

The Goals and Structure of the CNT

CNT

1996

Contents

What is anarcho-syndicalism?	3
How is it different from other unions and social movements?	3
The basic structure of anarcho-syndicalism: the union branch	3
Functions of the anarcho-syndicalist unions	4
Human and technical means	5
Legal advisors to the CNT	5
What is the union committee?	6
Committee members are not paid	7

Translator's Introduction: This is the first of three excerpts from a pamphlet published last year by the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo, Anarcosindicalismo: Basico. The pamphlet is a training manual for new union members, to help them understand the CNT and how it functions.

What is anarcho-syndicalism?

Anarcho-syndicalism is a current of thought and principles which appeared at the end of the 19th century. It has these fundamental characteristics:

- The goal of organizing the world's workers for the defense of their immediate interests, and to obtain improvements in their quality of life. To form unions to achieve this.
- The creation of a structure in which there are neither leaders nor executive power.
- The desire for the radical transformation of society, a transformation to be brought about by the means of a Social Revolution. Without this goal of transformation, anarcho-syndicalism does not exist.

Another name for anarcho-syndicalism is revolutionary syndicalism.

How is it different from other unions and social movements?

Anarcho-syndicalism has the conviction that the causes of social inequality and injustice, are based on power, on the principle of authority, which puts a minority in charge, disposing of the wealth produced by society and maintaining its privileges by means of violence, and the obedient majority, has no more than what it needs to survive and must suffer the violence of the minority. Consequently, anarcho-syndicalism, in order to eliminate injustice opposes the principle of authority, decision-making by the elites, and the ultimate representation of power: the State.

Contrary to the hierarchical Organization and authority of the State-Capital, and its repressive apparatus, anarcho-syndicalism poses its Anti-Organization. This involves a process, in which decisions are made at the base, in which the people participate, in which there is no leadership (or it is very limited), there is no repression, and there exists full liberty and equality in the exchange of ideas, opinions, and initiatives. Anarcho-syndicalist organization resembles that of the State-Capital as little as possible. It is thus an anti-organization when compared to the authoritarian model existing nowadays.

The basic structure of anarcho-syndicalism: the union branch

The CNT is a union, a confederation of industrial union branches. A union branch is a group of people who work in the same branch of production, to defend their interests. The unions of the CNT are industrial unions, contrary to what are called trade unions. Trade unions, for example, divide health workers into the nurses' union, the medical technicians' union, doctors' union, etc. In contrast the CNT health workers form the Union of Public Health, without distinction to

professional categories. This structure was adopted at the Sans Congress in 1918. It was agreed on because it was seen as the most practical in struggles with capital.

Everything in the CNT revolves around the union. An industrial union in health, for example, is formed by the people who work in health within the same city, who meet as a local union. There they discuss the problems of their industry. Likewise industrial unions are formed for metallurgy, construction, wood-work-ing, food processing, etc. If there are not enough people (at least 25) to form an industrial union, as it often happens, they constitute a Sindicato de Oficios Varios (SOV) [a union of varied trades] with a minimum of five people. As the SOV grows and a group of people in a distinct industry becomes sufficient, it reorganizes into industrial unions. For example, an SOV of 300 members could have 30 in construction, 50 in metallurgy, 200 in public services, and 20 in other industries. They could, if they desired, form three industrial unions (construction, metallurgy, and public services) and leave the SOV with only 20 members.

The union decides its issues by means of the Union Assembly. The assembly is its highest decision-making body, attended directly by members. It is not mediated by outside committees, delegations, etc.

The majority of other union organizations — at least they claim its that way — base their decisions on the assembly. But there is a great difference with respect to anarcho-syndicalism. The assembly is considered to be the supreme means for decision-making, but they hold the assembly only once a year, for example. Immediately there are written the rules for the creation of other structures, union council, committee meeting, executive board or whatever, which decides between assemblies, with all executive power passing in practice to these structures.

In the anarcho-syndicalist union, in the industrial union, it is the assembly which always decides. There exists no board, no committee, delegates' council, no director, no executive...which can decide between assemblies. Later the major functions of the CNT committees will be explained. Other names by which the industrial union are called are "one union," or "one industrial union."

Each time an assembly is held it is important that someone makes a record of what is said there. The record reflects the opinions of those persons taking part, the debates, the agreements that are made and who agrees to carry them out. In order to write and to maintain records we write our history.

Functions of the anarcho-syndicalist unions

The unions of the CNT concern themselves with all subjects related to the defense of its members, and for this they provide themselves with all available means, human, technical, economic, and legal. They plan actions to be taken against employers, make studies of working conditions, file grievances over health and job security problems, and seek all information possible concerning the operation of the enterprise (supplies, suppliers, profits, subsidiary companies, contracts, labor policy, conversion plans...). This is important on the one hand to not be taken by surprise by capitalist plans, and on the other, for the eventual arrival of the day in which we take over the enterprise. They have the capacity to conduct strikes, to assist in dealings with the authorities, and to negotiate on behalf of the members. They prepare training courses, study days, and conferences. They provide for legal defense of workers and imprisoned members. The union is the school of the people. In it we must come to see in the injuries of others as injuries to ourselves,

to develop through conversations, thought and debate, to become multi-talented, to learn to take initiative... Depending on the number and activities of the people in the union, the union will be well or poorly equipped.

Human and technical means

The first thing members of an anarcho-union must do is to evaluate the forces that they have, and to continue to plan activities that can be carried to completion. By achieving the possible we can approach the impossible. This is important because inactivity or failure always leads to demoralization. There are also technical means available, such as telephones, FAX, photocopiers, word-processors, computers and printers, a hall for meetings and archives, including a moving record for our people of the glorious epoch, when everything was done by hand and the backs of old mules. Certainly to achieve all the former, requires development.

What gets membership, which is most important, is that everyone seeks the means to make the union grow. What is absolutely certain, is that the anarcho-syndicalist union only grows where there are problems and conflicts, and it is the role of union militants to discover them and provoke them.

For a century activism was very strong. The people wanted to be unionized in spite of repression. That was when there was a period of union growth, and the desire for social transformation was widespread. Today this no longer exists, having been replaced by a narrow individualism, cynicism, and consumerism instigated by the capitalists. We must understand that our message in this society is not widely shared – for the moment – and that a large part of our initiatives are met with indifference. We must not lose spirit.

Legal advisors to the CNT

The CNT does not have legal advisors in order to be run by lawyers. There are sufficient members who have some experience in labor law, or have studied it. In case of doubt, the CNT consults lawyers with whom it has contact. It is necessary to be informed of the laws as they exist, by means of official provincial bulletins, of the assembly of the corresponding region or state, and of all the information over the enterprises to which they apply.

In this world of hostile and unjust laws, we have to defend our rights and the better we know them, the better we can defend them. The better we know the laws, the less the necessity for legal representation. But the least legal intervention will come with the greater strength of the union.

We would like to make it clear that the purpose of all labor law is to benefit capitalism in general, to defend its privileges and to permit its robbery without risk, preventing the direct confrontation between labor and capitalism. The State makes the rules of the game which always benefit the employers, so that the legal system:

- Is expensive. To function within it requires the payment of high fees. To get lawyers to open their mouths never costs less than a thousand dollars. Much more to take a case, or handle legal documents, without which no magistrate needs to deal with it.
- Uses language which is difficult to comprehend by ordinary people. It is made this way to augment the ignorance of the people, since to know a thing is to understand it, to indicate

a power to control it, and this is not in the interest of a legal caste which wants to impose its will without question.

- Is slow. It prolongs the processes which could be solved rapidly by means of direct negotiations.
- Considers the conflicting sides to be children, incapable of solving their own problems.
- Is very complex. It requires a great deal of skill to maneuver within it. Many of its statutes are contradictory, with traps and no real clarity or rationality to it.

To rely on lawsuits is a course which always favors the employer, such that even when the judge sides with labor, and assesses damages against the capitalists, the only thing which has been done is to give us what is already ours, and what triumphs is the idea that in spite of the faults of a system which is slow, bureaucratic, expensive, pernicious, domineering, corrupt and incomprehensible, we have to give it power over us.

To know the laws makes it possible to demand their implementation, which succeeds on many occasions. But in addition it is necessary to know when to break the laws, to employ common sense and to plan to follow the path which is the most short, simple and economical to do something.

To use lawsuits, however, violates our form of existence, which rejects the institutions of the State. Nothing is possible to achieve through magistrates which could not be done with concrete actions. According to our principles, the only tactic useful for its militants is Direct Action. Lawyers to the CNT manage, therefore, those limited cases in which there are not enough forces to reach the goal by Direct Action. The lawyers function within the contradictions in which anarcho-syndicalism is forced to operate.

What is the union committee?

The union assembly chooses people to keep open local union halls, maintain relations with other unions, handle correspondence, collect dues, issue the union journals, handle literature orders... Simple tasks which in general the union assembly delegates to achieve its goals. These people form what is called the union committee, which is divided among the following secretaries for:

- Organization, responsible for internal union relations, membership lists...
- Education, culture and archives, editor of educational materials, organizer of the library...
- Press and information, responsible for media relations.
- Treasury and financial matters, collecting dues.
- Law and prisoner support, to gather official bulletins, information on laws, contracts, to inform the union of labor law problems, dispense funds in cases of detention, imprisonment, to deal with lawyers...
- Union organizing. To help develop plans for action in workplaces, unionized or not.

- Social activism. The same as above but dealing with non-union questions: ecology, anti-militarism...
- And the General Secretary, representing the confederation.

All of them form the union committee, together with delegates from specific union sections within industry where the union is active. This is in theory, because if the union desires a smaller committee, it might drop some secretaries (press and education, for example). And if it wants, it could invent another secretary, thus increasing the committee. But what is really important is:

Committee members are not paid

All the committees are mechanisms for management and coordination, with no power to make policy. The only decision-making bodies are the union assemblies. If in the case of dire emergency or necessity they have to decide something, they would have to account for it to the assembly, which would decide if their action was correct or not.

All mandates are revokable at anytime. The assembly is free to demand the resignation of the officers if it wishes. The duration of a term is two years, with possible re-election for one more year as maximum. It is required that officers be rotated.

The committee, as a body, can not make proposals to the union assembly.

All the members of the committee have to be confirmed at the next assembly after their election. All officers are always at the disposal of the assembly.

Members of political parties may not hold office in the confederation.¹

In all assemblies the committees have to account for the activities of the secretaries.

The committees of the CNT do not express their individual opinions. When they open their mouths, they do it in the name of the entire organization and its agreements.

These limitations guarantee that every officer acts without self-interest. It is a barrier to avoid the growth of a bureaucracy, and to limit to the maximum possible the development of leaders, dictators and authority in the heart of the union.

The committee of the CNT must be a mechanism of facilitation, administration and coordination, not a power group.

¹ The restriction against members of political parties to serve on union committees, was adopted in the 1930s as a means of defending the unions against control by the Communist Party. No restriction was made against authoritarian communists belonging to the confederation as workers. But these people belong to parties which aspire to become vanguards and guides of the workers, and one of their tactics is to infiltrate independent organizations in order to control them. For this reason it is necessary to limit their aspirations to have power.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



CNT
The Goals and Structure of the CNT
1996

Retrieved on April 16, 2005 from web.archive.org
From Libertarian Labor Review #19, Winter 1996. Translated by Jeff Stein.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net