

Towards a programme of conflictual, class-struggle syndicalism

Contributions to the debate

Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici

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To all those comrades who have chosen the difficult path of union work in order to play an active part in the class war, those who have chosen the labour organizations as the main way to give voice and strength to the collective, immediate and historical interests of the exploited, those who organize and carry out union activities using the method of direct democracy, according to the class interests.

The dimensions of a defeat...

If we analyse the events or processes which have begun but which have not yet ended, the economic cycle, what do we find again and again? The reduction of the numbers of productive units; the shifting of certain sectors to countries with a cheaper workforce and no restrictions on environmental pollution; changes to the organization of labour with increasingly precarious jobs and conditions; the outsourcing of tasks to external companies; the introduction of telework; the development of information technologies and their application within the productive process; the introduction of policies restricting the productive base; the repression of consumption; the rapid acceleration of the flexible use of the workforce and the tendency to create wage differentiation. While all these processes have been crowned by the policies of the centre-right Government, it must be noted that they originated with previous governments — the “Biagi law”, for example, is merely a somewhat harsher version of the “Treu Packet”, in other words, the progressive demolition of National labour Contracts; the transformation of deferred and indirect wages into an opportunity for welfare to enter the market.

Partnership syndicalism

Concertation, triangulation, partnership. Taking over the national economic interests (a sort of neo-corporativism) by sacrificing the interests of the workers. The drama of the confederal unions is a double one: on the one hand, they try to “govern” the macroeconomic choices, sitting down to bargain while playing the part of the representative of society whose viewpoint is obligatory and binding, but the new economic phase does not seem to take into account the union as a constituent element of the new social pact, there is no space in Capital’s plans for the CGIL’s form of co-management nor for the Christian solidarity of the CISL.

On the other hand, they try to “govern” the wage bargaining for national contracts by forcing it on a counterpart who willingly accepts, provided it is an empty shell whose contents escape the control of the workers inasmuch as they are dictated by compatibility with the system (company planning, productivity).

On its path towards total institutionalization, partnership syndicalism is thus destined to become a consultation agency, a manager of financial services for the worker. The deceit of and the damage to millions of union members is thus two-fold: the idea continues to spread that THIS is the only possible form of syndicalism, while at the same time the very notion, the practice and the memory of the union as a place where the workers develop and collectively defend their class interests is being lost.

It is true that there still exists (or rather, resists) some opposition within certain categories or in certain geographical areas; it is true that there are still harsh struggles being carried on in individual areas where the unity of the workers demands a more conflictual form of syndicalism

which prevails over the usual stance of the CGIL or the CISL; it is true that the coordinating groups of RSUs (union representatives) in certain sectors or parts of the country still manage to impose another point of view in place of the decisions of local or national union leaders.

But these situations no longer seem to be able to “save” the confederal unions (and above all the bureaucratic-managerial class of the unions) and lead them to really represent the workers and fight, to drag them out of the mire of partnership syndicalism and move towards a more conflictual form of syndicalism.

Currently, the leadership of the CGIL (which is heading for its Congress) appears to have moved away from a strictly pro-partnership position. However, it must also be noted that the Confindustria (the employers’ association) under Montezemolo is no longer as radically confrontational as it was under D’Amato. If there is a change in the government, it could lead to the CGIL’s middle-management, who in effect grew up with the policy of partnership and who still quietly support it, coming once again to the fore.

Conflictual syndicalism

The gap that partnership syndicalism has created and continues to create has allowed various alternative and grassroots labour organizations and groupings to develop, whose creation, spread and growth is linked to the personal histories of their union activists, to particular places and to particular sectors. These groupings, having moved on from grassroots committees (“cobas”) to become unions proper, have increased their membership, have succeeded in getting their representatives elected to RSUs in a number of categories over recent years, and even manage to launch and promote struggles (both local and national) which have had reasonable support, EVEN among non-members. With the growth in their credibility and representativity (political, if not numerical), there should also be an increase in responsibility in these unions — both with respect to their own members and with respect to all workers — as the bearers of an alternative way.

Unfortunately, the plurality of the grassroots unions has thus far failed to bring added VALUE to conflictual syndicalism, but has turned into a break-up of workers’ unity, leading to a weakening of the alternative way, that of recreating class-struggle, direct democratic syndicalism. It is to be hoped therefore that the grassroots unions increase their co-ordination and that the grassroots struggles can be federated, both as a general strategy and also on an immediate basis, given the likelihood of change within the political and institutional scenario.

The role of Revolutionary labour activists

There are many Revolutionary workers who are active in the unions, from the left wing of the CGIL to the various Cobas, from the USI to Unicobas and the RdB/CUB, in different sectors and categories, in a range of geographical and political areas. Many others are not tied to any particular union. More often than not, the choice of union is dictated by the situation in the workplace rather than by any revolutionary feeling, or by the fact that the worker shares a particular policy or struggle of a particular union rather than any blind attachment to one union or another. Very often only the anarchist and libertarian union activists can actually be elements of union between the workers and not of division, or are able to point out common interests and intent rather than fall back on sectarianism. And this is because they are there where the class

consciousness is organized in any given moment, in the forms that the social conflict and the workers themselves mark out.

There are no special pre-defined methods or forms of syndicalism to be followed: more importantly than the unions themselves, anarchist union activists pay more attention to the forms of class self-organization in the workplace and in the community, because the mass organization is built from that starting point. It is a starting point and organized dimension where anarchist union activists are present and are working to promote.

Anarchist union activists choose the worker over the particular union, they choose the unity of the workers over the particular union, they support the workers' struggles for the defence of their interests independently of the form or particular union involved, of the type of syndicalism involved, as long as it can lead to an improvement in the proletariat's living conditions and to the creation of more freedoms within society!

In the workplace, building the unity of interests between workers with different types of contract, winning back the power of decentralized bargaining, protecting the right to health, managing working hours in order to better manage our lives, detaching pay from productivity.

In the community, building opportunities where we can seek to rebuild the fabric of association, of debate, of political and cultural elaboration, of solidarity that was once typical of the old Mutual Aid Societies and cultural circles which gave the workers' movement strength and ensured the efficient defence of class interests.

Or Inter-Union Labour Clubs, inter-category associations, union alliances or RSU delegate alliances, which can encourage the building of relationships and labour strategies that go beyond political and union affiliation. Places that can make the most of all the richness of the different experiences of unions, of self-managed groupings, of those labour and political militants who mark out and pursue struggles (both partial and more general) in which the workers of various affiliation can be federated.

On a national level, we support the spread of conflictual syndicalism so that it can become the distinguishing feature of federations of class segments, union activists and various grassroots unions. Given that at present the convergence of grassroots syndicalism into one single organization is not a credible prospect, though it is urgent and necessary that conflictual syndicalism establish itself as a real, alternative and effective forces for the workers, the least that must be done now is to create a platform for class-struggle syndicalism.

A platform which must include the aims and principles regarding pay, working hours, rights, services and union democracy for all workers, be they Italian or otherwise, north or south, in permanent or precarious employment:

1. struggle for union and political freedoms: the freedom to strike; the freedom of assembly; the freedom of labour organization and of expression in the workplace; full operability for all labour organizations;
2. struggle for employment and against casual work relations, against all destructurization of the labour market; struggle against modern forms of day-work and against manpower agencies; the abolition of Law 30/2003; equal pay for equal work;
3. struggle for a European inter-category minimum wage; the defence and increase of indirect wages and social services; the defence and extension of deferred wages with workers' self-determination of their severance pay and its revaluation on the basis of the cost of living;

4. full access of all migrant workers to the formal structures of work relationships and to the world of labour in the host countries, with full rights and pay parity;
5. struggle against discrimination in social rights and guarantees, in forms of work and job contracts, on the basis of productive and socio-cultural criteria; struggle against the re-introduction of wage ceilings;
6. struggle for access to social services by whoever needs them; struggle against the privatization of social services (education, healthcare, transport, energy, telecommunications, etc.);
7. struggle against alienation from the world of employment;
8. struggle for pay parity between men and women;
9. internationalist support for the struggles of workers in other countries and other economic areas;
10. struggle for free, public, secular education for all;
11. struggle for the right to a clean environment and health, non-monetizable and non-negotiable, for a better quality of life;
12. against the repression of labour struggles, continuous counter-information, renewed organization and strengthening of defence bodies (defence funds, observatories on repression, solidarity for comrades affected by disciplinary measures, legal aid networks);
13. re-introduction of the Syndicate of Councils, where all can elect and be elected; free choice of candidates, recallable mandates; departmental representatives on mandates from the assembly; worker-elected delegates for bargaining at every phase of the talks.

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