

# **Tom Mann and British Syndicalism**

Anarcho

November 21, 2021

# Contents

Syndicalists and the Great Unrest . . . . .	4
Mann's Syndicalism . . . . .	9
Mann and the Anarchists . . . . .	12
The Move to Bolshevism . . . . .	16
A few Marxist Myths Debunked . . . . .	19
What now? . . . . .	26

Tom Mann (1856–1941) played a critical role in the industrial struggles of 1910–1914, better known as “the Great Unrest” or “the syndicalist revolt”. While it is an exaggeration to suggest, as Fabian elitist Beatrice Webb did, that the “absurd” and “pernicious doctrine of ‘workers’ control of public affairs through trade unions, and by the method of direct action” was “introduced into British working-class life by Tom Mann,” he certainly played an important role in popularising syndicalism.<sup>1</sup>

Mann was born in Foleshill, Coventry, in 1856. Starting work in a mine at the age of nine, he eventually became an engineer and joined the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1881. A member of various parties at different times – including the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and the Independent Labour Party (ILP) – he gained fame as one of the leaders of the 1889 London dock strike before becoming the President of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers’ Union of Great Britain and Ireland until 1893 and helping to form the Workers’ Union in 1897. He left for Australia in 1902, remaining active in both trade unionism and labour parties before returning to Britain converted to syndicalism and just in time to take a key role in the labour disputes of the next four years:

Tom Mann did not in any sense cause the strikes or the unrest: he contributed a great deal to the direction they took and to the guiding of the “unrest” into definite and constructive channels, but he cannot be said to have caused it. He utilised an existing state of affairs with an eye to a wider future as well as to the present... Mann’s success came no doubt largely from his personal qualities, his gift of oratory, and his strong personality and vivid enthusiasm; but it came much more from the fact that he chose the right moment for his reappearance. The time was ripe, and it was his fortune and privilege to be the spark to set the train alight.<sup>2</sup>

Given the impact of Mann’s ideas, that this was the closest Britain came to a mass syndicalist movement and, including the post-war ferment, the closest to a social revolution, it is worthwhile to reconsider them. Moreover, all the leading syndicalist activists in Britain at the time were working class. There does seem a distinct sense that syndicalism is viewed with condescension by many who comment upon it, particularly by Marxists (academics or not). The underlying position seems to be that theoretically it is worthless and no match for ideologies produced by middle-class intellectuals (particularly Lenin). A similar perspective permeates accounts of Proudhon, namely the idea that working class people can develop their own theories seems to shock. More, they are all too often ascribed ridiculous notions which some reflection and research would quickly debunk.

Given this, a review of British syndicalism via one of its leading lights, Tom Mann, is warranted.<sup>3</sup> Hopefully we can learn lessons useful for today and debunk some of the worse claims made against it.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Ken Coates, “Preface”, Tom Mann, *Tom Mann’s Memoirs* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1967), xii.

<sup>2</sup> G.D.H. Cole, *The World of Labour: A Discussion of the Present and Future of Trade Unionism* (London: G. Bell & Son Ltd, 1915), 40.

<sup>3</sup> This article will not cover Jim Larkin and Irish revolutionary unionism.

## Syndicalists and the Great Unrest

Neither Tom Mann nor British syndicalism can be discussed or understood without an appreciation of the wider social context, namely the period of extensive industrial struggle between 1910 and 1914 (“the Great Unrest”). Faced with falling real wages and other issues such as union recognition, resistance to management control and not being treated with appropriate dignity, bolstered by relatively full employment, workers across Britain took part in an industrial revolt whose scale exceeded that of the decade before: the average number of person days lost through strikes between 1900 and 1909 averaged 2½ to 3 million but in 1910, 1911, 1913 and 1914 there were about 10 million person days lost, with nearly 41 million in 1912. Union membership rose from 2.5 million to over 4 million during those four years. Strikes were usually unofficial and militant:

The trade union leaders, almost to a man, deplored it, the government viewed it with alarm, the ILP regretted this untoward disregard for the universal panacea of the ballot box, the SDF asked, ‘Can anything be more foolish, more harmful, more... unsocial than a strike’; yet disregarding everything, encouraged only by a small minority of syndicalist leaders, the great strike wave rolled on, threatening to sweep everything away before it.<sup>4</sup>

Mann’s return to Britain could not have come at a better time. Yet it should not be assumed that he ploughed unbroken ground. Rather, syndicalist ideas had been advocated for some time in Britain. The earliest was *Freedom* from the early 1890s onwards, to later be joined by the de Leonist Socialist Labour Party (SLP) which split from the SDF in the 1900s but whose impact was limited. The 1900s also saw the anarchists publish the short-lived *The General Strike* (1903–4) and *The Voice of Labour* (1907). Awareness of revolutionary syndicalism in France (the Confédération Générale du Travail) and its spread to other countries was increasingly widespread.<sup>5</sup>

British syndicalists had two main strategies. The first, dual-unionism, saw the existing unions as very much part of the problem and argued for building new revolutionary one. These were influenced by the example of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The second argued that the existing trade unions could be transformed by their members and so urged what became known as “boring from within” (the term associated with the American syndicalist William Z. Foster).

In May 1907 Guy Aldred helped create the Industrial Union of Direct Actionists from a number of existing anarchist groups but it did not last. The dual-unionists of the SLP also formed the British Advocates of Industrial Unionism (BAIU) that year which aimed to build new revolutionary unions on the pattern of the IWW. Slightly before the American IWW, it split over political action. The SLP managed to alienate even other dual-unionists by their sectarianism, and their creation of an Industrial Workers of Great Britain in 1909 was stillborn. The “anti-political” faction formed the Industrialist League which acted as an unofficial British section of the Chicago IWW and launched the *Industrialist* in June 1908.

---

<sup>4</sup> Walter Kendall, *The revolutionary movement in Britain, 1900–21: the origins of British Communism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 26.

<sup>5</sup> The best account of this period remains Bob Holton’s *British Syndicalism 1900–1914 Myths and Realities* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

The North-East of England saw the first stirrings of the labour unrest. From November 1909 until July 1910 spontaneous strikes took place by the shipyards' boilermakers which resulted in the bosses locking them out. January 1910 saw the start of a three-month strike by the traditionally moderate Durham miners against an agreement already signed by their union officials. Railwaymen, despite having a five year agreement in place, struck successfully for three days in mid-1910. In the Autumn, militant tactics were used by cotton workers which saw a lockout in reprisal.

Mann arrived in Britain in May 1910 and immediately "visit[ed] the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) to study its methods of procedure... and examined thoroughly the principles and policy of the CGT, the syndicalists of France."<sup>6</sup> He then helped set up *The Industrial Syndicalist* which was issued as 11 monthly pamphlets between July 1910 and May 1911. This swiftly became very influential and in November the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) was founded at a two-day conference attended by 200 delegates representing 60,000 workers. Not a union, not even a formally structured body, the ISEL saw its role as spreading syndicalist ideas in the trade unions for it, like Mann, favoured the "boring from within" strategy to create a national federation of industrial unions and another of trade councils, recognising that dual-unionism risked isolating militants from a wider audience who would be sympathetic to their arguments. Its influence was reflective of the mass struggle which unfolded during these years and unlike earlier attempts, syndicalist ideas now found a fertile soil and a wider pool of activists than just Britain's small libertarian groupings.

The Great Unrest is usually dated from September 1910, with the beginning of the unofficial Cambrian Combine Strike in South Wales. Initially, the strike centred on wages and conditions but it took on an increasingly insurrectionary nature. Syndicalist influence grew steadily, with at least three syndicalists active on the strike committee and other syndicalist miners helping to spread the dispute throughout Wales while Mann and other ISEL members were frequent visitors. In contrast to syndicalist solidarity, the South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) refused to abandon its policy of conciliation as a means of settling grievances. After ten months, it ended in defeat for the miners but it had not been entirely in vain as, for example, the 1912 demand for a minimum wage for all miners emerged from it as did a campaign to reconstruct the SWMF on fighting lines, centred on the syndicalist-influenced Unofficial Reform Committee and based on the pamphlet *The Miner's Next Step*.

The summer of 1911 saw unrest spread to the transport industry, the dockyards and railways. Between June and September, largely unofficial strike action took place in all the main British ports and throughout the railway network. The disputes originated with a strike by seamen in Southampton, which spread quickly. In Liverpool, solidarity action saw other trades strike in support of the seamen, with a strike committee, which included Tom Mann, formed to represent all workers involved and their demands. The seamen and dockers strike ended in early July with a partial victory but more strikes were called by London dockers. Seeing the militancy elsewhere, the port authorities made significant concessions that were accepted by the unions, but rank and file activists argued for continuation of the strike and the resulting unofficial action quickly spread until the docks were paralysed. As food became scarce, further concessions were won from the government.

---

<sup>6</sup> Mann, *Tom Mann's Memoirs*, 203.

Just as the dockers strike ended, strikes began on the railways. Poor wages and conditions combined with dissatisfaction with the Conciliation Boards set up in 1907 contributed to the actions. The strike began on Merseyside, where 1,000 rail workers walked out in favour of higher wages and an end to conciliation in early August 1911. Within 5 days, the unofficial strike had spread to include some 15,000 railway workers and a further 8,000 dockers, who came out in sympathy. Rail workers in other areas joined the dispute, with unofficial action in Hull, Bristol, Swansea and Manchester forcing the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS) to call a national strike. Within days, all the rail unions had joined the stoppage, making it the first ever national rail dispute.

In Liverpool the new strike broke out the very day the Agreement for the previous one had been signed. Within a week, the ship-owners imposed a general lock-out and the strike committee called for an all-out strike by transport workers. Soon over 70,000 were on strike – with the traditional sectarian hatred between Catholics and Protestants being temporarily overcome. Liverpool was brought to a standstill, with the State reacting to this challenge by sending some 3,000 troops, large numbers of police and two gunboats. Concessions saw the end of the 72 day strike on Merseyside and in its wake a new monthly syndicalist journal, *Transport Worker*, was launched. Edited by Mann, it attained a circulation of 20,000 by October 1911 in the North-West of England before closing when he was imprisoned for his revolutionary activities in March 1912. *The Syndicalist Railwayman* was also launched in the Autumn of 1911 and syndicalist activists were elected onto the ASRS executive.

January 1912 saw the first issue of the monthly newspaper *The Syndicalist* appear. The issue contained a reprint of an anti-militarist article urging soldiers to refuse to shoot at strikers written by Fred Bower, a syndicalist stonemason, which was first published in Jim Larkin's *Irish Worker* in July 1911. Railway worker Fred Crowsley distributed it at Aldershot barracks. Crowsley was sentenced to four months, Guy Bowman (the editor of *The Syndicalist*) received nine months and the printers six under the Incitement to Mutiny Act 1797. Mann was later charged under the same act when he read the article at a public meeting and was sentenced to six months (reduced to seven weeks by public pressure). With the prosecutions, trials and imprisonment associated with the "Don't Shoot" leaflet, syndicalism became far better known and sales of *The Syndicalist* rose from around 5,000 copies to 20,000.

The biggest dispute of 1912 centred on a national minimum wage for miners. Parliament, fearful of unrest, rushed through legislation agreeing in principle with the demand but it did not set a rate. Nevertheless, the miners voted against this solution and for continued strike action, only to see the decision overturned by union leaders who ordered a return to work. This blatant betrayal by the union officialdom led to further increase in syndicalist influence.

In November 1912, the ISEL held two conferences with an attendance of 235 delegates representing 100,000 workers. That winter, the organisation began setting up branches and drawing up a constitution. The labour unrest continued and in 1913 syndicalism began to gain ground in other sectors of industry including engineering. One notable strike broke out in the Black Country, organised by the Workers' Union. At its peak 40,000 workers were involved, with strikers marching from factory to factory to spread the strike. Amalgamation committees spread across the engineering sector while syndicalist influence grew in the building industry. The Dublin lockout saw sporadic sympathy action in opposition to the TUC's finance only support, with – as an example – 10,000 railway workers unofficially striking in September 1913 after three workers were suspended for not handling Dublin traffic as called for by the Irish strikers. That month

saw an international Congress of syndicalist unions and groups (except the CGT) held in London. Organising this successful Congress was probably the high-point for the ISEL as some within it were moving to a dual-unionist position and the resulting tensions caused the body to break-up, with its rump continuing to publish *The Syndicalist* after a seven month gap.

Mann did not attend the Congress as he was on a speaking tour of America. One such meeting, in which he debated the Marxist Arthur Lewis on the motion “*Resolved, That economic organization is sufficient and political action unnecessary to the emancipation of the working class*”, was subsequently published as a pamphlet.<sup>7</sup> After his tour, *The International Socialist Review* published his “A Plea for Solidarity” (January 1914) which reiterated his opposition to dual-unionism as well as “Big Bill” Haywood’s reply.<sup>8</sup> On his return to Britain, he moved away from the ISEL due to its increasingly sectarian dual-unionist position but he continued to advance the syndicalist case. He – like many former ISEL members – became associated with the Industrial Democracy League which grew out of the Amalgamation Committee Federation and which followed his favoured policy of working in and transforming the existing unions. As well as writing for its journal *Solidarity: A Monthly Journal of Militant Trade Unionism*, Mann also wrote for the *Daily Herald* – which had began as a bulletin issued during the London printers’ strike of 1910–11 before being relaunched as a socialist daily in April 1912 – and spoke at the *Herald* supporters Leagues established in the winter of 1912–13. With a pre-war circulation of 50,000–150,000 copies, this was an important means of getting the syndicalist message across:

The role of the *Herald* as a publicist for syndicalist views was more significant. The meaning and utility of syndicalism was a topic for debate within the paper from its inception. This emphasis was stimulated at the editorial level by Charles Lapworth, himself a committed syndicalist, and by [George] Lansbury. Prominent syndicalists like Tom Mann, Guy Bowman and A. D. Lewis were involved as contributors and *Herald* publicists from 1912, while many rank-and-file syndicalists gave financial support. By these means the *Herald* not only gave the syndicalists’ objectives a wider national publicity than was possible within their own monthly press and outdoor agitation, but also helped create through its correspondence columns and news reports, a sense of syndicalism as a coherent movement. Last, and perhaps most important, the *Herald*’s emphasis on syndicalism helped to encourage a cross-fertilisation between revolutionary industrial thought and other currents of dissidence. Syndicalism became, in the words of a contemporary activist “part and parcel of the left wing approach.”<sup>9</sup>

Syndicalists had growing influence with the railway workers by building upon the industrial unrest which had culminated in the 1911 railway strike, the dissatisfaction caused by how the Government brought the strike to an end and the Conciliation Scheme which resulted from the settlement. *The syndicalists* attacked the demand for nationalisation, arguing that it would simply change the boss and that real emancipation was only possible when workers had complete control over the industry which could only be achieved by solidarity and direct action. A resolution

---

<sup>7</sup> Tom Mann and Arthur M. Lewis, *Debate between Tom Mann and Arthur M. Lewis : at the Garrick Theatre, Chicago, Illinois, Sunday, November 16, 1913* (Chicago : C.H. Kerr, 1914).

<sup>8</sup> William D. Haywood, “An Appeal for Industrial Solidarity”, *The International Socialist Review*, March 1914.

<sup>9</sup> R. J. Holton, “*Daily Herald v. Daily Citizen, 1912–15: The Struggle for a Labour Daily in Relation to “The Labour Unrest”*”, *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1974), 358–9.

on these lines was passed at the 1912 annual conference of the ASRS, the largest railway trade union at that time. When the ASRS amalgamated with two other unions in 1913 to form the National Union of Railwaymen, the new union resolved at its 1914 AGM that “[n]o system of state ownership will be acceptable to organised railwaymen which does not guarantee to them their full political and social rights, allow them a due measure of control and responsibility in the safe and efficient working of the railway system, and ensure them a fair and equitable participation in the increased benefits likely to accrue from a more economical and scientific administration.”

Likewise in the building trade, which had seen the formation of the Building Trade Consolidation Committee (BTCC) in 1912. This had called for an industrial union for all building workers, regardless of trade and, in 1913, building workers voted for the amalgamation by 31,541 to 12,156. The leaders of the various unions chose to ignore the result. A series of unofficial strikes prompted the employers to warn the unions’ officials in December 1913 that if they could not discipline their own members then they would take action themselves. They duly called a lock-out which affected some 40,000 building workers and the organisation of the dispute was taken over by the syndicalists around the BTCC to secure rank and file control.

After five months, employers offered a number of concessions, only to see their offer turned down by the strikers by 21,000 votes to 9,000. Some union leaders then began to break ranks but despite rank-and-file protest, they had effectively sold out the workers by breaking the unity of the dispute. This led to a radical rethink by syndicalist building workers. The majority, previously committed to working within existing unions, decided to form a new revolutionary union, the Building Workers’ Industrial Union (BWIU) which four existing unions immediately joined. The growth of the BWIU – like the wider labour unrest – was only halted by the outbreak of the First World War.

This can only be a short and selective account of the great unrest. A feel of the atmosphere of the times can be seen when *Freedom* wrote of “1913: The Dawn of Revolution”:

It would simply be impossible to enumerate all the happenings of the past year that have interest in a special sense for the sincere revolutionists – that is, for those who fervently hope for a fundamental change in the bases of society. It is sufficient to say that the general unrest has shown no signs of diminishing, and that the all-round awakening to a sense of what life really should mean to the great army of wealth-producers, has brought with it new tactics in the struggle against the power of capitalism, and a new spirit of rebellion, which has developed an unprecedented kind of solidarity between all sections of the working classes.

In a word, the class struggle – the exploiter against the wage-slave – has reached a point at which the great issue – the use of the instruments of production in the interest of all – is no longer clouded by “the divine right of property.” The private ownership of land, of minerals, of factories, of means of transport, anti-social in its origin and in its effects, is attacked on all hands. It is attacked directly by the economic struggle which means nothing less than an all-round demand in the ranks of the workers for sustenance and a fuller development of life, with war to the knife on the inhuman misery which the monopoly of these sources of wealth inflict on them; and it is attacked indirectly, feebly and half-heartedly by political reformers of the democratic-radical type, who would compromise with the evils of our present



system, so long as the keeping of body and soul together, with a show of some elementary decencies. of life, can be maintained.<sup>10</sup>

That year saw *The Voice of Labour* relaunched, reflecting the fact that the ideas that anarchists had been championing for decades – direct action on the economic terrain to achieve workers’ control of industry – had become extremely influential in the labour movement. The industrial struggles had transformed those involved, confirming the syndicalist argument that a “new mentality is created by mass association, a more intense thought and action.”<sup>11</sup> For example, one miners’ strike saw the strike committee express itself in increasingly radical tones, with a leaflet of June 1911 calling for the miners’ “To put an end to Capitalist Despotism and do battle for the cause of Industrial Freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Anarchist support for direct action and solidarity as the means of individual and social transformation had been, again, strikingly confirmed.

Likewise with the syndicalist activists themselves. While Mann and many others in the ISEL did not start as an anarcho-syndicalist, the lessons they drew from the struggles of the period drove them to that position. We now turn to Mann’s syndicalist ideas.

## Mann’s Syndicalism

Mann’s syndicalist period – 1910 to 1916 – was not a long one compared to his decades of activism but it is, along with his role in the 1889 dockers’ strike, what he is best remembered for. His syndicalism reflected various aspects of his earlier politics such as his union organising as part of the New Unionism of the early 1890s and calls for an eight-hour day. He had long seen the importance of practical struggles for reform as the means to achieve longer term transformation. However, many in the SDF (and its later incarnations like the British Socialist Party, BSP) followed the position of its leader Henry Hyndman and opposed strikes, thinking them a waste of time, energy and resources better spent on “political action” (i.e., standing for election and failing to win).

Mann’s move to syndicalism occurred when he lived in Australia between 1902 and 1910. This was a product of seeing first-hand how the state-owned railways did not represent railway workers interests, the effects of arbitration (introduced under Labour Party administrations) as well as closely following developments in Syndicalism in France, Italy and Spain as well as the IWW after its founding in 1905. By 1907 he started to lecture and write on “Revolutionary Unionism” but did not reject political action yet. The Broken Hill strike of 1909 was the catalyst for his syndicalist turn, seeing the failings of the arbitration system (it punished workers while employers could ignore its rulings with impunity) and the transporting of the police used to break the strike by organised railway workers. This caused him to pen the pamphlet *The Way to Win* (1909) which, while not rejecting political action, stressed the need for industrial unionism and the primacy of economic organisation. In short, it “seemed clear to Tom Mann that solidarity had to transcend sectional boundaries and the workers had to rely on their own direct action

---

<sup>10</sup> “1913: The Dawn of Revolution”, *Freedom: Journal of Anarchist Communism* (January 1914).

<sup>11</sup> E.J.B. Allen, “Is Syndicalism Un-English?”, *The Syndicalist*, July 1912.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Holton, 84.

rather than on the efforts of legislators. The long-term project was the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.”<sup>13</sup>

Like other syndicalists, Mann considered that the “engines of war to fight the workers’ battles to overthrow the Capitalist class, and to raise the general standard of life while so doing – must be of the workers’ own making. The Unions are the workers’ own.”<sup>14</sup> The first task was to transform the unions, for if you think workers can transform the world in their unions then first transforming those bodies would not be an impossible task and, moreover, a sensible position to start from:

Those who say, “We will have nothing to do with organisations that have not been on the clear-cut, class-conscious basis,” will practically take up the position of saying, “We will have nothing to do with humanity.” To ignore the unions does not commend itself to experienced men as a wise method of procedure...The unions... are truly representative of the men, and can be moulded by the men into exactly what they desire.<sup>15</sup>

The unions were seen as having many useful functions:

The Union stands between the worker and a “boss” to guard the worker against arrogance and insult. The Union is the place for fellow workers to fraternise; the real educational institution where information should be forthcoming about the World’s Movements of Workers, all struggling for economic emancipation.

The Union is conducive to good fellowship. It should and will explain the “Class War” and the stages of progress made in that war. It lifts the Worker out of the mere routine of working for bread, and tends to brighten and broaden his views of life. Comrades, get into the Union according to your occupation. Don’t receive advantages for which other men fight without doing a share yourself. Join and attend well, and do a share of work, and get others to join, and get and keep your eyes on the goal, the true goal of working class emancipation, the wiping out of the capitalist system of Society and the ushering in of a worthier and happier time. Line up then inside the Unions; whatever is wrong we can put right, far better inside than outside.<sup>16</sup>

His views on the State remained ambiguous at this stage although he admitted in an early debate on syndicalism that he “cannot get rid of this important fact that Parliament was not brought into existence to enable the working classes to obtain ownership and mastery over the means of production... Parliament was brought into existence by the ruling class... to enable that ruling class to have more effective means of dominating and subjugating the working class.” While not discounting electioneering, he argued that reforms via parliament were possible but only as “the direct outcome of effort first put forth outside of Parliament.”<sup>17</sup> By May 1911, he had come to reject his previous position on electioneering:

---

<sup>13</sup> John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists* (London: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1978), 262.

<sup>14</sup> Mann, “Prepare for Action”, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, July 1910.

<sup>15</sup> Mann, “First Conference on Industrial Syndicalism”, *Industrial Syndicalist*, December 1910.

<sup>16</sup> Mann, “The Need for a Federation of all the Workers in the Transport Industry”, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, August 1910.

<sup>17</sup> Mann, “Debate on Industrial Unionism”, *Industrial Syndicalist*, January 1911.

My experiences have driven me more and more into the non-Parliamentary position... I find nearly all the serious-minded young men in the labour and socialist movement have their minds centred upon obtaining some position in public life such as local, municipal or county councillorship... or aspiring to become an MP... I am driven to the belief that this is entirely wrong... So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation, not as a means but as THE means whereby the workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system and become the actual controllers of their industrial and social destiny.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, if we took the advocates of political action seriously there would be no need for unions or collective struggle as the elected representatives would do all that for us. The reality is different. As Mann suggested in a debate with an American Marxist, his opponent seemed “to conclude that as a result of the political organisation of the German social democracy... that they were achieving economic changes as a consequence... Have they achieved them? And if they have, will my opponent be good enough to recite them to us?” This explained the rise in syndicalist influence as many political socialists had “spent so long in the movement, and obtained so little, or no return, that they decided to give it the ‘go-by’ entirely. From that time they have resorted to economic organisation; and in proportion as they have done so, they say they have achieved results in the way of reduction of hours and increase in pay.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the capitalist State was unsuited to the task of creating socialism:

Those who know the real attitude of Syndicalists towards parliament, know full well that our ignoring parliamentary methods is not as the [BSP] manifesto states... Our objection is a much more serious one, it is that parliament is part of the decaying capitalist regime, and [an] institution wholly unsuited to afford the workers opportunities of getting control of the industries and the wealth produced by the workers in these industries... We declare it to be not of the smallest value that there should be a few socialist speeches made in such a place. Such speeches would give the workers no power nor would they send fear to the hearts of the capitalists. Naturally the capitalists will fear nothing until they find they are losing the power to control the working class. Our syndicalist method is the encouragement of the working class to control itself. There is absolutely no agency in existence or projected at all suitable to this great work except the industrial organisations of the workers.<sup>20</sup>

His non-political perspective in the class struggle fed into his vision of the future socialist society, affirming an anarcho-syndicalist position by 1913:

I am not for any government. I am for that free co-operation of the workers, industry by industry, district by district, co-ordinated and co-related with and to each other so effectively that we shall know exactly what output of commodities will be required and what necessities of life will be required, and what the productive capacity is.

---

<sup>18</sup> quoted by Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900–1914 Myths and Realities* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), 65.

<sup>19</sup> Mann, *Debate*, 45–46, 48–49.

<sup>20</sup> Mann, “The Manifesto of the B.S.P.”, *The Syndicalist*, November 1912. Parts of this article were reprinted in *Mother Earth* (September 1913) under the title “Tom Mann on Parliament”.

Therefore I rely upon perfect industrial organisation. And if any of you care to know what that means, it is exactly what is meant by the term “syndicalism”.<sup>21</sup>

Thus not only improvements in the here-and-now could be achieved by syndicalist tactics but also social revolution for “that which is known as the ‘Trades Union movement’, when it is properly broadened, properly idealised and intelligently utilised, which I believe it will be by-and-by, then I argue that that institution — the working class industrial organisation — known now as the ‘Trade Union movement’ — when that is made what it ought to be, we shall be quite equal to achieving the entire economic and social change.”<sup>22</sup>

Mann, however grand his hopes on the possible future of the union movement, was also realistic about the present and noted that it was “too early at present to go beyond the educational stage, as only a small minority have been reached in any definite fashion.”<sup>23</sup> Even as the class struggle intensified in the following years, he remained well aware that such a reformed union movement would take time to produce. “Would that the workers were reasonably prepared to overthrow the wretched system that compels us to work for the profit of a ruling class, and ready to co-operate intelligently for universal well-being,” he wrote in February, 1912. “But we know that the workers are not ready to do this, and we must therefore fall back on something less ambitious for the time being.”<sup>24</sup>

## Mann and the Anarchists

So over the space of a few years Mann moved from a social-democratic position to syndicalism to, finally, anarcho-syndicalism. “If Mann is not an Anarchist, (and he never said he was),” noted *Mother Earth*, “he believes everything the Anarchist does”.<sup>25</sup> Yet Mann’s libertarian ideas during this period did not come out of nowhere. He had had a long association with anarchists dating back to at least the 1889 Dockers’ Strike:

Like Morris, Shaw and Cunninghame Graham, [Kropotkin] went down among the dockers to inspire them with his speeches, and he made at this time a friendship with Tillett and Mann which lasted until his eventual departure from England [in 1917]. On Mann he had even some influence, for while Burns and Tillett both took the road that led to political power and a high place in the rapidly growing hierarchy of the trade unions, Mann remained very much a rebel and soon followed Kropotkin’s example in doubting the value of political action. His later adhesion to revolutionary syndicalism, when he founded the [Industrial] Syndicalist Education League, was undoubtedly due in great part to the influence of his anarchist friends.<sup>26</sup>

In April 1896 C.S. Quinn of the Associated Anarchists wrote to Mann expressing the feeling of “general satisfaction among the Anarchists” with his account of anarchist communism at a lecture

---

<sup>21</sup> Mann, *Debate*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Mann, *Debate*, 12–13.

<sup>23</sup> Mann, “Forging the Weapon”, *Industrial Syndicalist*, September 1910.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Holton, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Ben L. Reitman, “Tom Mann”, *Mother Earth* (January, 1914), 341.

<sup>26</sup> George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince: a biographical study of Peter Kropotkin* (London: Boardman, 1950), 232–3.

series he held.<sup>27</sup> Later that year he argued that the anarchists should be allowed as delegates at the London Congress of the Second International and spoke at the protest meeting organised by the anti-Parliamentarians. October 1896 saw a meeting of London Anarchist Communists to “bid farewell to Louise Michel and Pietro Gori on their departure to America on a lecturing tour” in Holborn at which he spoke along with Errico Malatesta and Sebastian Faure. In early 1900, Mann took part in an anti-Boer War meeting in London along with Emma Goldman<sup>28</sup> while the pub he ran in Long Acre, London, in the years before he left for New Zealand and Australia was “an anarchist hangout. Was Mann close to them? There is some scattered evidence that suggests he quite possibly was” and so “his exposure to anarchism was real and continuing in the last years of the 1890s.”<sup>29</sup> In Australia, he regularly mentioned Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid* as shown in one 1908 address in which explained to his audience that this book “was complementary to Darwin’s work, and should be read by everyone. It was a set-off to the idea that the individual struggle for existence was everything in evolution, as it showed that the development of social instincts was just as important.”<sup>30</sup>

His return to Britain and his embrace of syndicalism saw closer links develop between him and the anarchist movement. The veteran anarchists Errico Malatesta and John Turner (of the Shop Assistants Union) spoke at an ISEL New Year’s Event in 1911, the former “congratulated the League on its libertarian ideas” and the later “declared that Syndicalism was giving to progressives a much needed opportunity to translate their theories into action.”<sup>31</sup> Turner later joined its executive while Malatesta spoke “under the aegis of Mann’s Industrial Syndicalist Education League on a number of occasions.”<sup>32</sup> *Freedom* reported how Mann had “charged himself with foolishness in the past in looking to Parliament for Labour’s emancipation” and had “now came out as a full fledged Direct Actionist.”<sup>33</sup> As *Mother Earth* summarised:

No one enjoys greater respect among the workers of England than Tom Mann . Deservedly so: has he not been an active participant within the last twenty five years in every struggle of the proletariat in England, Australia, and South Africa? Like so many other Socialists, he has become convinced through experience of the uselessness of parliamentary activity and he has learned the importance of direct action and the General Strike.

The methods which the Anarchists have been propagating for a score of years have finally triumphed in England. Thus an important bond has been formed between the toilers of Great Britain and the revolutionary movement on the Continent.

By means of direct action and the General Strike the English workers have accomplished more in a few days than their leaders have succeeded in doing in the yearlong

---

<sup>27</sup> Chushichi Tsuzuki, *Tom Mann 1856–1941: The Challenges of Labour* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 103.

<sup>28</sup> Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970) I: 255–7.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph White, *Tom Mann* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 121, 114.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted by John Laurent, “Tom Mann, R. S. Ross and Evolutionary Socialism in Broken Hill, 1902–1912: Alternative Social Darwinism in the Australian Labour Movement”, *Labour History*, No. 51 (Nov. 1986), 60.

<sup>31</sup> “A Hopeful Start”, *The Syndicalist*, January 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Quail, 269.

<sup>33</sup> “The Industrial Syndicalist Education League”, *Freedom: Journal of Anarchist Communism* (January 1912).

“activity” in Parliament. They have not only carried their demands, but also caused tremendous injury to their masters, the capitalists.<sup>34</sup>

“What a pity,” Emma Goldman lamented, “we lack a Tom Mann in America, to gather up the forces that are sick to their very souls with the opportunistic compromises of the [Socialist] party? The soil has never been more ripe, the material never more ready for a real revolutionary Syndicalist movement.”<sup>35</sup> Mann contributed articles to *Mother Earth* including, in December 1912, an article celebrating Kropotkin’s 70<sup>th</sup> birthday while the December 1912 issue of *The Syndicalist* also had a short article marking it, noting “that magnificent revolutionary study, ‘The Conquest of Bread’” and how he had “devote[d] himself to the self-imposed task of helping to rid the world of economic slavery and its twin evil – political government.” The “best homage all can pay to him is to study his works, imitate his unselfishness, and propagate his ideas.” September 1913 saw Mann argue that workers had to “see the unfitness of the Capitalist State to deal with industrial problems; and, what is of equal importance, the impossibility of the working class ever functioning as the controllers of industry through the State machine. They require to feed on a good course of Peter Kropotkin to wean them from the idea that the modern State as a governing entity is in any sense a real necessity.”<sup>36</sup>

Anarchists in Britain and America viewed Mann’s evolution with interest, seeing in it a confirmation of their long-held views. This is reflected in *The Syndicalist* which informed its readers about “The Old International” which was originally “a Federalist and Revolutionary body” until the Hague Congress of 1872. While “the authoritarians, under the guidance of Marx and Engels, evolved from a revolutionary body to a reformist one” and “became Social Democrats and foreswore all revolutionary methods”, the “Federalists kept alive the revolutionary traditions, and in Spain they originated Syndicalism by declaring for the expropriation of the landowners and capitalists and the control of industry by free Federations of the workers.” Bakunin “was the champion of the Federalist element” and “although the Federalist International disappeared... its ideas went on developing regionally”, meaning that his “ideas are now more alive than ever.” Needless to say, the author linked themselves to those expelled from the London Congress of 1896.<sup>37</sup>

Mann remained in contact with Kropotkin over many decades and in an article for the Amalgamated Engineering Union journal included Kropotkin – along with Robert Owen, J.S. Mill, Proudhon and Bakunin – amongst those who had influenced his idea of communism.<sup>38</sup> In 1938 he outlined to his Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) biographer, Dona Torr, how he had met Kropotkin and that he had talked “about his hostility to the State, and this influenced me very much”.<sup>39</sup>

This does not mean that anarchists were uncritical of aspects of Mann’s syndicalism.

While bemoaning that Mann had “not cut himself quite clear of the political octopus, which, to our mind, is a danger”, *Freedom* welcomed the launch of *The Industrial Syndicalist* with its “call

---

<sup>34</sup> Hippolyte Havel, “Surprised Politicians”, *Mother Earth*, September 1911; included in *Proletarian Days: A Hippolyte Havel Reader* (AK Press, 2018)

<sup>35</sup> Emma Goldman, “The Power of the Ideal”, *Mother Earth*, June 1912.

<sup>36</sup> “Tom Mann Writes from Mid-Atlantic”, *Maoriland Worker*, 26 September 1913.

<sup>37</sup> “The Old International”, *The Syndicalist and Amalgamation News* (February 1913)

<sup>38</sup> Tsuzuki, 202–3.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Antony Howe, “‘Our only ornament’: Tom Mann and British communist ‘hagiography’”, *Twentieth Century Communism*, Issue 1 (2009), 103.

for Direct Action and General Strike” and that it “speaks the truth” that “the future... is with the economic struggle.”<sup>40</sup> In contrast, the following month it reported with approval the passing of a motion noting “the futility of Parliamentary action” at the second annual Conference of the Industrialist League, arguing that “industrial Unionism will gain immensely by adhering to the one clear call for economic struggle. Propaganda in this direction is sadly needed at the present moment.”<sup>41</sup>

Anarchists also recognised that the structure of unions mattered with Glasgow anarchist John Paton criticising Mann for his ambivalence over Parliament and, more importantly, that he did not explicitly address the power of officialdom within the unions:

In deciding for the retention of the present organisations, Mann has quite evidently failed to get to grips with the root of the problem he is facing. The curse of Trade Unionism in this country is the centralisation of executive power with its resultant multiplication of officials. The corresponding stagnation and death of local life and spirit is the inevitable consequence. This centralisation would be enormously extended and developed by Mann’s scheme... We must decentralise and as far as possible destroy executive power. Let the workers themselves bear the burden and responsibility of decisive action.<sup>42</sup>

The *Industrial Syndicalist* reflected a range of views as regards officials. One SWMF activist, W.F. Hay, argued that officials should be “elected for a definite period with definite instructions” but given substantial powers to secure the demands agreed by the members. Members were envisioned as having little say beyond removing them from office if they were unsuccessful for “no General can consult with his troops when going into battle with the enemy” and, moreover, this was how shareholders acted when “appointing a Manager” as how he secures their wishes “is of no concern of theirs.” As such, “we may learn from our masters.”<sup>43</sup> Of course, shareholders are not subject to the authority of the manager and structures which work well exploiting workers are not suitable for freeing them. Other activists – as expressed at the ISEL conference held in November 1910 – were critical of officialdom and the powers it held, seeking to empower the members and so activists “must see that they did not have too much leadership” (W.G. Kerry) and “[o]ne of the things they ought to work and fight for was to take out of the hands of the Executives and leaders the power they now have, and they could do it by getting among the members.” (T. Wilson Coates).<sup>44</sup> This often proved harder than expected with, for example, the resistance by the union officialdom in the building industry seeing a rise in dual-unionism, with the creation of the BWIU in August 1914.<sup>45</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, most anarchists saw the opportunity afforded by the rise of industrial unionist ideas, arguing that they “can use their influence to make it [the I.W.W.] anti-Parliamentary (the Industrialist League, the British section of the I.W.W. is already anti-Parliamentary); they can point out to the Industrial Unionists the fallacies and dangers of

---

<sup>40</sup> “The Industrial Syndicalist”, *Freedom: Journal of Anarchist Communism* (August 1910).

<sup>41</sup> “Industrialist League and Parliamentary Action”, *Freedom: Journal of Anarchist Communism* (September 1910).

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Quail, 264.

<sup>43</sup> “The Miner’s Hope”, *Industrial Syndicalist*, November 1910.

<sup>44</sup> “First Conference on Industrial Syndicalism”, *Industrial Syndicalist*, December 1910.

<sup>45</sup> Holton, 162–3.

centralisation; and they can help the movement reach its logical aim – Anarchy.”<sup>46</sup> As the “great unrest” developed, this hope increasingly became reality and libertarian influence within the ranks of British syndicalism grew.

Of course, Mann’s syndicalism does not address the problems with the doctrine that Malatesta so elegantly explained in many articles and, most famously, against Pierre Monatte at the International Anarchist Congress of 1907.<sup>47</sup> As Malatesta rightly argued in 1922, “the Trade Unions are, by their very nature reformist and never revolutionary. The revolutionary spirit must be introduced, developed and maintained by the constant actions of revolutionaries who work from within their ranks as well as from outside, but it cannot be the normal, natural definition of the Trade Unions function.”<sup>48</sup> The ISEL seems to reflect the kind of libertarian involvement with the labour movement Malatesta championed, raising libertarian ideas and tactics within the unions with remarkable success.

One last point on the subject of anarchism and syndicalism.

While many Marxists today often like to portray anarchism and syndicalism as incompatible (the former being “individualistic”, the latter collectivist), their ancestors recognised the links. “In Germany,” one argued, “the thinking of Karl Marx is dominant; in France the thinking of Proudhon, the anarchist.”<sup>49</sup> In Britain, they bemoaned the “insidious preaching of Syndicalism, Direct Action and similar forms of anti-political anarchism”.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, it is interesting to see that Mann wrote for *Mother Earth*<sup>51</sup> and stated it “voiced in clear terms the necessity for ‘working class solidarity,’ ‘direct action in all industrial affairs’ and ‘free association.’ I subscribe to each of these with heart and mind.” It was “labouring so thoroughly to popularise principles calculated, as I believe, to emancipate mankind, intellectually and economically.”<sup>52</sup> The journal, in return, was very praising of him and his activity. All facts which are hard to square with the common-place (and false) Leninist assertion that Emma Goldman was an elitist cultural activist who ignored the class struggle.

## The Move to Bolshevism

It is disappointing to note that Mann, like many other syndicalists (although not as many as Leninists today like to imply) became a Communist, although he did not take a role in the formation of the CPGB in 1920 and joined once it has been created. Given that he joined the BSP sometime after the June 1917 Leeds convention on the Russian Revolution “and toured the country calling for support for the Russian Revolution and for soviets in Britain”,<sup>53</sup> the BSP made up the bulk of

---

<sup>46</sup> Industrialist, “Industrial Unionism or Anarchist Communism?”, *Freedom: Journal of Anarchist Communism* (January 1912)

<sup>47</sup> Various relevant articles can be found in *The Method of Freedom: an Errico Malatesta reader* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2014), edited by Davide Turcato.

<sup>48</sup> *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London: Freedom Press, 1993), 117.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis, *Debate*, 26–27.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by Quail, 271.

<sup>51</sup> Mann’s articles in *Mother Earth* are: “In Appreciation” (December 1912); “A Rebel Voice from South Africa” (June 1914); “*Mother Earth* and Labour’s Revolt” (March 1915); “War and the Workers” (September 1915); “Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand Cotton Operatives Get an Advance by Direct Action” (December 1915); “Situation in England” (July 1916).

<sup>52</sup> “*Mother Earth* and Labour’s Revolt”, *Mother Earth*, March 1915.

<sup>53</sup> White, 193.



the new CPGB, and his syndicalism was a relatively recent development built upon decades of Marxist prejudices, perhaps this development is less surprising than some would think.

In 1921 he visited Russia to take part in the Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern), an experience he wrote about in a pamphlet entitled *Russia in 1921*. This makes no mention of the dictatorship of the Communist Party and instead quotes a “Comrade Peterovsky” from *The Communist Review* that “Communism has never yet existed in Russia; what has existed has been the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., of the best organised and most class-conscious of the town industrial workers, supported actively in the Soviets by the remainder of the working class, and passively by the peasantry, so long as its elementary demands were satisfied” while “the large industrial establishments will be entirely owned, managed and controlled in all respects by the government with the aid of the trade unions in a very real sense”.<sup>54</sup> He repeated this claim in his *Memoirs*:

the Russian Revolution has taught us many things. Perhaps the most important of these is that the administration or management of industry must be by councils of workers and not by parliaments... I am, therefore, strongly in favour of the universal establishment of workers’ councils, and the universal formation of shop committees. These institutions are indispensable instruments for achieving the complete overthrow of capitalism and the full control of all forms of industry by the workers. Such control will be secured, and the administration of industry will be effected, through industrial organisations, through our present trade unions when they have shed their narrowness and absurdities, have broadened their bases, and have welded themselves together so as to become equal to all industrial requirements.

This is the essence of syndicalism. The outlook for the future is not that of a centralised official bureaucracy giving instructions and commands to servile subordinates; I look for the coming of associations of equals, working co-operatively to produce with the highest efficiency, and simultaneously to care for the physical and mental wellbeing of all... With the experience of Russia to guide us, I entirely agree that there will be a period, short or long, when the dictatorship of the proletariat must be resorted to.<sup>55</sup>

Yet such a regime did not exist in Russia and, moreover, the Bolshevik “dictatorship of the proletariat” had been the mechanism by which tendencies towards that future had been systematically destroyed and replaced by rule by a massive, corrupt bureaucracy “giving instructions and commands to servile subordinates.” Lenin, like the other leading Bolsheviks, rejected both in practice and in theory the idea of workers’ management of production and, ironically, had in 1920–1 denounced a weakened demand for this by the Workers’ Opposition as a “syndicalist” deviation.<sup>56</sup> There was simply no workers’ control in Soviet Russia and substantial ideological reasons why this would remain the case.

---

<sup>54</sup> Tom Mann, *Russia in 1921* (London : British Bureau, Red International of Labour Unions, 1921), 36–7.

<sup>55</sup> *Tom Mann’s Memoirs*, 270–1.

<sup>56</sup> The Workers’ Opposition did not reject the dictatorship of the party nor the predominant role of the party in the election of economic institutions nor question the Bolshevik prejudice in favour of centralisation. As such, their calls for workers’ management of production were a faint echo of genuine syndicalist ideas on the matter and, as such, would not have saved the revolution.

Mann's hope was that parliamentary action could be used "to prevent the capitalist class from using force to block the workers' movement" and that "ignoring the existence of the plutocratic state machine, or by indifference to its functioning in a manner hostile to the workers" would be unwise, so "it would be impolitic to leave the forces of the state machine in the hands of our plutocratic enemies."<sup>57</sup> This – as we will see – was just the old Social Democratic critique he had replied to in his syndicalist period and which would mean no strike would be wise until Communists made-up more than 50% of parliament. It also failed to take into account that the so-called "dictatorship of the proletariat" had used the forces of *its* state machine against strikes from 1918 onwards.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, the Bolshevik regime confirmed the warnings of the syndicalists that nationalisations meant "the further power of the political machine, the political power extended to the industrial" and would create "an all-powerful bureaucracy, with its own laws, and its own army and police to support it".<sup>59</sup>

Was Mann aware of this? Probably not. Like so many, he wanted to believe the Bolshevik Myth and so closed his eyes to those – including his previous libertarian comrades – who exposed the grim reality of Bolshevik Russia. Emma Goldman recounted her disappointment with Mann and his initial unwillingness to support the protests at the 1921 Profintern Congress for the imprisoned Russian anarchists and syndicalists:

Tom Mann, always anathema to the ruling class of his country, now accepted and made much of by the head of the new dynasty, proved clay in Bolshevik hands. He was too weak to resist Lenin and he was overcome like a debutante first receiving male homage.<sup>60</sup>

To be fair, he did sign the protest letter on the issue of the anarchists (much to Harry Pollitt's dislike) but the fact Mann remained, like Scottish ex-syndicalist William Gallacher, a Communist until his death and so stuck with the party as it became Stalinist. Yet he also remained true to some of what he had learned before the war. "We aim," he wrote in 1927, "at applying the principle of workers' control in the shops, factories, mills, mines, ships and railways until we get complete control".<sup>61</sup> Eleven years later he was still arguing for workers' control.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Dona Torr – the CPGB member tasked with writing his biography<sup>63</sup> – "revealed that Mann was not altogether satisfied with his party career, 'feel[ing] deeply' that there was an 'essential difference between the side he has fought on since 1921' and his life before the party."<sup>64</sup>

So Mann's legacy primarily lies in his trade union activism rather than his membership of various Marxist parties before and after his syndicalist period. As one contemporary noted, "Tom Mann is today, even in his old age, a giant among pygmies. It is pathetic, however, to think of him spending his declining years in association with a bunch of political nonentities"<sup>65</sup> like the

---

<sup>57</sup> *Tom Mann's Memoirs*, 270–1.

<sup>58</sup> See section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2 (Edinburgh: AK Press, ) for details.

<sup>59</sup> A.G. Tufton, "Osborne Judgement Outcome: An Address delivered to the Walthamstow Trades' Council", *The Industrial Syndicalist*, March 1911, 22.

<sup>60</sup> *Living My Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970) II: 909.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted by Coates, "Preface", xii.

<sup>62</sup> White 201.

<sup>63</sup> Her death meant that only the first of three volumes appeared: *Tom Mann and his Times*, vol. 1 1856–1890 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1956).

<sup>64</sup> Howe, 102.

<sup>65</sup> Bonar Thompson, *Hyde Park Orator* (New York: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1934), 84.

CPGB. Significantly, Torr's pamphlet *Tom Mann* (1936) issued to mark his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday had some twenty-seven pages dedicated to the period of the 1880s to 1914 while the post-1914 period had only two.

Ironically, this is reflected in the fact that the source of Mann's appeal for Leninists is not his Bolshevik period – beyond a few references to the 1920s National Minority Movement it is rarely mentioned – but rather his activities which predated the CPGB. This reflects his utility to the Bolsheviks themselves, who recognised that “he was nevertheless one of the world's foremost syndicalists, and his adherence to communism had a tremendous potential value as a counter to be paraded around Europe before anarcho-syndicalist and ‘leftist’ critics of Bolshevism.”<sup>66</sup>

Still, regardless of this, Mann's arguments and activities from 1910 to 1916 should be better remembered. That Mann is remembered for his syndicalist period is significant for it shows the power of the ideas he advocated compared with his stints in various socialist parties (SDF, ILP, BSP).

## A few Marxist Myths Debunked

Yet while the move from syndicalist to communist is celebrated as a good example to be followed by libertarians today, Mann's toleration of Stalinism is less noted by Marxists. Understandably, given what it says about their ideology. Insofar as Leninists mention the Stalinist endpoint of the likes of Mann, it is usually explained by reference to their pre-Communist politics – a lingering legacy of their libertarian period.

Paul Foot, for example, noted how Mann “supported the Russian Revolution throughout the Twenties and by the time Stalin started to extirpate every revolutionary vestige of that revolution, Tom was an old man”, bemoaning how he went to China in 1927 and “chronicle[d] the disaster for which [his] beloved Stalin was chiefly responsible. Once more the abstentionism inherent in the syndicalist case – the abandonment of ‘difficult’ political decisions to ‘them upstairs’ had blinded Tom Mann to the cause of this most awful horror.”<sup>67</sup> Yet surely – as a leading member of the SWP – he was aware that Bolshevism is based on “democratic centralism” in which party members are expected to follow the decisions of the central committee (actual “them upstairs” rather than unspecified ones) regardless? As Trotsky put it in 1924 during his fight with Stalin:

Comrades, none of us wants to be or can be right against the party. In the last analysis, the party is always right, because the party is the sole historical instrument that the working class possesses for the solution of its fundamental tasks... I know that no one can be right against the party. It is only possible to be right with the party and through it since history has not created any other way to determine the correct position.

The English have a proverb: My country right or wrong. We can say with much greater historical justification: Whether it is right or wrong in any particular, specific question at any particular moment, this is my party... I consider my duty at the present time to be the duty of a party member who knows that the party, in the last analysis, is always right.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Howe, 94.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Foot, “Right as Pie”, *London Review of Books*, Vol. 13, No. 20 (24 October 1991).

<sup>68</sup> Leon Trotsky, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923–25)* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), 161–2.

So the whole point of democratic centralism is that you submerge your views and parrot the party line. To blame Mann's Stalinism on syndicalism rather than Bolshevism is unconvincing, particularly as embracing Leninism in the first place meant supporting – or turning a blind-eye to – the party dictatorship, state capitalism and “dictatorial” one-man management of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky. So ignoring your own experiences and doubts in favour of following the Comintern line was part of the CPGB position *from the start* and *not* a later development under Stalin. Mann, then, followed the decisions of the Comintern under Lenin and Stalin due to the same (non-syndicalist) principles – undoubtedly because the Russians had a “successful” revolution under their belts, one which Stalin had taken part as a key supporter of Lenin. Following Lenin was the soil upon which following Stalin flourished just as the former had extirpated every revolutionary gain of 1917 long before the latter secured his position precisely on those foundations.

There are other issues with Foot's claims. He suggested that Mann's “apolitical syndicalism left him without independent political answers when the workers, on whose industrial strength he depended exclusively, stampeded to the colours.” Except, of course, syndicalists around the world campaigned against the war while almost all Marxist parties sided with their State in the imperialist conflict. As a Spanish syndicalist noted at the Second Congress of the Communist International when the Bolsheviks suggested something similar, “of the professed syndicalist organisations only the CGT deserved this reproach, that precisely the political unions – those maintaining connections with the socialist parties – had supported the war and thus aided the capitalists.”<sup>69</sup> As syndicalist-turned-Bolshevik Alfred Rosmer noted, “people talked too much, and not always intelligently, about ‘syndicalist prejudices’” yet “these ‘prejudices’ had not stopped syndicalists being in the front line of resistance to the war and of the defence of the October Revolution.”<sup>70</sup>

Trying to save this claim, Leninist academic Ralph Darlington looked at the syndicalist movement in France, Italy, Spain, Ireland, Britain and America. Of these, only the CGT became pro-war (although “there emerged a tiny internationalist and anti-war minority within the CGT”) and “in both Spain and Ireland the syndicalist movements mounted opposition to the war” while “the bulk of Italian syndicalists confirmed their anti-militarism and internationalism”. In Britain and America, the syndicalists and IWW are condemned for not explicitly campaigning against the war although he does not explain how their “ambiguous stance was a reflection of their syndicalist refusal explicitly to link industrial activity with political ideas and organisation” when, as he himself shows, other syndicalists managed to do so. Needless to say, he draws no similar generalisations from his admission that in Britain “[e]ven those shop stewards’ leaders who were members of revolutionary socialist parties, such as the British Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party, acted no differently.” Add the other countries he mentions in which the syndicalists took an anti-war position – Germany, Sweden, Spain and the Netherlands – and it seems hard to conclude that syndicalist theory somehow hinders opposing imperialist war.<sup>71</sup>

So, in reality, compared to political Marxism and its affiliated unions, the syndicalists – like the anarchists – have a far better track record as regards opposing the First World War. Foot's grasp

---

<sup>69</sup> Wayne Thorpe, *The workers themselves: revolutionary syndicalism and international labour, 1913–1923* (Dordrecht/London: Kluwer Academic and International Institute of Social History, 1989), 133.

<sup>70</sup> Alfred Rosmer, *Lenin's Moscow* (London: Bookmarks, 1987) 137.

<sup>71</sup> Ralph Darlington, “Re-evaluating syndicalist opposition to the First World War”, *Labor History*, 53:4 (2012), 526, 524, 528, 531, 533.

of the facts can also be seen from his claim that Mann “threw himself into the Red International Labour Union, which was founded in Moscow in 1921. Lenin’s aim was to set up revolutionary trade unions to counter the ‘reformist’ trade unions which were being set up in the capitalist world.” While the former is true, the latter is not. Indeed, the opposite is the case: Lenin’s aim was to get the revolutionary unions to disband and for their militants to join both the Communist Party and the reformist trade unions.

Then again, Foot once managed to write an article on Louise Michel which failed to mention she was an anarchist so perhaps we should not be too surprised. However, his claims are often repeated and so worth debunking. Likewise with another common claim that the syndicalists “neglected politics and the role of the state altogether”<sup>72</sup>. Another historian suggested “that ‘pure’ syndicalism’s (and Mann’s) theory of the state – and his consequent denial of the need for anything that can plausibly be called political action – was as close to being just plain wrong and for the reasons most commonly cited.”<sup>73</sup> This is reflected in this passage:

Welsh syndicalists consistently underrated the significance of the state. Politics were unimportant because the state was simply the superstructural manifestation of the economic power of the bourgeoisie. The real fight was with a real not an abstract enemy at the point of production...Unfortunately the state was not an abstraction but a force in its own right which intervened with decisive effect during the decontrol struggle in 1921. That experience underlined the relevance of the arguments advanced by the British Socialist Party in its pre-war polemic against Syndicalism. “You cannot get very far by mere industrial action”, wrote Fred Knee at that time. “So long as the capitalist state remains, with its army, navy and police... so long will it be possible for that capitalist state, when thoroughly awake to any danger, to throttle any strike, however big”<sup>74</sup>

In terms of the Welsh syndicalists, are we expected to believe – to take just one example – that they were unaware that Churchill had during a south Wales miners’ dispute in 1910 sent battalions of police from London and held troops in reserve in Cardiff, in case the police failed in their task? That during what became known as the Tonypany riots that the authorities fortified Pontypridd with 400 policemen, two troops of infantry and a squadron of the 18<sup>th</sup> Hussars (who were stationed at the Llywnypia pit)? Is there any doubt that they knew that the State was on the side of the employers given what they saw with their own eyes?

Moreover, Mann – and other syndicalists – were fully aware of the role of the State and repeatedly answered *at the time* this apparently unanswerable critique. Indeed, Arthur M. Lewis raised the same claim in his debate with Mann during the latter’s tour of America and got this reply:

Of course I am aware of what is likely to be said with regard to their being the men in possession; they are the owners of the factories, the mills and the mines.

---

<sup>72</sup> James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), 278–9. Hinton, it should be said, immediately contradicted himself by noting that the syndicalists also thought that the “revolutionary General Strike” would “fragment the forces of bourgeois repression.” (279)

<sup>73</sup> White, 171.

<sup>74</sup> M.G. Woodhouse, “Mines for the Nation or Mines for the Miners? Alternative Perspectives on Industrial Democracy, 1919–1921”, *Llafur*, Vol.2 No.3, Summer 1978, pp.92–109

At present I know that they are the virtual owners of the state machinery, and the virtual owners of the fighting forces. And it may be argued that they can use these against us, against the working class. I am declaring they could not do anything of the kind when class solidarity is once a fact. Given solidarity, the army cannot move. Given solidarity, the navy cannot move. Given solidarity, the judges cannot function in their particular grooves. Given solidarity, neither statesman, politician, church, nor others will be able to aid in supplying the daily bread.<sup>75</sup>

Mann re-iterated this answer by noting that while “it is claimed that if you will ignore the state, the state has its machinegun, etc.” he had, “[i]n the plainest of English language... commented upon the existence of that power” and had “also made the straightest possible reference to the means whereby I would deprive them of that power”, namely that “functioning on the industrial field by the exhibition of solidarity... would entirely deprive the government of the present power it has, and it could no longer control those who would make use of the guns to pop holes through you.”<sup>76</sup> He mocked those who said that “political action” was essential to capture the State in order to then destroy it:

*That it may be abolished!* Is that the same “state” that Mr Lewis is now proposing we shall spend our energy in capturing? And what will be the good of it when we have got it? What will we do with it when we have it? If it is to be abolished, and I say it is to be abolished, what is the good of spending time over it trying now to get hold of it, when here I have shown — and he has not refuted it or attempted to — I have shown that by refusing to function at the bidding of the bosses we thereby deprive the state entirely of its present power. I request him to be good enough to deal with that.<sup>77</sup>

At an ISEL Conference the previous year Mann moved a motion on this:

#### **Methods of Direct Action**

Whereas the State is always prepared to use its armed force in the interests of the capitalists to coerce the workers into submission whenever they attempt to better their conditions;

Whereas the capitalists have even gone so far as to raise armed forces of their own;

Whereas the workers, who have no country, have no interest in any war, except the class war;

The Conference declares the necessity for the workers to devise means of Direct Action against the State as well as against the capitalists — such as the Strike, the Irritation Strike, the Pearl Strike, Sabotage, the Boycott, and Anti-Militarism.<sup>78</sup>

And, lest we forget, Mann embraced Industrial Unionism after seeing organised railway workers transport “the armed police and other henchmen of the companies” to Broken Hill “thus

---

<sup>75</sup> Mann, *Debate*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> Mann, *Debate*, 40. Mann later repeats this argument (72).

<sup>77</sup> Mann, *Debate*, 41–42.

<sup>78</sup> “London and Manchester declare for Syndicalism”, *The Syndicalist*, December 1912.

enabling the master class to have at its disposal the machinery of the state and the services of the organised workmen to beat the miners.”<sup>79</sup> Likewise during the Liverpool transport strike, Mann saw 3,000 troops and several hundred police imported into the city along with gunboats on the Mersey. The 13<sup>th</sup> of August – Bloody Sunday – saw a mass demonstration of 80,000 workers violently dispersed by police and troops. Two days later, two strikers were shot dead by troopers as crowds attacked prison vans taking those convicted for resisting the police on the 13<sup>th</sup> to prison.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, he was imprisoned for anti-militarist propaganda (the “Don’t shot!” leaflet) in 1912.

Now it is one thing to say that such responses were inadequate,<sup>81</sup> it is quite another to suggest that the syndicalists were blissfully unaware of the issue and had not responded to it. Yet, apparently, we are meant to believe that Mann – like *all* syndicalists – was unaware of the role and nature of the State in spite seeing its forces of coercion deployed against strikes.

So, as Bob Holton summarised, the Syndicalists “quite clearly perceived the oppressive role of the state whose periodic intervention in industrial unrest could hardly have been missed.” They “were hostile to any view of parliament and the state as socially neutral and therefore malleable by supporters of social reform. State institutions were seen instead as functioning in capitalist interests.”<sup>82</sup> In reality, then, syndicalists addressed this issue and argued that anti-militarist agitation and the general strike would paralyse the forces of the State.<sup>83</sup>

This perspective flowed from “the Syndicalist view that the organised State, with its government and officials and armed forces, was brought into existence by the opponents of the Workers, and functions only in the interests of the enemies of the Workers.”<sup>84</sup> They rejected the idea that the State was a neutral body which could be captured:

Political Socialism works by legal means from above; Syndicalism works from underneath, irrespective of legality.

The Political Socialist sees in everything the need for the State or the Municipality to do something, thereby forgetting the class nature of the State and his own teaching that anything to be done, must be done by the workers themselves, and that no law

---

<sup>79</sup> *Tom Mann’s Memoirs*, 193.

<sup>80</sup> Holton, 99–100.

<sup>81</sup> Kropotkin in his “Preface” to *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution* noted that the authors “have considerably attenuated the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way. The check of the attempt at Revolution in Russia [in 1905] has shown us all the danger that may follow from an illusion of this kind.” (*Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* [Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014], 561).

<sup>82</sup> Holton, 22, 182. Also see, R. J. Holton, “Syndicalist Theories of the State”, *The Sociological Review*, Vol 28, Issue 1, 1980.

<sup>83</sup> Dismissal of this answer by Leninists may also be combined with criticism that the CNT helped defeat the October 1934 uprising in Asturias by its members transporting troops on the railways. This ignores that the majority of organised railway workers outside of Catalonia were in the UGT and that the assault on Asturias was by sea using colonial troops from Spanish Morocco, the Spanish Legion (part of Spain’s Army of Africa) and Assault Guards as it “was soon decided that the rebellion could only be crushed by experienced, professional troops. The other areas of Spain could not be denuded of their garrisons in case there were other revolutionary outbreaks. Franco therefore called upon Colonel Yague to lead a force of Moorish regulars to help re-conquer the province from the rebels.” (Richard A. H. Robinson, *The origins of Franco’s Spain: the Right, the Republic and revolution, 1931–1936* [Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1970], 190–1) Sadly, Trotskyist Felix Morrow – the source of such claims – did not indicate how he came by this information or why troops based in Africa were first ferried to Spain before being transported by rail across the country to then board the ships which were used to get them to Asturias in order to crush the revolt.

<sup>84</sup> Tom Mann, “George Lansbury”, *The Syndicalist*, December 1912.

will be enforced effectively in the workers' interest, until the workers can enforce it themselves.<sup>85</sup>

This analysis also informed their critique of nationalisation. First, “[w]here ‘Labour Governments are in power the workers are still wage-slaves. They are still exploited.’<sup>86</sup> Second, why expect the *capitalist* State to be the means of liberating labour? As one syndicalist stressed:

The State which now sends British soldiers and police to protect blacklegs... and to bludgeon British workers who are fighting for their bare rights to existence, can hardly be expected to inspire the workers with much confidence as to its intentions as an employer of labour... it is likely to be as unscrupulous an exploiter as is the private corporation. And this need hardly be wondered at. The State is essentially a ruling-class organisation, and its functions are chiefly coercive. The State came into existence with the rise of private property and a privileged class; its main functions have always been the protection of ruling-class property and the keeping of the masses in subjection.<sup>87</sup>

It should also be noted that the Marxists of the time had the naïve position that the State machine would simply follow the decisions of any Socialist government rather than, say, ignore parliament and organise a military coup. As one leading British syndicalist argued:

Besides, if our rulers, by Parliament, can prevent a General Strike, so equally can they take measures to prevent a Parliamentary Socialist Victory.... Does it ever strike the politicians that if capitalist politics can be used to tie up the workers' industrial revolt, how still more easily can they be used to tie up, deceive, or cajole the workers politically?

The base of the matter is to be found in the formidable error of thinking that the workers can emancipate themselves with the *permission* of their rulers.... The General Strike cannot be combatted by laws if the workers are determined to resort to it.<sup>88</sup>

Moreover, the critique was somewhat beside the point as no Marxist Party ever got into that position – electioneering ensured that any which managed to achieve a majority had by that time become completely reformist (indeed, the 1945–51 British Labour Party government had no qualms in sending in troops to break dockers' strikes). Ironically, one of Mann's Marxist critics admitted as much when he noted in passing how French socialist Aristide Briand “had proven himself a deserter.”<sup>89</sup> The rest of the twentieth century simply confirmed the syndicalist recognition that socialists “prior to being returned, were unquestionably revolutionary, are no longer so after a few years in Parliament.”<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> A.G. Tufton, “Osborne Judgement Outcome: An Address delivered to the Walthamstow Trades' Council”, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, March 1911.

<sup>86</sup> E.J.B. Allen, “Politicians and the General Strike”, *The Syndicalist*, February 1912.

<sup>87</sup> Charles Watkins, “The Question for Railwaymen: Conciliation or Emancipation?”, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, May 1911.

<sup>88</sup> E.J.B. Allen, “Politicians and the General Strike”, *The Syndicalist*, February 1912.

<sup>89</sup> Lewis, *Debate*, 38.

<sup>90</sup> Mann, “Prepare for Action”, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, July 1910.



In short, syndicalists regularly addressed the issue of the use of State forces in strikes and at a minimum argued for anti-militarist propaganda within the armed forces and that solidarity strikes would hinder their deployment if they proved immune to calls for class solidarity. Others, such as Pataud and Pouget, recognised the need for actively “disorganising the State, of dismantling and thoroughly disabling it” (insurrection) along with “The Arming of the People” to form an “organisation of defence, with a Trade Union and Federal basis” and these “Syndicalist battalions 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.”<sup>91</sup>

Given this, their urging that we direct our energies to building our own organisations rather than on a futile attempt to capture those of our masters becomes simply stating the obvious.

Finally, the question of the General Strike. Marxists have a tendency to portray this as a passive “folded arms” revolt. Indeed, initially many French syndicalists envisioned it this way and were critiqued by anarchists (most famously, by Errico Malatesta at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress). The notion that the general strike could starve out the capitalist class ignored the resources available to it and the disruption to the community such a strike would have. The need then, as Kropotkin had stressed in the early 1880s, was to turn the general strike into a general insurrection and expropriation.<sup>92</sup> This critique was recognised as valid by many syndicalists with, for example, Pouget and Pataud arguing that the general strike was the precursor for an uprising, swift expropriation of the means of life and the resuming of production under workers’ control. This perspective was also expressed by British Syndicalists:

For Syndicalists to preach passivism is absurd. The expropriation of the capitalists is not going to be accomplished by the starvation of the workers. For us the general strike is not a national movement for working-class starvation but the commencement of the capitalists’ expropriation... Direct Action, sabotage, general strike, insurrection leading to expropriation are the only methods that Syndicalists can use to emancipate the workers.<sup>93</sup>

Thus “Direct Action will have to carry the victory ultimately. There is no solution for the abolition of wage system other than expropriation... the Revolutionary General Strike for the expropriation of the capitalists.”<sup>94</sup> It was a fallacy to suggest otherwise:

Our conception of the Social Revolution, effected by the direct and forcible expropriation of the capitalists, abolishes at once and for all the wages system... It means the communist reorganisation of society, the abolition of all political government, all society being workers, and these regulating and controlling their own conditions of existence through their economic organisations that have been shaped to that end.<sup>95</sup>

In other words, the insurrectionary and expropriatory general strike so vividly portrayed by Pouget and Pataud was also advocated by many British syndicalists (Mann suggested that while

---

<sup>91</sup> Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How we shall bring about the Revolution: Syndicalism and the Co-operative Commonwealth* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 78–84, 150–8.

<sup>92</sup> See Kropotkin’s comments on the American 1877 railway strike in the chapter “Expropriation” in *Words of a Rebel*.

<sup>93</sup> “Some Fallacies Stated and Answered”, *The Syndicalist*, December 1912.

<sup>94</sup> E.J.B. Allen, “Politicians and the General Strike”, *The Syndicalist*, February 1912.

<sup>95</sup> “Some Fallacies Stated and Answered”, *The Syndicalist*, December 1912.

details would differ, “all the present day developments compel acquiescence in the main lines of the forecast”<sup>96</sup>). Needless to say, their book was also positively reviewed by Max Baginski in the June 1913 issue of *Mother Earth* and was advertised in it alongside Goldman’s pamphlet *Syndicalism: The Modern Menace to Capitalism*.

## What now?

The industrial scene is very different now. Large-scale industry is nowhere near as significant as it was in Mann’s day (the utter destruction of coal mining being the most obvious example). The unions have moved from primarily sectional trade-based ones to giant general ones rather than industrial ones. They are subject to draconian regulations which impose – to use Pouget’s term – “Democratism” onto them, so disempowering the militant minority who can inspire mass action and empowering the officials who can diffuse it. We have no equivalent of the *Daily Herald*.

The “free market” and “anti-red-tape” Tories have passed law-upon-law regulating industrial action (and so the labour market) and wrapping the trade unions in red tape. Spontaneous (“un-official”) action and solidarity strikes have no legal protection. In the 1960s and 1970s, the wage share was around 60% but fell rapidly after 1981 (reaching 53.5% by 2007). Decades of defeats mean a sense of power is lacking, with the vision of most unions being at best fighting against attempts by bosses and politicians to make things worse rather than anything as “utopian” as workers’ control. Most just aim to survive until a Labour government is elected with the unspoken expectation that they will be ignored rather than further regulated and weakened.

Given all this, does Mann’s syndicalism have any relevance for today?

The unions are hardly the perfected weapon of struggle Mann hoped they would become. Officialdom still reigns and industrial organisation is rare. Where some unions are industry based – for example, the University and College Union – the workers are usually divided by grade even if they face the same boss. Thus activists can be in the ironic situation of having their senior management being fellow union members while workers subject to that manager’s diktats cannot join due to being in a lower grade – and various trade union anti-poaching agreements exist to maintain this illogical arrangement. As such, Mann’s industrial unionism is still relevant.

Then there is the lumping of all workers in a workplace in a single branch and this being the body which decides on action. Such a situation does make some sense, but it does allow management to utilise salami-slicing tactics, targeting subunits for “re-organisation” on the often all too correct assumption that the wider branch will not be willing to back a minority of members (even if the branch does back action, the bosses can rely on the new legal 50% barrier on ballots to work its magic). Obviously, building a culture of solidarity is essential here, as is stressing that such attacks are usually rolled out across the organisation as a whole, but making the branch itself a federation would make sense and encouraging others to practice their right to not cross pickets organised for legal strikes.

Which is part of the issue. The law limits official strikes considerably – but in terms of the barriers it places on taking action and the types of action allowed (no sympathy and “political” strikes<sup>97</sup>). For all their talks of “union bosses”, the Tories’ anti-union laws give union officials

---

<sup>96</sup> Mann, Foreword, Pataud and Pouget, ix.

<sup>97</sup> The Tories banning sympathy strikes does not stop their cheerleaders also moaning about “the unions” being “selfish” and only interested in their members.

yet more power as they mitigate against “unofficial” action. This means that any new syndicalist revolt will need to understand the importance of “unofficial” action and the impact that can have on strikers and their unions. Likewise, attempts to outlaw any effective actions by whatever government is in office would need to be met with direct action and solidarity rather than relying on elections to return the lesser evil (who, like New Labour, never get around to ending the restrictions).

Ultimately, though, the Tory anti-union laws reflect the correctness of many aspects of Mann’s syndicalism. The power of direct action and solidarity – both in terms of improving pay and conditions and transforming people’s consciousness – was something the Tories wished to destroy and have done so to a large degree. The task is to build a sense of power in workers, a raising of awareness of what in Mann’s time could be taken for granted for a large section of the population.

The question of how much time, effort and resources to invest in reforming the existing unions remains as valid now as in the 1910s. Mann’s strategy had the distinct advantage of both giving activists a feasible short-term goal and of bringing them into contact with activists who shared some, if not all, of their ideas and so could be more easily convinced to move further. However, the power of officialdom remained – not least because it reflected the role of trade unions in negotiating agreements with bosses and so having to uphold their side (e.g., industrial quiet for at least a while). So a clear danger is that militants become integrated into the union machine, become part of the very officialdom which they sought to eliminate – as shown by a few former British syndicalist militants who saw through the Bolshevik Myth.

So electing radicals to positions within the officialdom with a clear anti-bureaucracy reform strategy may be the end result of the process but it can never be the start. Yes, many union branches have little attendance at general meetings but without a culture change in the membership any activists “elected” to branch committees will be isolated – both as regards the bureaucratic-minded existing Committee members who will be in the majority and from the rank-and-file who may not appreciate the changes or activities being championed. The aim must be a transformation at the bottom and that will influence any wider strategies within the existing unions.

Mann’s support for amalgamation and “boring from within” provided activists with something to do. The latter should not be underestimated for the bane of revolutionary politics is a lack of constructive activity, of actually seeing your ideas making a positive impact on the world. Mann’s strategy gave a positive activity, something which would bring us a step closer to socialism, rather than building tiny “pure” revolutionary unions which are very similar to activist groups simply existing to propagate abstract revolutionary propaganda. This is not to say that new unions may not be needed at some stage – the example of the Building Workers strike of 1913–4 springs to mind – just that this is almost certainly not the starting strategy in most areas.<sup>98</sup> Still, we should not forget that there are more options than just “boring from within” or dual-unionism and that different tactics may be applicable in different situations.

Then there is the state of the left. Mann faced the sectarian SLP and the SDF/BSP rather than the plethora of “revolutionary” sects we have today. These far more than the old parties will seek to grasp hold of any radical currents within the unions and use them to build their parties at the expense of creating a wider spirit of revolt. The negative impact of this can be seen

---

<sup>98</sup> Being a member of two unions, a reformist and a revolutionary one, is always an option but that means the revolutionary union is more an educational body than a union and this should be acknowledged.

from the lack of influence of the CPGB's National Minority Movement and the fact that parties with the "correct" Leninist position have rarely grown in influence compared to the syndicalists between 1910 and 1914. However, the danger remains as shown by the anti-poll tax movement of the early 1990 – extra-parliamentary, direct actionist, based on community solidarity – being used as a means of electing Militant activists (such as Tommy Sheridan) into council and other seats before being allowed to disappear. Any new syndicalist revolt would need to be aware of this danger and stress its apolitical nature – after all the CPGB dissipated the promise of the syndicalist revolt by importing a party model formed in a pre-capitalist Tsarist autocracy and we should seek to learn that lesson.

In terms of goals, Mann's call for workers' control (self-management) remains as valid as ever although the idea that unions are the means to organise it depends very much on workers being in direct control of those. However, whether by unions or new workplace assemblies and committees, workers' control of production remains a fundamental principle of any genuine socialism. The decline in syndicalist influence and rise of Leninism saw the demand for workers' control essentially disappear, arising again only in the 1960s when we saw some of the descendants of those who buried it proclaim – without a hint of shame – their support for it. We cannot allow such hypocrisy to go unmentioned.

To conclude. We should recall that despite all the patronising and selective Leninist accounts of British syndicalism, none of these various Marxist parties and sects have managed to gain the influence that Mann and others achieved between 1910 and 1914. If British syndicalists did not bring about the revolution, then the move to Bolshevism has been far less successful. This is not to suggest that a simple reapplication of the ideas and strategies of over 100 years ago is wise, simply that there is far more to learn from that experience than seeking to apply that of a party that ensured a failed revolution in a quasi-feudal absolutist monarchy.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho  
Tom Mann and British Syndicalism  
November 21, 2021

Retrieved on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2021 from [anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)