Geoffrey Ostergaard
The Relevance of Syndicalism
June 1963

Retrieved on 4th March 2021 from libcom.org
From *Anarchy* #028: The Future Of Anarchism

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

The Relevance of Syndicalism

Geoffrey Ostergaard

June 1963

TO DISPLAY ANYTHING OTHER THAN AN ACADEMIC INTEREST in syndicalism at the present time is to lay oneself open to the charge of being a social troglodyte. Syndicalism, as a movement of any size and influence, flourished in the first two decades of this century and, since then, apart from a brief and cruel flowering in Spain during the Civil War, it has been a spent force. Avowedly syndicalist groups and organisations still exist in many countries but their memberships are numbered in the hundreds and thousands rather than in the tens of thousands and millions; and a dispassionate observer would be forced to place them firmly in that half-submerged political world inhabited by "the socialist sects". Periodically, attempts are made to regroup the scattered forces of syndicalism in preparation for a new offensive: there have been several such attempts in this country since the war of which the National Rank-and-File Movement launched two years ago is only the latest. But it seems unlikely that such attempts will lead to any significant movement in the foreseeable future.

Why, then, should we bother our heads with syndicalism? Why not leave the subject to the historians? It is clearly one of the failures of history, a movement that didn't "come off". With

our eyes on the present and the future, why concern ourselves with the past, especially the unsuccessful past? As T. S. Eliot has reminded us, "We cannot revive old factions or follow an antique drum"; and perhaps we ought not, even if we could.

There are at least two good reasons for not adopting the viewpoint implicit in such questions. One obvious reason is that the present and possible future cannot be understood without an understanding of the past. And by "the past" I mean not only the "successful" past — that part of history which most obviously leads to the present; I include also the "unsuccessful" past — that part of history which, from the viewpoint of the present, seems to have led nowhere. It is a point often overlooked, even by intelligent historians, that there is as much, if not more, to be learned from the failures as from the successes of history. This, as I shall try to show, is particularly true of syndicalism. An understanding of why syndicalism failed and a pondering on the implications of that failure can illumine our understanding of the present in a way that no account of "successful" movements could do.

A second good reason for not dismissing syndicalism out of hand is perhaps more debatable, since it stems from the values inherent in my own political position. Looked at in the round, the world socialist movement since 1917 has been divided into two great camps: the social democratic camp, on the one side, and the Bolshevik or Communist camp, on the other. These two camps have been and remain sharply divided over the question of the road to the socialist society. The social democrats have opted for the constitutional and democratic road, while the Bolsheviks have been prepared, if necessary, to take the revolutionary road. But despite this and other differences, both social democrats and Bolsheviks are united in believing that the road to socialism lies through the acquisition by their respective parties of the political power of the State, the institution claiming, within its territory, sovereignty and a monopoly of the instruments of coercion. In this respect, both

social democrats and Bolsheviks differ from the socialists of what might be called the third camp: the camp of the anti-state or non-state libertarian socialists. Not much has been heard of this camp in the last forty years. Historically, it has comprised a variety of groups and movements both constitutional and revolutionary. These include the so-called pre-Marxist "utopians"; the co-operators; the anarchists in all their different hues; the guild socialists; and, of course, the syndicalists. Apart from the doubtful exception of the co-operators, the list looks like a list of "failures". But it is my conviction that, between them, the adherents of this camp have provided both the most realistic analysis of capitalist society and also the most penetrating insights into the essential conditions for the realisation and maintenance of a free, egalitarian, classless and international society.[1]

At the present time we are witnessing the decomposition of social democracy. The social democratic road, it is now becoming clear, leads not to socialism as traditionally understood, but to the managerial-bureaucratic Welfare-cum-Warfare State. In one important area after another, Bolshevism is gaining ground at the expense of social democracy. Bolshevism, at least, has demonstrated in a way that social democracy has never done, its capacity to make a revolution, to establish a new social order. What, alas, Bolshevism has not demonstrated and shows no sign of demonstrating is its capacity to create a new social order remotely resembling that

[1] Towards the end of his life, G. D. H. Cole placed himself squarely in this third camp. "I am neither a Communist nor a Social Democrat because I regard both as creeds of centralisation and bureaucracy, whereas I feel sure that a Socialist society that is to be true to its equalitarian principles of human brotherhood must rest on the widest possible diffusion of power and responsibility, so as to enlist the active participation of as many as possible of its citizens in the tasks of democratic self-government" — A History of Socialist Thought, Vol. V, p.337.

of the classical socialist ideal. If the future does indeed lie with Bolshevism, so much the worse for the socialist dream!

From this perspective, the libertarian socialist tradition takes on a special significance for the present generation of socialists. It may be — and we have cause enough to be sceptical — that there is no road to the truly socialist society. The whole ideology of socialism over the last 150 years may come to be seen in the future — if mankind has any future — as yet one more ideology preparing the ground for the rise of yet one more historic ruling class.[2] But, if there be a road, I am convinced that it is the third road which the syndicalists helped to pioneer. I believe that the socialists of this generation will have to take a long step backwards if they are ever to move forwards again in the right direction. They will have to reassess the whole libertarian tradition from Owen to Sorel and from this re-assessment draw sustenance for a new third camp movement.

* * *

The most striking feature of syndicalist thought and action is the importance it attached to the class struggle. The classical syndicalist movement emerged at about the same time as the first great revisionist controversy at the turn of the century. Led by Bernstein, the revisionists questioned, among other things, Marx's analysis of class development and his theory of the state. They argued, in effect, for what I have called the social democratic position — the view that socialism could be achieved gradually by a broad democratic movement acquiring, peacefully and constitutionally, control of the existing machinery of the State. This amounted to a right-wing revision of Marxism. Syndicalism, in contrast, was a revision of Marx-

[2] The idea that socialism may be no more than the ideology of the future ruling class is not a new one. It was first elaborated by the Polish revolutionary, Waclaw Machajski, in his book The Intellectual Worker, published in Poland in 1898. Hints of the same thesis may be found earlier in some of Bakunin's writings. For a discussion of Machajski's ideas, see Max Nomad's Apostles of Revolution and, more especially, Aspects of Revolt.

pares the way for a new social order in which power will be retained by the people.

There is thus a clear link between the syndicalist movement of forty years ago and the present movement against nuclear weapons. The link is there both in the political style and in several of the basic values of the two movements. The differences, of course, are obvious too. Syndicalism was a proletarian class movement: the anti-war movement appeals to the sane-minded in all classes. In terms of revolutionary potential, the present movement is perhaps of greater significance. The immediate issues involved are simpler and more dramatic than those raised by the syndicalists and the crisis is more compelling. If mankind survives the present crisis, some of the other issues raised by the syndicalists, notably workers' control as a means of ensuring a wide dispersion of social power, will again come to the fore — are indeed already doing so.[14] It is, therefore, I think, no extravagance to claim that the spirit of syndicalism, dormant so long in this country, is once again in the air. In this, if anything, lies a hope for the future. The serious anti-war radical would do well to breathe in full measure the syndicalist spirit of militant direct action.

[14] See, e.g., The Bomb, Direct Action & the State (1962) published by the Syndicalist Workers' Federation.

ism to the left. The struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was seen by the syndicalists as the very essence of Marxism — "the alpha and omega of socialism", as Sorel put it. All their energies were devoted to the relentless pursuit of this struggle: the class war was to be fought to a victorious finish with no compromise given or taken. Any form of class collaboration was regarded as an anathema. Like the Marxists, the syndicalists saw the State as a bourgeois instrument of coercion. Where they parted company from the orthodox, however, was in their opposition to any form of the State. Marx argued that the task of the proletariat was to destroy, in the course of the revolution, the bourgeois state and to put in its place a proletarian state, which would be the prelude to the eventual liquidation of the coercive apparatus of society. The syndicalists, influenced in this respect by the anarchists, insisted that the State as such must be destroyed by the revolution: to build a new state on the ruins of the old would simply result in the perpetuation of class rule over the proletariat in a new form.

This view implied a rejection not only of parliamentary action — the contesting of elections for bourgeois parliaments — but also of political action in the narrow sense of the term. The syndicalists insisted that the class war must be waged, as they put it, on the terrain de classe by direct action. Fighting the class war involves, of course, political action in the wider sense of a struggle for social power. What distinguished the syndicalists was the view that this struggle for social power, the struggle to achieve proletarian ascendancy, did not involve setting up a specialised political organisation, to wit, a political party. On the contrary, quite the reverse. To try to achieve socialism through such an organisation would be fatal to the very aims of the proletariat.

It is important to grasp this point and the reasoning behind it if we are to make any sense of syndicalism. To Bolsheviks, rejection of party organisation will appear to be the fatal error of the syndicalists. The so-called Marxist revolutions of our cen-

tury have been carried through only by use of the instrument of a highly disciplined proletarian party perfected by Lenin. No Communist party, they would argue, means no revolution, or at least no successful revolution. How, it might be asked, could the syndicalists have made such a stupid mistake?

This, of course, is a begging question. But, leaving aside the suggestion that the syndicalists were in error, it is relatively easy to see how they arrived at their position. In a sense, they did so because they were more Marxist than Marx himself and certainly less heretical than that arch political determinist, Lenin. For those who accept the materialist conception of history, political power is essentially a derivative of economic power. A class that possesses economic power will necessarily, sooner rather than later, acquire political power. If, then, one sets about acquiring the latter and is able to do so, one need not worry overmuch about the former. For the proletariat, as for the bourgeoisie, economic power means power within and over industry. If the workers can win control of industry, the battle for supremacy is won. James Connolly put the syndicalist point succinctly when he wrote, "The workshop is the cockpit of civilisation ... The fight for the conquest of the political state is not the battle, it is only the echo of the battle. The real battle is being fought out every day for the power to control industry."[3]

But there is more to the syndicalist case than this. Taking seriously the theory of the class struggle, the syndicalists worked for a clean-cut, uncompromising proletarian victory. Socialism for them meant the replacement of bourgeois culture and institutions by proletarian culture and institutions. Their whole conception of socialism was a thoroughly working class conception[4]: they had no patience at all for middle class socialists,

[3] Socialism Made Easy, 1908.

[4] See the editorial, "Syndicalism — a Working Class Conception of Socialism" Freedom, Nov.-Dec. 1912.

ignore the material interests that divide one state from another, and to overlook the disastrous increase in nationalist sentiment that is a feature of the contemporary world.

It may be that, from the point of view of sheer survival as a species, mankind has already passed the eleventh hour. In the present context of human affairs, Lenin's cryptic phrase, "We are all dead men on furlough", takes on a new significance. In the contemporary crisis, there is only one sensible course open to those who wish to survive the next decade: to join the struggle to control, or better still to overthrow, the nuclear warlords, militarists and political bosses in all states. This struggle in an inchoate form has begun and is already gathering momentum in many countries. And it is no accident that the most determined participants in the anti-war movement have found themselves adopting the classic stance of the syndicalists: direct action. A direct action movement always has been and always will be an anathema to the rulers and would-be rulers of mankind. For direct action involves a refusal to play the political game according to the rules laid down by our masters. It is a grassroots, do-it-yourself kind of action which recognises implicitly the truth of what Gandhi called 'voluntary servitude'; the fact that, in the last analysis, men are governed in the way they are because they consent to be so governed. When sufficient numbers of the governed can be persuaded to withdraw that consent and to demonstrate by their actions that they do not recognise the legitimacy of the rulers to act in their name, the government must either collapse or radically change its policies. When the bishops and the editorial pundits warn the participants in the recent Civil Disobedience campaigns that they are undermining the foundations of social order, we should take heed. Civil Disobedience, pressed to its logical conclusion, involves just that. All we need to add is that it undermines the present social order which has brought mankind to the edge of the abyss and pre-

with its fine promise of universal peace and brotherhood, to appreciate that an indispensable condition for achieving its objective was the liquidation of that supreme bourgeois institution, the sovereign state. Failing to appreciate this, the socialists after one hundred and fifty years of endeavour have succeeded not in making socialism but only in making socialist states. Not surprisingly, in this situation the socialist leaders have found what the anarchists and syndicalists always predicted they would find: that it is impossible for socialists to accept the responsibility of governing in existing states without thereby becoming defenders of them.[13] The role that they occupy as state leaders inevitably impels them to act like state leaders, even to the extent, as in the case of the USSR, of making them subordinate, in the interests of the Soviet State, the revolutionary Communist movements in other countries. That the Soviet leaders have not always and everywhere succeeded in this subordination, with the result that we are now witnessing the development of national rivalries within the international Communist sector of the world, is no consolation. It makes only more obvious the fact that socialist revolutions within states, even socialist revolutions within all the states of the world, would not solve the problem that now faces mankind. If the USA were to sink into the ocean tomorrow, the state system in the rest of the world would not, for example prevent the possibility of war sooner or later between a Communist China and a Communist Russia. To think otherwise is to put far too high a value on the beneficent effects of a common ideology, to

[13] The popular radical notion that socialism is continually being "betrayed" by leaders more interested in their own than in working class emancipation is sociologically naive. There is no reason to believe that socialist leaders, as individuals, are any more corruptible than most other men. What is corrupting is their acceptance of certain roles which, if they are to be performed at all, impel them to act in ways that radicals define as "betrayal". It is as difficult for a socialist statesman not to betray socialism as it is for the rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven — and for the same kind of sociological reason.

not even for the guildsmen who were closest to them and who, with their statist ideas, were, as they put it, "incapable of conceiving a commonwealth which is not designed on the canons of bourgeois architecture".[5] When Marx in his Address to the First International had said that the emancipation of the proletariat must be the work of the workers themselves, the syndicalists thought he meant it. They did not think that emancipation would come through the organisation of a self-styled proletarian party led principally by men of bourgeois origin who for one reason or another had taken up the cause of the workers. Bourgeois socialist intellectuals — students, professors, publicists and the like — had only a limited auxiliary role to play in the strategy of the revolution.[6] Their task was to make explicit what was implicit in the social situation of capitalist society: it was most definitely not their task to instruct the proletariat, to guide them and to lead them into correct courses of action. Any movement which allowed itself to be directed by bourgeois intellectuals, even déclassé intellectuals, would, they believed, end up either by compromising with the status quo or by establishing a new form of class rule.

This perspective led the syndicalists to juxtapose the concept of class against that of party.[7] As social formations, these two are quite different. A class is a natural product of historical development, comprising individuals who occupy essentially the same position in the economic order. A party, in contrast, is an artificial aggregate, a consciously contrived organisation, composed of heterogeneous elements drawn from all classes. A class is based on homogeneity of origin and conditions of life, and the bond of unity is economic. A party, however, represents essentially an intellectual unity; the bond uniting its members is ideological. When an individual is approached on

[5] Socialist Labour Party, The Development of Socialism (c.1912).

[6] That intellectuals have only an auxiliary role to play in the socialist movement is a major theme in Sorel's writings.

[7] cf. A. Gray, The Socialist Tradition, 1947, p.414.

the basis of class, the focus is on his role in the economic order, a role which separates him from members of other classes; and the opposition of class interests is high-lighted. When, however, an individual is approached on the basis of party, the focus is on his role as a citizen and elector in the political order, a role he shares with members of all classes; and inevitably the opposition of class interests is muted. Parties may and often do express class interests but, more important, they also serve to moderate and to contain class antagonisms.[8]

The syndicalists, of course, appreciated that classes as such do not act. Social action involves the actions of individuals in organisations. Organisation, therefore, was an admitted necessity: in this they differed from the classical anarchists who minimized the importance of organisation and pinned their hopes on the possibility of spontaneous revolutionary uprisings. But, if the class struggle was the basic reality, why, asked the syndicalists, create an organisation — the party — which would inevitably from its very nature undermine that struggle? Why, indeed, when the proletariat already had an organisation of its own: the trade union, an organisation based on the working class, confined to members of the working class, and created by the workers for the purpose of defending their interests in the daily struggle against their capitalist masters. True, the trade unions had been conceived, even by their creators, as mainly ameliorative instruments, as a means to win

[8] The wealth of empirical data on the social class basis of most major parties should not blind us to this important truth. It is not an either-or matter: either parties express class interests or they do not. Within a political system, parties frequently express class interests (though not necessarily according to the Marxist category of classes); from the point of view of the system as a whole however, for the reasons adumbrated by the syndicalists, parties tend to mitigate class conflicts and hence to preserve the socio-political system. Communist parties implicitly recognize this fact in the special measures they adopt in an attempt to preserve their revolutionary character, e.g., subordination of the parliamentarians to the party caucus. These measures, needless to say, are not always successful.

tive capitalism. Given industrialisation and modern economic techniques, mass poverty can be and is being abolished. For this reason, in all advanced industrial countries the acute class divisions that marked 19th and early 20th century capitalism are becoming blurred and it is no longer possible to locate in the social arena a simple straight-forward contest between two main classes, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. At the same time, the techniques of social control available to the rulers in the shape of the mass media of communications and the mass political parties have enormously increased their power vis-a-vis the ruled. All in all, the emerging managerial-bureaucratic society possesses historically unparalleled potentialities for maintaining a stable system of exploitation. There is only one major flaw in the system: its patent inability to solve the problem of war in an age when, for technological reasons, war has become a truly deadly institution.

The omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation now clearly vindicates the anti-statism of the anarchists and the syndicalists. For war is a function of the state and of the state system into which mankind is politically divided. The emerging new social order has modified the bourgeois state system: it is no longer a system of many balancing sovereign nation-states but rather a system of two super-states each surrounded by their satellites plus a group of uneasy non-aligned and relatively undeveloped states. The state system has been rationalized but not rationalized enough: for, within the framework of a state system, nothing short of one world state would be adequate to solve the problem of war in a nuclear age. And a world state — set up by mutual agreement — is just not on the political agenda of the great powers. The reasons which led to the capitalist ruling class in their several states to engage in mutually destructive wars still operate to make possible, and perhaps almost inevitable, the final war between states dominated by the managerial-bureaucrats. The great tragedy of our epoch is the lamentable failure of the socialist movement,

For a movement that is generally labelled a failure, there is surprisingly much in syndicalism that is relevant for our own age. Most significant of all, perhaps, is the fact that it did fail. In retrospect, syndicalism appears as the great heroic movement of the proletariat, the first and only socialist movement to take seriously Marx's injunction that the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves. It attempted to achieve the emancipation of labour unaided by middle class intellectuals and politicians and aimed to establish a working class socialism and culture, free from all bourgeois taints. That it failed suggests that, whatever else they may be, the socialist revolutions of recent decades are not the proletarian revolutions the ideologists would have us believe. In this connection the eclipse of the syndicalist doctrine of workers' control, in the USSR no less than elsewhere, and the subordination of trade unions to political parties and their quasi-incorporation into the machinery of government, take on a special and ominous significance. We are, indeed, living in a revolutionary epoch in which dramatic changes are taking place in the composition and structure of the ruling class. But in both East and West the emerging rulers, displacing the old capitalist class, are not the workers but the managerial bureaucrats whose privileges and power are based on their command of organisational resources. In the West the rule of this new class is being legitimized in terms of a rationalized corporate capitalism operating in a mixed economy; in Communist countries, the formula of legitimization is avowedly socialist and the economy is state-owned and managed. But, in both, the rulers, like all ruling classes known in history, accord to themselves superior rewards and privileges; and the mass of mankind continue to toil and to spin for inferior rewards and for the privilege of keeping their rulers in a state to which they show every sign of becoming accustomed. The new society, rationalized managerial capitalism or bureaucratic state socialism, is in many respects a more tolerable society than competi-

for the workers concessions within the capitalist social framework. But there was no a priori reason why their role should be so limited. Given proper direction, it was argued, they could be transformed into revolutionary instruments.

A single-minded emphasis on the potentialities of the trade union is in fact the most distinctive single feature of syndicalism. The syndicalists saw the trade unions as organisations with a dual role to perform: first, to defend the interests of the workers in existing society, and secondly to constitute themselves the units of administration in the coming socialist society. From a long term point of view, the second role was, of course, the more important. It was a role that did not begin on the morrow of the revolution. The syndicalists did not simply assert that the basic unit of social organisation in a socialist society would be the trade union and draw up blue-prints in which the unions, federated at the local, regional, national and international levels, would take on all the useful functions now performed by various capitalist bodies. The revolutionary role became operative at once. The task of the unions was to struggle now to divest the existing political organisations of capitalist society of all life and to transfer whatever value they might have to the proletarian organisations. This part of the syndicalist programme was summed up in Sorel's words: "to snatch from the State and from the Commune, one by one, all their attributes in order to enrich the proletarian organisms in the process of formation".[9]

It is an egregious error to accuse the syndicalists, as some Bolsheviks have done, of ignoring the problem of power. Not only did they not ignore the problem; they proposed the most realistic way open to the workers of acquiring power. It is true that they were mistaken in their belief that the unions could perform the dual role assigned to them. To be effective as defensive organisations, the unions needed to embrace as

[9] L'Avenir socialiste des Syndicats, 1898.

many workers as possible and this inevitably led to a dilution of their revolutionary objectives. In practice, the syndicalists were faced with the choice of unions which were either reformist and purely defensive or revolutionary and largely ineffective.[10] But in the context of modern society, their general strategy of power was surely correct. They proposed to begin to acquire power at the point where, according to the logic of Marxist theory, they ought to begin — in the fields, factories and mines. And they did so because they were convinced that, unless they did win power within the social base of capitalism, there would be no proletarian revolution, whatever other kind of revolution there might be. The syndicalists said, in effect, that the revolution must begin in the workshop. Their message to the workers was much the same as Goethe's to the emigrant in search of liberty: "Here or nowhere is your America" Here, in the workshop, in the factory and in the mine, they said, we must accomplish the revolution or it will be accomplished nowhere. So long as we are a subject class industrially, so long will we remain a subject class politically. The real revolution must be made not in Parliament or at the barricades but in the places where we earn our daily bread. The organisations that we have built up to carry on the daily struggle must be the foundations of the new order and we must be its architects. The law and morality that we have evolved in our long struggle with capitalism must be the law and morality of the future workers' commonwealth. All other proposals are but snares and delusions.

The syndicalist strategy of revolution, therefore, involved a struggle for social power through direct action based on the workers' own class organisations. The tactics of direct action included sabotage, ca'canny, the use of the boycott and the trade union label, and, of course, industrial strikes. What is

[10] For a discussion of this crux, see Gaston Gerard, "Anarchism and Trade Unionism", The University Libertarian, April, 1957.

common to all these means is a determined refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of bourgeois rule. It was not, argued the syndicalists, a proper function of trade unions to make agreements with the employers. Negotiations, agreements, contracts all necessarily involve bargaining and compromise within the framework of capitalist contrived rules. The function of the unions was not to participate with employers in ruling the workers but to impose, as far as they were able, the will of the workers on the employers. The only contract the syndicalists cared to consider was the collective contract conceived as part of a movement of "encroaching control" — a system by which the workers within a factory or shop would undertake a specific amount of work in return for a lump sum, to be allocated by the work-group as it saw fit, on conditions that the employers abdicated their control of the productive process itself.[11] After a period of vigorous pursuit of such tactics, the workers in their unions would, it was envisaged, have won sufficient power to make a successful General Strike possible. Such a strike, since it was only the form of the revolution, could not be planned in advance: the conditions had to be ripe for it. It would probably begin as a local or national strike confined to a single industry. Class solidarity would lead to its extension to other industries and rapidly it would build up to a strike general in its dimensions.[12] The mass symbolic "folding of arms" would, in effect, be a total withdrawal of the workers of their consent to a system of class servitude. The legitimacy of the capitalist order would be shattered and in its place would emerge a proletarian social order based on the unions.

* * *

[11] W. Gallacher & J. Paton, Towards Industrial Democracy, 1917.

[12] The syndicalist vision of the revolution is well described in E. Pataud & E. Pouget, Syndicalism & the Co-operative Commonwealth, 1913.