

Militant Unions – The Backbone Of “Movement Socialism”

Edvin Dahlgren

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Swedish trade unions were once the backbone of a “movement socialism”. The term is coined by Mats Dahlkvist, a Swedish political scientist, in contrast to “state socialism”. This “movement socialism” meant that unions created a strong civil society, a public arena and counter-power to the powers that be. It was a living practice of the masses that brought meaning to everyday life and hope for the future. Now, it is almost gone, but it can be made great again. Thus argues Edvin Dahlgren, a Swedish syndicalist, in the following article.

“The labour movement is dead,” writes Olle Sahlström, former head of the Swedish trade union think-tank “LO Idédebatt” (in the journal *Tvärdrag*, August 2008). Is he crazy? In Sweden, we have the big union players LO, TCO and Saco! Oh well. We syndicalists emphasize that the labour market is dominated by union bureaucracies, not a union movement.

If there was a strong movement, union bureaucrats would not sell out our right to strike to the business world, which they did in 2019 in an infamous legislation act. At the very least, such sell-out attempts would be swept aside by a general strike from below.

“**The labour movement is dead**”, writes Sahlström and he continues: “for me it is an insight filled with hope and a future of possibilities”. Yes! The movement can be rebuilt if its basic insights are spread once again. The syndicalist recipe for successful trade unions is: *direct democracy, solidarity across occupational boundaries and direct action*. Unions should welcome all workers but exclude all political parties.

In Sweden, syndicalism has an official voice through the union SAC since 1910. We syndicalists believe that unions can once again become the people’s best tool for improving living conditions and creating a humane society.

How? In this article, I intend to look back at history to find ways forward. I will touch on the popular currents that political scientist Mats Dahlkvist refers to as “movement socialism” (in Swedish: rörelsesocialism). Swedish readers can consult an eminent text by Dahlkvist on movement socialism during the first half of the 20th century (see his text in the public enquiry SOU 1999:112). Below, I will also try to outline an updated movement socialism for the 21st century.

The labour movement grew out of the collective interests of workers against the capital owners and their state apparatus. The capital-owning class plays many roles: it is a buyer of labour power, seller of goods, a landlord, banker and holder of political power. Capitalists also own mass media and cultural production.

In Sweden, people usually talk about the “two branches” of the labour movement: the Party in the state and the Union in production. It is a very narrow view. The labour movement was built primarily on three social roles: the worker’s role as producer, consumer and “citizen” (or member of society).

Trade unions were formed in the labour market. In the commodity markets, consumer associations were started. In the housing market, tenant associations and co-operative housing were established. Trade unions also set up employment agencies and made unions into fighting organizations for both unemployed and employed workers. Furthermore, workers created study associations, cafes, newspapers, libraries, theatres, cinemas, parks and houses owned in common, and more.

A fourth social role was downplayed but not ignored: the individual as a private person with family and kinship ties. This private sphere was highlighted as a social issue by the labour movement and even more so by the women’s movement. This includes the fight for sexual education, contraception, childcare, protection against men’s domestic violence, and more.

In neighbourhoods, workplaces and urban centres, the flora of associations converged. This civil society constituted a proletarian public sphere, an arena of meeting places and independent media. It was a counterweight to the voice of the ruling class. The rulers owned the state apparatus and companies. But in civil society, a counterculture pulsed that was owned by the people. It was a real counter-power. The capital-owning class was confronted in all its roles. That's how people changed their lives.

In the unions and civil society, syndicalists perceived the seeds of a new society. In SAC's Declaration of principles of 1922, a future breaking point is depicted when the workers' organizations will "displace, overcome and replace the organs of capitalism" and "the organs of state power". The new bodies would consist of local assemblies that elected some form of workers' councils, consumer and citizens' councils. The councils would be interwoven into industry-wise and geographical federations, stretching across national borders.

This is how syndicalists intended to conquer workplaces, residential areas, villages and entire cities. The realism of this project was proven in the great Spanish Revolution of 1936–39. The workers' self-management was crushed by external attacks, it did not fall due to internal defects. The revolution was crushed by all the totalitarian and liberal governments of the world that could influence the outcome.

In Sweden, the various associations of the labour movement have lost their ability to mobilize. They have been marginalized and disappeared or integrated with capitalists and the state. The once progressive civil society is gone. The public arena is dominated by the lies of power and the noise of commerce.

I believe in a new movement socialism. It is the alternative to both parliamentary concessions and political sectarianism outside parliaments. Movement socialism is also the alternative to "state socialism" which went into the grave with the 1900s. Movement socialism is class solidarity in action.

It requires patient and hard work to rebuild militant unions. The focus must be on workplaces, but unions should also extend their tentacles in civil society. We must build a new public arena, a counterculture and counter-power. Then our unions can lead the way for social change. How? I see three important fronts for union organizers.

The first front is about improving the welfare state from a union perspective. Employees in the tax-funded sectors should assert their interests in cooperation with the consumer or user side (patients, the elderly, parents of school children, and so on). The important thing is to improve working conditions, increase workers' influence and the quality of services. I think we should avoid principled wars about ownership forms.

The second front is about what is usually called "social wage": better unemployment insurance, sickness benefits, student incomes, pensions, tenants allowances, child allowances etcetera.

Both these fronts depend on a third front, militant wage struggles in the private sector. Higher wages yield more tax revenue for public welfare. Higher wages also allow workers to consume more, companies to produce more and hire more people.

On the three mentioned fronts, trade unions can mobilize the working class and a large part of the medium strata. Then two additional goals become realistic: full employment and the six-hour working day. More people can get jobs when workers demand a slower work pace, shorter working days and more recruitments. Trade unions do not have to wait for legislation on the six-hour day. This demand should be enforced directly in the workplaces.

On the three fronts, I see great potential for alliances. Here, the working class can act not only as wage earners. I have already mentioned the user side of public welfare. Students, people within labour market measures and self-employed persons can also participate in broad alliances. The fight for a higher "social wage" would also benefit the unemployed, those on sick leave and pensioners. In this way, a popular counter-power might be built that can go even further.

Absolutely crucial to our victories is that unions develop collective strength in the production of goods and services. As far as I can see, industrial action is the trump card in both narrow union issues and broad social issues.

In the coming years, union organizers must probably prioritize the most basic work: start new job branches and sections, revive old ones, recruit and train more members, etcetera. A valuable addition would be local cross-union forums. This would mean that workers from different unions and industries meet to exchange experiences and support each other. Through such forums, workers can help each other build militant unions everywhere. That would lay the basis for greater ambitions.

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This article is a short version of an essay originally published in Swedish. The article can also be found on Znetwork. The original essay was first published in the Swedish union paper *Arbetaren* in 2018. Thereafter published on the website *Anarkism.info* in 2022 (slightly updated). The author is a member of the Swedish syndicalist union SAC. *Photo below: Pixabay.*

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