection or, for that matter, armed defence of a revolution.

On the same page Darlington references Pataud and Pouget's 1909 syndicalist novel *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution* while proclaiming that there is "the dissolution of the government" and syndicalists aimed to "circumvent the state" (41) He then admits that for these French syndicalists "the concept of the general strike merged gradually with the older concepts of insurrection and revolutionary seizure of power." (42)

It is important to note that Pataud and Pouget write of how the Chamber of Deputies was "invaded from all sides" by crowd, which "threatened with death any deputies who should dare sit again." The "General Strikers were on watch" and "in order to guard against any aggressive action by the fallen power, or any effort to re-establish Parliamentarianism, a certain number of their comrades should remain permanently at the Palais Bourdon" and "oppose by force any

³³ *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, p. 83

³⁴ *Op. Cit.*, p. 78, p. 82

counter-revolutionary measures.” Guards were also used in “the Police Offices, the Government Offices, the Elysée, etc.” after “having taken them by assault.” The town hall “was not neglected” and “was occupied” in a similar fashion. Thus there was a “definite intention of disorganising the State, of dismantling and thoroughly disabling it” to ensure it was “impossible for the Government to recover itself, or rally around any point whatever.” Thus the general strike “very soon changed into an insurrectional strike” and “the General Strikers occupied the centres of Government action, and expelled the representative of the State.”³⁵

Given that Rocker in 1937 and Pataud and Pouget in 1909 recognised the need for insurrection it seems somewhat incredulous for Darlington to quote Leninist Georg Lukacs that the “general strike alone, the tactic of folded arms, will not enable the working class to defeat the bourgeoisie. The proletariat must resort to armed uprising.” (252) To suggest syndicalism as such was blind to the necessity of insurrection is flawed.

Similarly, Darlington shows his confusion when he tries to suggest that there was an “internal contradiction in syndicalist doctrine” in that they were anti-political but also “in rivalry with the reformist parties and in conflict with the state.” (240) He notes that “syndicalists were practically involved in a variety of directly political issues” and “in every country syndicalists opposed the First World War.” (28) Yet there is no contradiction as by “anti-political” syndicalists, as Darlington at one stage admits, were “adopting a narrow definition of political action” as “electoral and parliamentary politics advocated by the dominant wing of electoral and socialist parties.”³⁶ (235) For syndicalists, “political questions were something that could be resolved by industrial action and direct action in the workplace”³⁷ (28) How could they ignore political issues when, as Darlington notes, there were numerous state attacks on CGT strikes, mobilising troops and killing strikers? (163) As Kropotkin put it:

“There is no serious strike that occurs today without the appearance of troops, the exchange of blows and some acts of revolt. Here they fight with the troops; there they march on the factories... Thanks to government intervention the rebel against the factory becomes the rebel against the State.”³⁸

Hence syndicalist recognition of the need for insurrection fits into a general political perspective, one which is anti-political with regards bourgeois politics and political activities but which recognises the need to analyse and fight the state and other aspects of capitalism: “The International does not reject politics of a general kind; it will be compelled to intervene in politics so long as it is forced to struggle against the bourgeoisie. It rejects only bourgeois politics.”³⁹

³⁵ Pataud and Pouget, *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution*, pp. 79–83, p. 94

³⁶ Syndicalists use “the term ‘political action’... in its ordinary and correct sense. Parliamentary action resulting from the exercise of the franchise is political action. Parliamentary action caused by the influence of direct action tactics... is not political action. It is simply a registration of direct action.” (Earl C. Ford and William Z. Foster, *Syndicalism*, p. 19f)

³⁷ As Rudolf Rocker put it, syndicalists are “not in any way opposed to the political struggle, but in their opinion this struggle... must take the form of direct action, in which the instruments of economic power which the working class has at its command are the most effective.” So the “focal point of the political struggle lies, then, not in the political parties, but in the economic fighting organisations of the workers.” (*Op. Cit.*, p. 77)

³⁸ quoted by Cahm, *Op. Cit.*, p. 256

³⁹ Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 313

Workers Councils, Marxism and Anarchism

Darlington states that for Marx and Engels “the working class could only triumph by overthrowing the capitalist state” with “the working class seizing state power.” (249) Thus Marxism argues that “the capitalist state had to be replaced by a new and transitional form of workers’ state, founded on workers’ councils.” (253) However, until 1917 Marxists did *not* argue that at all. Workers’ councils did not play any role in their visions of a socialist system.

For Engels the “democratic republic” was “the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat”⁴⁰ and did *not* write of a “commune-republic” or anything close to a soviet republic, as expressed by the libertarian wing of the IWMA. Clearly and explicitly he speaks of the democratic republic, the current state which is to be seized and transformed, the state which is “at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at once as much as possible.”⁴¹ Engels explained what was meant when Marx stated that the Paris Commune showed that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes”⁴²:

“It is simply a question of showing that the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its own purposes: whereas all bourgeois republicans since 1848 inveighed against this machinery so long as they were in the opposition, but once they were in the government they took it over without altering it and used it partly against the reaction but still more against the proletariat.”⁴³

Hence the many calls by Marx and Engels for the working class to organise in political parties and utilise voting (“political action”) to seize political power. Compare this to Bakunin’s vision of social revolution:

“the Alliance of all labour associations... will constitute the Commune... there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council... [made up of] delegates... invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times... all provinces, communes and associations... [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all... invested with binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces... and to organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction... it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the universality of the Revolution... will emerge triumphant.”⁴⁴

Compare this vision with the *Bourses du Travail* (local federation of unions) and Trades Unions Congress in *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution*, with the latter being formed by delegates

⁴⁰ *Collected Works*, vol. 27, p. 227.

⁴¹ *Op. Cit.* vol. 27, p. 190

⁴² *Op. Cit.* vol. 22, p. 328. The Paris Commune, as Marx himself made clear, was definitely *not* based on delegates from workplaces but rather was “formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town.” (p. 331) It should be noted that the Paris Commune was heavily influenced by followers of Proudhon and so Marx was simply reporting many concepts (such as mandating and recalling delegates, federations of communes, etc.) which had been advocated by his arch-rival decades previously (see the introduction to *Property is Theft!*).

⁴³ *Collected Works*, vol. 47, p. 74. See my “The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism” (*Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 50) for more discussion.

⁴⁴ *No Gods, No Masters*, pp. 181–2

“from all parts of France” and “from all trades, from all professions” and “having to decide upon points previously discussed by the comrades who had sent them.”⁴⁵ Or, for that matter, Darlington’s account of how the soviets were formed, “first as a strike committee by striking St. Petersburg print workers” before growing “into a body made up of delegates from different workplaces, cutting across the sectional lines which trades unions reflected, and basing itself on the power of workplace organisation.” (254)

Both are examples of Bakunin’s argument that the “future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.”⁴⁶ In short, the vision of socialism being based on workers councils is found in Bakunin and not Marx.⁴⁷

The “Transitional” State

Another key aspect of the Leninist critique of syndicalist is on the need for a “transitional” state. This, of course, was hardly new – Lenin stressed this during 1917 and in *State and Revolution*’s (inaccurate) polemics against anarchism.

Unsurprisingly, Darlington repeats this analysis by arguing that there must be “a transitional period between a workers’ revolution and the achievement of full communism, during which time the working class would have to arm and organise itself against the threat of counter-revolution through the establishment of a workers’ state” This is termed the “Transitional Workers’ State.” (252)

Needless to say, when Bakunin argued against Marx’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” he did not deny the need to defend a revolution. He was well aware that the workers needed to arm themselves to defend their newly found liberty against those seeking to re-enslave them:

“Immediately after established governments have been overthrown, communes will have to reorganise themselves along revolutionary lines... In order to defend the revolution, their volunteers will at the same time form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighbouring communes in revolt... and to federate with them for common defence.”⁴⁸

The same can be said of syndicalists. Pataud and Pouget write of how the unions formed “bands” to “watch over the security of the committees” and “sought to arm themselves.” Indeed, there is a chapter (XX) entitled “The Arming of the People” in which the people “arm themselves” in order to “counterbalance the military and other forces” which “held them under the yoke.” The trade unions distributed arms and in each syndicate “a group for defence was formed” which entered “into relation with like groups in the same district, and with distant centres” by means of an “organisation of defence, with a Trade Union and Federal basis.” These “Syndicalist battalions

⁴⁵ Pataud and Pouget, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 128–9

⁴⁶ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 206. “As early as the 1860’s and 1870’s,” as Paul Avrich noted, “the followers of Proudhon and Bakunin in the First International were proposing the formation of workers’ councils designed both as a weapon of class struggle against capitalists and as the structural basis of the future libertarian society.” (*Op. Cit.*, p. 73)

⁴⁷ See section H.3.10 of *An Anarchist FAQ* for more discussion.

⁴⁸ *No Gods, No Masters*, p. 164

were not a force external to the people. They were the people themselves” who “had the common-sense to arm themselves in order to protect their conquered liberty.”⁴⁹

This can also be seen in the Spanish CNT’s 1936 resolution on Libertarian Communism in the section entitled “Defence of the Revolution” which “acknowledge[d] the necessity to defend the advances made through the revolution” and so “the necessary steps will be taken to defend the new regime, whether against the perils of a foreign capitalist invasion... or against counter-revolution at home.” The “people armed will be the best assurance against any attempt to restore the system destroyed from either within or without” and so every Commune has “its weapons and means of defence” and their federation ensures that “defensive means are effectively organised nation-wide.”⁵⁰

Anarchist rejection of the Marxist “transitional” state has nothing to do with defending the revolution but rather lies in our analysis of the state. The state, Bakunin argued, “stands outside the people and above them”, “the government of society from above downward” and resulted in the “actual subordination of the sovereign people to the intellectual minority that governs them.” While recognising that the modern state defended the capitalist class, Bakunin rejected Marx’s reductionism and argued it could and did have interests of its own as it was “government of society from above downward” rather than a social organisation federated “from below upward.”⁵¹

Thus the so-called “workers’ state” of the Marxists would produce a new ruling elite simply because it was a state and, consequently, a centralised, top-down social structure. As the Russian Revolution showed, and as anarchists had predicted from Bakunin onwards, the Marxist “transitional state” was only transitional from one form of class rule (capitalists) to another (party/bureaucracy). Sadly, Darlington fails to address this awkward fact and instead prefers to recount the usual Marxist false division of either seizing state power or ignoring it. The destruction of the state by means of working class organisations, as advocated by Bakunin and recounted by Pataud and Pouget, is not even discussed neither mind refuted.

The Russian Revolution

For Darlington, the Russian Revolution vindicates the Comintern’s case on “the need to link the industrial struggle to political issues of a broader nature and to direct such struggles towards the conquest of state power via insurrection; the need for a revolutionary political party that provided centralised leadership inside the working class movement; and the insufficiency of unions compared to soviets as the chief agency of revolution and organ of workers’ power.” (279) Yet on these issues, that Revolution provides evidence against all those conclusions (with the obvious exception of soviets against unions).⁵²

⁴⁹ Pataud and Pouget, *Op. Cit.*, p. 69 and pp. 155–7. Darlington notes that the revolution depicted in the novel is “all achieved with remarkable ease” (41) so weakly repeating Kropotkin’s comments in his preface that the authors “have considerably attenuated the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way.” (*Op. Cit.*, p. xxxvi) Given that Leninists seem to believe that anarchists fail to see the need to defend a revolution, this is somewhat ironic.

⁵⁰ quoted by Jose Peirats, *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 110. Ironically, while Trotskyists denounce the Stalinist destruction of the democratic militias created by the CNT in 1936 they are silent about how Trotsky destroyed military democracy in Russia in 1918.

⁵¹ *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 136, p. 198, p. 13, p. 198. See also section H.2.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

⁵² Many Russian syndicalists, for example, supported soviets over unions in 1917 and, crucially, in 1905 and after. Syndicalists in other countries followed suit.

For Darlington, the Bolsheviks “provided the centralised organisation and leadership that the working class movement required” (273) to ensure that “the soviets, led by the Bolsheviks, seized power from the Provisional government.” (255) Thus the soviets “born as an organ of workers’ struggle, the soviet developed from an organisation of workers fighting *for* power, and eventually was transformed into a form of organisation of workers *in* power.” (255)

While this may be the standard Leninist interpretation of 1917, the reality was somewhat different. Before discussing the reality of the new “transitional” state headed by the Bolsheviks, some myths about the party must be addressed.

As Alexander Rabinowitch shows, Bolshevik centralism, organisational unity and discipline are “vastly exaggerated” and, in fact, Bolshevik success in 1917 was down to “the party’s internally relatively democratic, tolerant, and decentralised structure and method of operation, as well as its essentially open and mass character – in striking contrast to the traditional Leninist model.” Thus “subordinate party bodies like the Petersburg Committee and the Military Organisation were permitted considerable independence and initiative... Most importantly, these lower bodies were able to tailor their tactics and appeals to suit their own particular constituencies amid rapidly changing conditions. Vast numbers of new members were recruited into the party... The newcomers included tens of thousands of workers and soldiers... who knew little, if anything, about Marxism and cared nothing about party discipline.” For example, while the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” was “officially withdrawn by the Sixth [Party] Congress in late July, this change did not take hold at the local level.”⁵³

It is no exaggeration to argue that if any member of a current vanguard party acted as the Bolshevik rank and file did in 1917, they would quickly be expelled (this probably explains why no such party has been remotely successful since).⁵⁴

Then there is the internal nature of the party. After quoting bourgeois intellectuals Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev at length, Darlington then incredulously proclaims that “the Communists cultivated the growth of *workers’* parties under *workers’* leadership” rather than “the domination of social democratic parties by intellectuals of bourgeois origins.” (200) He seems blissfully unaware that the Bolsheviks (in stark contrast to the syndicalist movement) had a predominantly non-worker leadership.⁵⁵ “It should not be forgotten,” Trotsky admitted, “that the political machine of the Bolshevik Party was predominantly made up of the intelligentsia, which was petty bourgeois in its origin and conditions of life... Workers who turned professional revolutionists joined this set with great eagerness and lost their identity in it.” Worse, “[i]n most cases they lacked independent daily contact with the labouring masses.”⁵⁶ Trotsky then raises a key question:

“As often happens, a sharp cleavage developed between the classes in motion and the interests of the party machines. Even the Bolshevik Party cadres, who enjoyed the benefit of exceptional

⁵³ *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, p. 311, p. 312, p. 313

⁵⁴ It is no coincidence that Britain’s most militant union was the federalist (and syndicalist influenced) *National Union of Mineworkers*. Ruolf Rocker usefully discusses the benefits of federalist organisation before comparing the response of the “completely centralised” German unions to the “federalist” Spanish syndicalist unions to the rise of Fascism. (*Op. Cit.*, pp. 60–1)

⁵⁵ He also skilfully avoids discussing Lenin’s *What is to be Done?* and its comments on bourgeois intellectuals injecting socialist consciousness into the workers movement from without. The anti-socialist nature of this position is discussed in section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

⁵⁶ *Stalin*, vol. 1, pp. 297–8. Moreover, “just as in the Bolshevik committees, so at the [1905] Congress itself, there were almost no workingmen. The intellectuals predominated.” (p. 101)

revolutionary training, were definitely inclined to disregard the masses and to identify their own special interests and the interests of the machine on the very day after the monarchy was overthrown. What, then, could be expected of these cadres when they became an all-powerful state bureaucracy?"⁵⁷

That is the key issue. Regardless of Darlington's claims, it was not the soviets that seized power in 1917 – it was the Bolshevik Party. Lenin always stressed that the "Bolsheviks must assume power." The Bolsheviks "can and *must* take state power into their own hands." He raised the question of "will the Bolsheviks dare take over full state power alone?" and answered it: "I have already had occasion... to answer this question in the affirmative." Moreover, "a political party... would have no right to exist, would be unworthy of the name of party... if it refused to take power when opportunity offers."⁵⁸ This is admitted in passing by Darlington when he argues that "the conquest of state power required an *insurrection* that could not be carried out by the soviets... the Bolshevik party had organised the October 1917 insurrection, albeit not directly in its own name." (273)

Yet to maintain party power, the Bolsheviks had to undermine the soviets and they did. This onslaught on the soviets started quickly, in fact overnight when the first act of the Bolsheviks was to create an executive body, the Council of People's Commissars (or Sovnarkon), over and above the soviets. This was in direct contradiction to Lenin's *State and Revolution*, where he had used the example of the Paris Commune to argue for the merging of executive and legislative powers. Then, a mere four days after this seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the Sovnarkom unilaterally took for itself legislative power simply by issuing a decree to this effect. By the spring of 1918, the Bolsheviks were gerrymandering soviets to maintain control on the face of massive losses in working class support. When packing them failed or could not be done, any soviet elected with non-Bolshevik majorities was simply disbanded by force. This was done at all levels, including packing the Fifth All-Russian Soviet Congress to deny the Left-SRs their rightful majority. Significantly, Leninist myths notwithstanding, Bolshevik authoritarianism began *before* the start of the civil war in late May, 1918.⁵⁹

Thus the "conquest of state power" simply turned Soviet Power into a fig-leaf for Bolshevik Power. As Trotsky explained in 1920, in terms of making decisions we "have the Council of People's Commissars but it has to be subject to some supervision. Whose supervision? That of the working class as an amorphous, chaotic mass? No. The Central Committee of the party is convened to discuss ... and to decide."⁶⁰

Ironically, Darlington suggests the party "was not be a leadership that issued commands from above and expected the working class to follow" but one which "generalised" the "best of what was invented by workers themselves in struggle" and points to the "spontaneously created soviets" of 1905.⁶¹ He admits the Bolsheviks "initially" opposed the soviets but fails to mention

⁵⁷ *Op. Cit.*, p. 298

⁵⁸ *Collected Works*, vol. 26, p. 19, p. 90. As Zinoviev proclaimed in 1920, the syndicalists "do not realise that the working class without a political party of its own is a body without a head" and that we "must have a state organisation, and only the party can direct it." (*Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, p. 147, p. 154)

⁵⁹ Section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*.

⁶⁰ *Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, p. 174

⁶¹ Darlington fails to note it took them 12 years to do so. Unlike the Russian syndicalists who "regarded the soviets... as admirable versions of the *bourses du travail*, but with a revolutionary function added to suit Russian conditions. Open to all leftist workers regardless of specific political affiliation, the soviets were to act as nonpartisan labour councils improvised 'from below'... with the aim of bringing down the old regime." The anarchists of *Khleb i*

that they demanded the St. Petersburg soviet accept the Bolshevik political programme and then disband. (271) The Soviet, rightly, ignored them. The Bolshevik rationale for this is significant. They were convinced that “only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.”⁶²

In other words, the soviet could not reflect workers’ interests because it was elected by the workers! The implications of this perspective became clear in 1918.⁶³

So we get the typical confusion of leadership in the sense of institutional, hierarchical and top-down leaders with individuals and groups intervening at the base to give a lead. Libertarians are in favour of the latter (“militant minority”) but argue the first produces a division between leader-led which cannot help produce a new class system. The fate of Social Democracy as well as the rise of trade-union bureaucracy suggests that this analysis has been more than confirmed.

The nature of the Bolshevik regime also confirms this and shows that Bakunin had been right to warn that “[b]y popular government [Marxists] mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people.” This was “a lie behind which lies the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed” made up “of former workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers’ world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people.”⁶⁴ Darlington, however, fails to address this.

The Nature of the Bolshevik Regime

As a Leninist, Darlington is keen to downplay or ignore the less attractive aspects of the Bolshevik regime. That it was a state-capitalist party-dictatorship goes unmentioned while syndicalist recognition of this is recorded but dismissed with qualifiers.

Thus we discover that the Italian Syndicalist Alibrando Giovanetti “complained” that “[t]he dictatorship of the proletariat has become the dictatorship of a few party leaders” while Angel Pestana returned to Spain “with the news of alleged persecution of Russian anarchists, the rise of a ‘party dictatorship’ and the suppression of the Kronstadt sailor’s insurrection” (192) and “bitterly criticised what he believed to be the Bolshevik regime’s dictatorial character.” (253) The “hard-line anarchists inside the CNT came out in full opposition to what they regarded as being a ‘Bolshevik dictatorship’ after learning of the alleged persecution of Russian anarchists, the suppression of the soviets, and the rise of a new bureaucratic state.” (173) This was all part of the syndicalists’ “increasing critique of the apparent dictatorial nature of Bolshevik state power.” (198)

Volia “also likened the 1905 Petersburg Soviet – as a non-party mass organisation – to the central committee of the Paris Commune of 1871.” (Paul Avrich, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 80–1) This early recognition of the importance of soviets by syndicalists was unsurprising given that Bakunin had advocated the idea decades before.

⁶² quoted by Anweiler, *The Soviets*, p. 77

⁶³ Section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* explores the authoritarian nature of Leninist vanguardism and the reality of the Bolshevik Party in 1917 as opposed to the myths. Section H.6.2 discusses the negative impact of Bolshevik ideology on the Russian Revolution.

⁶⁴ *Statism and Anarchy*, p. 178

Use of words like “complained”, “alleged” and “believed” expresses an unwillingness to acknowledge reality on Darlington’s part than some misunderstanding of the facts or flawed analysis on the part of syndicalists. There is nothing “alleged” about the Bolshevik repression of anarchists in Russia, it is well documented.[66] Similarly, Bolshevik gerrymandering and disbanding of soviets to maintain their power is well established, as is their repression of strikes and other forms of working class protest.⁶⁵

Significantly, leading Bolsheviks *publicly* embraced their party-dictatorship and tried to turn it into a truism for the revolutionary movement.⁶⁶ Zinoviev proclaimed and celebrated the reality of Bolshevik dictatorship at the Second Congress of the Comintern in no uncertain terms:

“Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class... the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.”⁶⁷

Given that this is a book Darlington quotes from, his endless qualifiers on syndicalist perspectives on the Bolshevik regime would appear perplexing. However, attempts to cleanse Bolshevism in a democratic bath have a long history with Zinoviev writing a letter in 1920 to the *Industrial Workers of the World* stating that the “Russian Soviet Republic... is the most highly centralised government that exists. It is also the most democratic government in history. For all the organs of government are in constant touch with the working masses, and constantly sensitive to their will.”⁶⁸ The obvious contradiction with his speech at the Second Congress is palpable, as are these words also from 1920:

“soviet rule in Russia could not have been maintained for three years – not even three weeks – without the iron dictatorship of the Communist Party. Any class conscious worker must understand that the dictatorship of the working class can be achieved only by the dictatorship of its vanguard, i.e., by the Communist Party... All questions of economic reconstruction, military organisation, education, food supply – all these questions, on which the fate of the proletarian revolution depends absolutely, are decided in Russia before all other matters and mostly in the framework of the party organisations.”⁶⁹

Needless to say, Darlington does not mention, never mind address, that at the time the Bolsheviks were trying to win over the syndicalists their regime had been a party-dictatorship for at least a year-and-a-half.⁷⁰ Not only were the leading Bolsheviks perfectly at ease with this, they

⁶⁵ See section H.6.1 and section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*, respectively

⁶⁶ Indeed, they wrote whole books explaining and justifying their policies. Trotsky, for example, wrote in 1920 that the Bolsheviks had “more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of the party” but “it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party.” “In this ‘substitution’ of the power of the party for the power of the working class,” he added, “there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class.” (*Terrorism and Communism*, p. 109)

⁶⁷ *Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, pp. 151–2

⁶⁸ *Op. Cit.*, vol. 2, p. 928

⁶⁹ quoted by Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets*, pp. 239–40

⁷⁰ At the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets “electoral fraud gave the Bolsheviks a huge majority of congress delegates.” Without it, the Left SRs and SR Maximalists would have outnumbered the Bolsheviks by around 30 delegates. This ensured “the Bolshevik’s successful fabrication of a large majority in the Fifth All-Russian Congress of

were advocating it to the international revolutionary movement – hence Darlington’s comment that Zinoviev’s speech was “notable for its triumphalism and ultimatory style.” (195) So it must be stressed that the Second Congress of the Comintern was in July 1920 when the civil war appeared to be over[73] and the Communist Party “took victory as a sign of the correctness of its ideological approach and set about the task of economic construction on the basis of an intensification of War Communism policies.”⁷¹ A key aspect of that ideology was now the necessity of party dictatorship.⁷²

The Bolshevik state shows the key difference between libertarian and Leninist perspectives. The syndicalists predicted the “demolition of the prisons and court houses”⁷³ while the Bolsheviks utilised both – ironically, the Cheka’s first headquarters was at Gorokhovaia 2 which, under the Tsar, housed his notorious security service the Okhrana.⁷⁴ Needless to say, the Bolsheviks used the Cheka and Red Army to break strikes just as the Tsar had. As Lenin explained in 1920 to his political police:

“Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.”⁷⁵

It goes without saying that it is the vanguard party which determines what is “wavering” and “unstable”, so ensuring that in a conflict between party-rule and workers’ democracy the party gives itself the duty to crush the later to ensure the former. This shows how wrong Lenin was to proclaim that “all this talk about ‘from above’ or ‘from below,’ about ‘the dictatorship of leaders’ or ‘the dictatorship of the masses,’” is “ridiculous and childish nonsense.”⁷⁶

That requires bodies of armed men separate from the people, bodies like the Cheka.⁷⁷

It must be noted that Lenin as early as 1905 had argued for “pressure... from above as well as from below,” where “pressure from above” was “pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.” He notes that Engels “appreciated the importance of action from above” and that he saw the need for “the utilisation of the revolutionary governmental power.” Lenin summarised his position: “Limitation, in principle, of revolutionary action to pressure from below

Soviets.” A similar packing of the Petrograd soviet had occurred previously, so ensuring that “[o]nly 260 of roughly 700 deputies in the new soviet were to be elected in factories, which guaranteed a large Bolshevik majority in advance.” (Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, p. 396, p. 308, pp. 248–52)

⁷¹ Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin*, p. 37

⁷² A position, it must be stressed, Trotsky defended throughout the 1920s and 1930s when modern-day Leninists usually present him as defending the alleged democratic nature of Bolshevism against Stalinism.

⁷³ Pataud and Pouget, *Op. Cit.*, p. 152

⁷⁴ Rabinowitch, *Op. Cit.*, p. 85

⁷⁵ *Collected Works*, vol. 42, p. 170

⁷⁶ *Collected Works*, vol. 31, p. 49

⁷⁷ Trotsky repeated Lenin’s argument in 1939: “The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.” (“The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism”, pp. 53–66, *Their Morals and Ours*, p. 59) Needless to say, *by definition* everyone is “backward” when compared to the “vanguard.” Moreover, as it is this “vanguard” which is “armed with the resources of the state” and *not* the proletariat as a whole we are left with one obvious conclusion, namely party dictatorship rather than working class democracy. How Trotsky’s position is compatible with the idea of the working class as the “ruling class” is not explained.

and renunciation of pressure also from above is *anarchism*.⁷⁸ At one stage he even went so far as to proclaim that “the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy” was “from the top downward”⁷⁹

Darlington, of course, ignores all this and proclaims that “Lenin insisted” that “socialism could indeed only come from below.” (270) Similarly, he ignores the reality of the Bolshevik regime and instead blames Zinoviev’s “patronising approach” which “merely provoked indignation of those it was meant to persuade” (196) for so many syndicalists rejecting Bolshevism!

He does, of course, recognise that something eventually went wrong with the revolution and so Tony Cliff is invoked to explain how “the bureaucracy transformed itself into a conscious state capitalist ruling class.” Thus 1927–29 represents the period in which “bureaucratic state capitalism” replaces “the remnants of the workers’ state that had survived from October 1917.” (287) Yet soviet democracy, a workers’ militia and workers’ self-management of production were all destroyed under Lenin and Trotsky.⁸⁰ The soviet regime may have become *more* oppressive and exploitative under Stalin than Lenin, but Stalinism did not represent a transformation in social and economic relationships.⁸¹

The Spanish Revolution

As with all Leninists, the Spanish Revolution is invoked to show the ideological problems with syndicalism. Darlington argues (correctly) that syndicalists (like other libertarians) “did not see the state as simply an instrument of the capitalist class” but also “an independent and oppressive body in itself.” (253) In July, 1936, the “anarcho-syndicalist opposition to *all* forms of government led them to renounce the conquest of state power by the working class.” This, he argued, was a disaster as “the desperate need for centralisation of the war effort” led the CNT to join the bourgeois state they refused to replace when it had the chance. The choice “was between leaving the capitalist state intact” or “building an alternative workers’ state in Catalonia – directly controlled by the working class and based on workers’ councils.” (259) Only the dissident *Friends of Durruti* group “finally grasped the importance of the struggle for state and therefore political power.” (260) For Trotsky the CNT should “take the initiative and lead a full-blown social revolution, involving the overthrow of the Republican government and the seizure of state power.” (259)

That the decisions of the CNT *did* lead to disaster few anarchists would disagree with. However, anarchists would also do something that Darlington singularly fails to do – provide some

⁷⁸ *Collected Works.*, vol. 8, p. 474, p. 478, p. 480, p. 481

⁷⁹ *Collected Works.*, vol. 7, pp. 396–7

⁸⁰ For a critique of the SWP attempts to present Leninism as distinct from Stalinism see my “How the Revolution Was Lost?”, *Black Flag*, No. 226–8. The Bolshevik onslaught on workers’ self-management is described in grim detail in Maurice Brinton’s *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control*.

⁸¹ Darlington points to the “transformation of the Comintern into an instrument of Russian foreign policy” but does not mention that the council communists of the KAPD had argued that Lenin’s *Left-wing Communism* had done that with its advocacy of “revolutionary” parliamentarism and mass parties in 1920. In contrast, Darlington asserts that its “early congresses” had “represented a huge advance in the development of revolutionary strategy and tactics.” (287) It should be noted that these were often ignored. For example, Darlington mentions “a split from the CGT in 1921 to form a separate confederation” which “became communist-controlled by 1923.” (171) So for all its talk of working within in order to capture reformist trade unions, the Comintern supported the CGTU split from the CGT a few years after denouncing syndicalists for advocating dual unionism!

social context for those decisions. After all, revolutionary anarchists had since Bakunin argued that the state be smashed and replaced by a federation of workers councils. The question arises why the CNT ignored its own political principles. The answer is clear enough – fear of isolation and having to fight both the fascists and the republican state. To quote the CNT itself:

“The CNT showed a conscientious scrupulousness in the face of a difficult alternative: to destroy completely the State in Catalonia, to declare war against the Rebels [i.e. the fascists], the government, foreign capitalism, and thus assuming complete control of Catalan society; or collaborating in the responsibilities of government with the other antifascist fractions.”⁸²

Anarchist historian Jose Peirats noted that “the CNT was in absolute control of Catalonia in July 19, 1936, but its strength was less in Levante and still less in central Spain where the central government and the traditional parties were dominant. In the north of Spain the situation was confused. The CNT could have mounted an insurrection on its own ‘with probable success’ but such a take-over would have led to a struggle on three fronts: against the fascists, the government and foreign capitalism. In view of the difficulty of such an undertaking, collaboration with other antifascist groups was the only alternative.”⁸³

As such, the *real* choice facing the CNT was rather something drastically different than that presented by Darlington: Either work with other anti-fascists against Franco so ensuring unity against the common enemy and pursue anarchism after victory *or* immediately implement libertarian communism and possibly face a conflict on two fronts, against Franco *and* the Republic (and, possibly, imperialist intervention against the social revolution). This situation made the CNT-FAI decided to collaborate with other anti-fascist groups in the Catalan *Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias*. To downplay these objective factors and the dilemma they provoked and instead simply blame the decision on syndicalist theory is farcical.

Needless to say, Darlington ignores the issue of his workers’ state fighting on at least two fronts and prefers to invoke Trotsky. Yet Trotsky’s advice on the Spanish Revolution is somewhat at odds with Darlington’s summary. For Trotsky, “[b]ecause the leaders of the CNT renounced dictatorship *for themselves* they left the place open for the Stalinist dictatorship.” Hardly an example of “workers’ power”! Or, as he put it earlier in the same year, a “revolutionary party, even having seized power (of which the anarchist leaders were incapable in spite of the heroism of the anarchist workers), is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.” Thus he saw the need for the leaders to seize power, not the workers as a class. The Spanish Revolution confirmed for Trotsky the truism that the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party... is an objective necessity... The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces *its own dictatorship* surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution.” Rather than seeing, as anarchists do, workers’ councils as being key, Trotsky considered the party, in fact the “dictatorship of a party”, as being the decisive factor.⁸⁴

The Spanish anarcho-syndicalists rightly rejected Trotsky’s suggestions but, fatefully, they also rejected their own theoretical positions as advocated by revolutionary anarchists since Bakunin. That they did so under the weight of objective circumstances does not make the decision right but to ignore those pressures as Darlington does is replace analysis with assumption.⁸⁵

⁸² quoted by Robert Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, vol. 2, p. 1156

⁸³ *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 179

⁸⁴ our emphasis, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936–37*, p. 514, p. 488 and pp. 513–4

⁸⁵ See section I.8.10 and section I.8.11 of *An Anarchist FAQ* for more discussion.

Conclusions

As Rocker correctly noted in his classic introduction to the subject, anarcho-syndicalism “is a direct continuation of those social aspirations which took shape in the bosom of the First International and which were best understood and most strongly held by the libertarian wing of the great workers’ alliance.” Pointing to Spain, he stressed that “the weight of the labour movement had lain, not in political parties, but in the revolutionary trade unions” as “Anarcho-Syndicalism had maintained its hold upon organised labour from the days of the First International.”⁸⁶

Ironically, for all his attempts to downplay anarchist influence on syndicalism and bolster Marxism, Darlington’s own book confirms Rocker’s position (echoed, it must be stated, by numerous other anarchists as well as academics). His attempt to downplay anarchism and boost Marxism as an influence on syndicalism fails once the full facts of revolutionary anarchism are shown.

Unwilling to acknowledge the flaws in Leninism, he ends up blaming (in part) the syndicalists who turned to it for its obvious failures from 1920 onwards. Thus the new Communist Parties were “fraught with ideological, political and organisational limitations, which to some extent at least were compounded by the carrying over of syndicalist influences into the new parties.” (280) That Leninism *itself* may have serious “ideological, political and organisational limitations” is not entertained, yet it must be given the failure of the Russian Revolution and its descent into state-capitalist party-dictatorship less than a year after the Bolsheviks seized power.

And that is the elephant-in-the-room. Yes, it was the case that the “success of the Russian Revolution, when revolutionary movements elsewhere in Europe had failed, undoubtedly increased the attraction of the Russian model and the prestige of the Bolsheviks.” (279) Yet that success was more apparent than real and few radicals today are as unaware of the reality of Bolshevik ideology and rule as they were when Lenin was alive. The exceptions, as Darlington shows, are usually modern-day Leninists.

Darlington is right to suggest that at “least in its early forms the syndicalists could detect the basis of a close kinship between their own conceptions and the shape the Russian Revolution appeared to be taking” with the French syndicalists, for example, writing “numerous articles exploring the parallels between the *syndicats* and the soviets.” The IWW, while disagreeing over elements of the Bolshevik revolution, argued that the “important point was that organs of working class self-government were in control of the factories, the capitalists had been expropriated and the land distributed to the long-suffering Russian peasantry.” (185–6) However, modern libertarians are well aware that it was the Bolsheviks who destroyed workers’ self-management, soviet democracy and all the other aspects of the revolution which syndicalists of the time found appealing – and that these actions had their roots both in Bolshevik ideology and the realities of state power.

Yet instead of Bolshevism warts-and-all, we get a Leninism cleansed in a bath of democratic niceties which is contrasted to an account of syndicalism which, at time, goes into caricature (particularly when Darlington discusses anarchism). While this would be expected in a SWP rant against libertarian ideas, it is unacceptable for a work seeking academic acceptability.

⁸⁶ *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, p. 54, p. 65, p. 60

As far as critiques of syndicalism go, sad to say those seeking a real one are best served by reading Malatesta's speech at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress than Darlington's book.⁸⁷ Indeed, in almost every *valid* aspect of the Leninist critique of syndicalism Darlington defends was first formulated far better by Malatesta – whether on the reformist pressures on trade unions,⁸⁸ union bureaucracy, the need to turn the general strike into an insurrection and for political organisations to work within unions to introduce and maintain a revolutionary spirit.⁸⁹ Yet this short but powerful critique of syndicalism is summed up as “Malatesta challenged [the syndicalists] for not being sufficiently ‘revolutionary.’” (73)

The only other issue Darlington discusses is, of course, the need for a “transitional” state yet Malatesta (like all revolutionary anarchists) was not blind to the need to defend a revolution.⁹⁰ Given that by the time of the debates on syndicalism at the Comintern were being held, there had been a Bolshevik dictatorship for well over 2 years we can conclude that the anarchist critique of the “transitional” state had been proven beyond doubt.

For those interested in a serious account of the syndicalists and the Comintern then Wayne Thorpe's *The Workers Themselves: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour* is still the best work available. Sadly, Darlington's book simply shows that there are still many socialists around today who seek to repeat history rather than learn from it.

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⁸⁷ This is contained in full in *The International Anarchist Congress*. Needless to say, it should be supplemented by the texts collected in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* and *The Anarchist Revolution*.

⁸⁸ Ironically, Darlington admits that “the pressure of reformism and the structural tendencies to incorporate trade unions within capitalism” were “not explicitly formulated by Comintern leaders at the time” and “arguably *both* syndicalist *and* communist traditions underestimated the powerful reformist impulse of trade unionism generally.” (212, 213) This cannot be said of Malatesta.

⁸⁹ While Leninism repeated *elements* of this valid critique of syndicalism, it bundled those up with concepts (such as statism, centralism, the “leading” role of the party, etc.) which ensured its counter-revolutionary nature. If syndicalism has weaknesses, the Leninist “cure” is worse than the disease.

⁹⁰ Malatesta pointed to “corps of volunteers (anarchist formations)” as a means of defending a revolution from “attempts to reduce a free people to a state of slavery again.” He despaired that some supposed “that anarchists, in the name of their principles, would wish to see that strange freedom respected which violates and destroys the freedom and life of others. They seem almost to believe that after having brought down government and private property we would allow both to be quietly built up again, because of respect for the *freedom* of those who might feel the need to be rulers and property owners. A truly curious way of interpreting our ideas.” (*Anarchy*, pp. 42–3) Decades later, he still urged the “creation of voluntary militia” to “deal with any armed attacks by the forces of reaction to re-establish themselves, or to resist outside intervention.” (*Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, p. 166)

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[10] *Modern Science and Anarchism*, pp. 82–3, pp. 78–9

[66] See Paul Avrich's *The Russian Anarchists* for details. Significantly, it started before the outbreak of the civil war in May 1918.

[73] As syndicalist-turned-Bolshevik Alfred Rosmer recalled, when he had arrived in June 1920 in Russia "the civil war was virtually at an end" for "[a]fter the triple blow struck at the interventionist forces, after the destruction of Kolchak, Yudenich and Denikin, the counter-revolution was defeated." (*Lenin's Moscow*, p. 128, p. 101)

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