

# **Anarch@syndicalism and (anti-)politics**

**A contribution to the political theory of anarchism**

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In the following, I will reproduce some insights that I have gained through my intensive study of the political theory of anarchism. The basic idea is that in anarchist syndicalism there is a discomfort with politics and a certain critique of it, while at the same time a reference to politics happens and is also inevitable. It is precisely from this tension that direct action, dynamic organizations, and a constructive social-revolutionary perspective emerge. The approach formulated in the article is by no means "correct" in itself, but a proposal to interpret and reflect on anarch@-syndicalist practice. The veracity of this theoretical input ultimately proves itself in experiences, discussions, and social struggles.

With my text I pursue four goals: First, I want to share knowledge to those interested; second, I want to stimulate comrades to form an awareness of their tradition and position, their forms of organization and action; third, I want to spread and renew theoretical thinking in anarchism; and fourth, I want to point to my activities.

## **On the Critique of Politics in Anarchist Syndicalism**

In the mid to late 19th century, the socialist movement differentiated into three main directions. Thus emerged social democracy, party communism, and anarchism. While the former two referred to political reform and political revolution as essential transformational strategies, anarchism centered on, among other things, the rejection of what was understood by "politics" during this period. Anarchists related to the concept of social revolution, through which they sought to achieve radical and comprehensive social transformation not by influencing or taking over the state, but through decentralized, autonomous, voluntary, and federated social movements and self-organized communities.

Anarchism is pluralistic. Interestingly, all of its tendencies - individualist, mutualist, communist, insurrectionist, syndicalist, and communitarian anarchism - include a distinctive critique of politics. From this critique emerges a generally skeptical attitude toward politics. And from this derives a striving for autonomy that is shared by all anarchist currents, but which results in different practices, styles, forms of organization and action. Here, for obvious reasons, I will focus on anarch@-syndicalism.

## **A defense against the politicization of socialism**

Modern european anarchism emerged, as mentioned, during a historical period when grassroots socialist movements were being politicized. Instead of forming hierarchical parties and seeking reforms within or with the help of the bourgeois-capitalist state, or forming political-revolutionary vanguard groups to seize state power and establish a "dictatorship of the proletariat," anarchists continued to rely on decentralized and autonomous self-organization. They rejected parliamentarism as a domineering mediation of social conflicts and wanted to lead social struggles outside the framework of institutionalized political rule. In doing so, they rejected the modern nation-state as a whole - with its bureaucracy, its educational institutions, its military apparatus, its newly emerged welfare state and the state churches that serve it - and wanted to look for other forms of organizing egalitarian, free and solidary communities.

While Marxists drew the conclusion from their critique of politics that socialist politics were needed to establish a "socialist people's state," anarchists did not share this view. They assumed

that relations of domination could only be overcome simultaneously with each other. That is, that capitalism could not be overcome with the state, but only against it. Instead of seeing a comprehensive development of state and capitalist relations as a prerequisite for a socialist form of society, they assumed that desirable social relations existed in parallel with the dominant relations of domination. This is the reason why syndicalist anarchists fight not exclusively or mainly for higher wages, but for less working time, democratization and self-management of production sites, the socialization of private property, and finally for the abolition of wage labor in favor of voluntary, self-determined and meaningful activities.

## **The Pull of the State and the Nationalization of Politics**

Another fundamental problem with what we commonly think of as politics is that the state appropriates self-organized social movements that seek autonomy. Politics is not necessarily state/statist. But in very many cases, politics is nationalized. This begins where demonstrations have to be registered, certain ways of acting are not considered legitimate and are demonized, certain perspectives are completely distorted and excluded from political discourse, political strikes are illegal in the FRG, and so on.

Social movements are characterized by the fact that they consist of different currents. Some of them aim to be heard by politicians with their concerns, to have a share in the political discourse, to be included in decision-making processes of nationalized politics, to develop political forms of organization and to found parties or so-called non-governmental organizations, for example.

Anarch@syndicalism, on the other hand, is a current within the socialist trade union movement that resolutely opposes this appropriation by and assignment to the state and instead advocates autonomy and self-organization. Anarchist syndicalists reject social-democratic and party-communist trade union federations. This is because they pay functionaries, are based on internal hierarchies, aim at social partnership and compromises negotiated with employers, ally themselves with political parties, take on a legalized and thus supporting function in the state structure, therefore prevent autonomous strikes and independent organizing, and ultimately give up the claim to fundamentally overcome capitalism.

## **The economy as an anti-political point of reference**

In anarchism as a whole, the effectiveness and meaningfulness of action in the political field is questioned. With Anarch@-syndicalism, a fundamental class antagonism is assumed and the primacy is placed on the economy in order to establish workers' power. The economic sphere is thus opposed to the political sphere. It is above all in the economic sphere, i.e. at workplaces, that it is necessary to organize on the basis of economic interests and the realities of workers' lives in order to effectively attack the existing order of domination and, in the same course, to be able to produce the nuclei of a new society. In anarchist syndicalism, the economy is understood as an anti-political antithesis to nationalized politics. And this is not an abstract theoretical insight, but is based on the repeated experience that trade unions have been instrumentalized by political parties, that the political mediation of labor conflicts leads to lazy compromises and paralyzes their dynamics and clout. Politicians mostly reject direct action and wildcat strikes, which

are powerful weapons of self-organized workers - precisely because they are not politically contained.

## **Justified political disenchantment and the anarch@-syndicalist way**

Finally, the so-called "disenchantment with politics" plays into the hands of anarchist syndicalism. Despite the change of governments or even of forms of the state, the followers of anarch@-syndicalism assume that within the political order of rule there can be no fundamental change of class society and no perspective for the emergence of a libertarian-socialist society. And they share this impression with quite a few other people who are not convinced radical socialists. In fact, the spectacle of the elections and the way politics is presented in the media really work towards depoliticizing, apathetic and frightening the population. The consequences are affirmative belief in the state, withdrawal into private life and reactionary compensation of the isolated citizens (e.g. racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, conspiracy mythologies).

The anarch@-syndicalist path is directed against this. With it, proletarianized people are to be organized. In the syndicates they synthesize their common interests, they develop class consciousness, they learn to act in a self-determined, direct and collective way and thereby empower themselves as exploited and oppressed class(es). In this process, the participants simultaneously produce cooperative relationships and forms of organization that can serve as models for a libertarian-socialist form of society. These aspects of the anarch@-syndicalist approach were developed out of a fundamental critique of politics-making. Here, for a change, the focus is on one's own interests - and in a thoroughly collective sense.

## **Intermediate consideration**

So there are comprehensible historical, well-founded theoretical reasons, based on extensive experience, why "politics" is criticized and sometimes downright rejected in anarchist syndicalism. What had long been understood indirectly by workers who carried out wildcat strikes and organized loosely, led to a second phase in which autonomous trade union activists, disappointed party socialists and movement-oriented anarchists came together and founded anarch@-syndicalist unions in many countries between 1895 and 1919. Unlike people in other socialist currents, anarch@-syndicalists assume heterogeneity of the working class, position themselves resolutely anti-national and think transnationally, find the involvement of individuals important ('subjective factor'), and adhere to the motto of the First International, which is: "The liberation of the working class can only be the work of the workers themselves!"

Since that time, the common understanding of politics has changed in some respects. Apart from that, different understandings of what "politics" actually is continue to exist. One can argue about this at length in everyday-worldly or political-theoretical language, as one pleases. In my view, however, this does not change how we relate to the basic problem: That politics within the existing order of domination is ultimately a relationship of domination between the governed and the governed. It is analogous to capitalism, as an economic relationship of domination; to patriarchy, as that of gender; to white supremacy, in the origin and attribution of ethnicity; and to anthropocentric domination of nature, and can only be overcome in concert with these. For

tactical reasons and to open up the debate on this, I think it is worthwhile to remain at least skeptical of "the" politics and to form a critical concept of it.

## The political game

In my reflection on an anarchist understanding of politics, I have chosen to use a governmental, conflict-oriented and ultra-realist definition, which I would like to illustrate briefly here: According to my understanding, politics consists in the negotiation of conflicting interests, which are represented by different actors. This representation eliminates many social groups, e.g. those without citizenship in a certain country. Furthermore, the respective interests and courses of action are hemmed in so that they are considered politically acceptable and negotiable in the first place. Whoever then sits at the negotiating table - especially if we think globally - usually represents a relatively privileged minority, while excluded social groups and classes are directly ruled over - even if their interests should be taken into account for strategic reasons.

Although we can imagine a round table around which politicians sit, at least in a democratic system, they actually have very different power resources. In the image of a deck of cards, some have quite a few trumps and high ranking cards, while others have mainly blanks. Some are dealt cards by their servants. Powerful actors may also leave the negotiation room, go to a side room, and then present a decision that can no longer be voted on. And of course, powerful actors can bribe others, threaten to throw them out of the room, and thus force them to accept their proposed decision. If decisions are then worked out that go too far for certain participants (e.g. because they mean too much social compensation for them), they can still veto them, while others cannot. Finally, after a game of several processing stages, a squishy compromise is reached. If this is resisted, coercion and force are used to enforce the decision.

In the end, the whole procedure served to change nothing in the existing class relations. The immense wealth of the economic and political elite, appropriated through exploitation, was thus not touched, but often enlarged and secured. Some adjustments, as minor as possible, are made or innovative projects are promoted if they are exploitable. When the elaborated decision is announced in front of the assembly hall, the citizens are told that this is the expression of their will. The game itself is not questioned at any point, but is presented as a necessity.

With this description I want to express that the political terrain is highly shaped by the political order of governance and dominated by powerful political players. Politics is governmental because it is related to governing. (This is tautological, but exactly, what politicians try to conceal.) That there were and can be 'complex' communities that are not governed and in which people can organize themselves quite well is a basic anarchist assumption. Politics is conflict-oriented because it is essentially about the assertion of interests, rather than the equal mediation of the concerns and needs of all participants. And the concept of politics used here is ultra-realist, saying that politics does not only, not always, and not in every case take this brutal, 'Machiavellian' form. But we should not deceive ourselves about the fact that this is precisely what constitutes the core of (nationalized) politics - and criticize it fundamentally for this reason.

The social democratic response to the political game is to accept the rules of the game and play along as best we can to get the best for our own clientele. The authoritarian-communist answer is to play along with the game in order to exploit it and then impose our rules on others. The anarchist answer, on the other hand, is that the game sucks, but there is no need to play

it either. Even if we are told very forcefully that we could achieve something there, it is much more worthwhile to go outside the door and realize that there are quite a lot of people there who are mastering their lives, coming together in groups, not primarily having political interests, and sometimes even being organized in alternative communities.

The problem of many leftists is that they expect far too much from politics - and this also applies to the extra-parliamentary socialist movements and, to some extent, to scene-politics that revolves around itself. By believing that the political game is so important, that we measure our own successes in political categories, that we think only political organizations are effective or that our campaign only makes sense if politicians take it up, we fall into what Emma Goldman called the "politics trap". Only when we work our way out of it and begin to strive for autonomy we may arrive at self-determined and social-revolutionary action. In anarchism as a whole, alternative ways of thinking and acting to 'leftist', 'democratic', 'grassroots', 'radical', 'radical-real' or even to 'revolutionary' politics are thus shown.

## **The political void: reality of political power, political dominance**

So now we could say that anarch@-syndicalists reject politics, with good reasons. They organize themselves in syndicates, pursue labor struggles, don't appeal to politics, spread their ideas of self-organization, autonomy, etc. and that's about it. It is not unlikely that this approach will make them more capable of action and more effective than people who rely on conventional party politics and wonder why the "right" politicians keep breaking their election promises. This disillusion people who, without a critical understanding of politics, often give up trying to change anything at all. Self-organization, direct action, emancipating consciousness-raising - all this is already happening in the syndicates. Politics, on the other hand, seems suspect, tedious, boring, inhibits initiative, is bureaucratic, hierarchical, inauthentic... Let's just leave it behind!

Unfortunately, there are five problems that make it at least difficult and perhaps not strategically sensible for Anarch@syndicalists not to care about politics at all.

First, most people can hardly imagine that they can organize themselves - contrary to politics in its form under the existing order of rule - in 'complex' forms of society. However, this is not (according to the definition used) because people are intrinsically 'political beings' and that the modern nation-state has more or less automatically emerged as an unwelcome but nevertheless logical consequence of this alleged anthropological predisposition towards authority, hierarchy and centralization. It is a form of political rule linked to capitalist class interests, usually brutally imposed and enforced, which determines the framework and functioning of the political terrain. Anarch@-syndicalism is meant to act outside and against politics. The importance of nationalized politics for the production of the public sphere, common decisions and their implementation is therefore partly an ideological fiction (Just as it is a fiction that political power would lie in parliament, rather than in ministerial bureaucracies).

At the same time, however, the nationalization of politics is manifest. Many people must necessarily remain entrenched in the belief in the necessity of state politics, because other forms of organization are marginalized, i.e. kept small and pushed to the margins. This happens, for example, with anarch@-syndicalist unions because they do not figure in the dominant political logic. If they want to become more as (potentially) social-revolutionary minorities, it is sometimes also necessary to dock with the political consciousness of people in order to offer plausible

explanations for why "politics" permanently fails, does not represent one's own interests and what alternative forms there are to it.

Secondly, anarch@-syndicalist unions have been and continue to be taken over by political actors. These can be, for example, social-democratic, Leninist or Trotskyist groups at the local level, which openly or covertly offer themselves as political representation and speak of "splitting" when their leadership claims meet with rejection. Historically, the formation of the Third International Workers Association was about subjecting all trade union federations to Bolshevik party doctrine. Anarch@-syndicalists therefore founded their own International Workers Association in 1922 - explicitly committing themselves to the anti-political goals of the First International. In any case, the grassroots trade union experience with the political dimension was always bad. The problem, however, is that this is partly due to a failure to deal with politics and occasionally a narrow-minded focus on economics. Whether there can and should therefore be a dual structure of economic and political organizations is discussed below.

## **Internal conflicts, other battlefields and prefiguration**

Third, there are occasionally political conflicts within syndicates. This is due to the different economic positions and situations of their members, as well as to their different political-ideological preconceptions. The basic idea is that these should be put aside by synthesizing the common interest. In fact, however, this is not easily 'objectively' definable, and there are divergent ideas about which strategies can be used to produce it. Differing views regularly lead to conflict. And in some cases, this also means understanding and managing them as political conflicts. How to behave towards left parties, actors in socialist movements or other socialist groupings on the basis of particular issues (e.g. participation in rallies) is a political question that should not be in focus, but also cannot be permanently faded out.

Fourthly, in different syndicates, in varying degrees, the question of the significance of other fields of struggle for one's own practice comes up again and again. Labor struggles and union organizing are in the foreground of anarch@-syndicalist activity - that is clear. But how should anarch@-syndicalists relate to the issues and fields of struggle of feminism, anti-racism, ecology and other social struggles, e.g. tenants' initiatives? It is argued that there are other political groups dedicated to these issues, but hardly any self-organized trade union work. To be able to work effectively in this field requires a focus and a recognizable profile. Although the argument is understandable, it does not change the fact that FLINTA and migrants are systematically harder exploited, receive worse jobs and are discriminated against in their workplaces. It does not change the fact that ecological destruction is also a class issue and that rising rents particularly affect those social classes and milieus that anarch@-syndicalists want to reach. My answer to this would be to refer to an intersectional understanding of economic struggles. The other topics should not be dealt with by grassroots unions, but should be considered and included in the analysis and - where appropriate - in their own communication. To this end, a fundamental political debate should be conducted at least at longer intervals.

Finally, the question of the prefiguration of a desirable society also arises in anarch@-syndicalism. This means: How can a libertarian socialism be thought of as a real utopia and incorporated into our practices applied today, so that we already realize it? In economic terms, according to the claim, private property is to be socialized and enterprises are to be



transferred to self-management. Work should be distributed as similarly as possible according to the respective abilities, feel meaningful and be done voluntarily. In order to realize this, the anarch@-syndicalist perspective also needs at least a basic idea of how communities are organized. This is about their forms of organization, the creation of a shared public sphere, shared decision-making processes, etc. starting with neighborhoods. Whether we ultimately call these matters a „political dimension“ is of little consequence if libertarian-socialist forces actually succeed in realizing a qualitatively different mode in the self-organization of autonomous and decentralized communities. If anarch@-syndicalists want to remain true to their claim to be nuclei of the coming society (with all the contradictions and shortcomings that this entails, which does not make the claim any less true), it seems to me that the formation of a shared basic understanding with regard to alternative communities would be useful.

## **Four anarch@-syndicalist ways in dealing with politics**

In dealing with the political sphere, essentially four different directions have emerged in anarchist syndicalism. Groups that call themselves this way, but in the end actually merely act like left-wing political groups (e.g., only make propaganda, organize in plenum, mainly participate in left-wing demonstrations, do not fight labor struggles, etc.), are in fact not to be counted among them.

One strand wants to be a union for everything. Behind this lies the idea that the economic questions ultimately contain the political ones. If the production sites were taken over and private property socialized through labor struggles, this would be the basic prerequisite for a reorganization of society as a whole, which could then also be restructured according to anarch@-syndicalist ideas. Émile Pouget, for example, advocated this approach as a prominent mastermind of anarch@-syndicalism. This focus can also be used to generate some self-confidence and clout. In my view, however, it is truncated. It is justified to put union issues, etc., in the foreground. But the transformation of society toward libertarian socialism must take place on different levels and with different means.

Another strand refers to organizational dualism, as advocated by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, for example. That is, in addition to the anarch@-syndicalist unions, there should be political anarchist networks, which in particular engage in propaganda, consciousness-raising, and high-profile actions. The former are supposed to be mass organizations, while the latter are formed by convinced militant activists. During the social revolution in Spain, this relationship was practiced relatively successfully by means of the CNT and the FAI (until its entry into government), which did not really work in the Germany of the Weimar Republic between the FAUD and the FKAD (Federation of Communist Anarchists of Germany). More recently, the "Platform" was founded (in Germany), which could be seen in such a relationship. For certain reasons, however, I do not believe that an organizational dualism in the real sense can succeed with it in perspective. Especially in the FRG, people often see left movement networks from a more communist tradition, such as the Interventionist Left, as partner organizations in the political field. In my view, however, there is still a political void that is apparently not (adequately) filled by anarchists.

The third direction can be located in a tradition pioneered by Christiaan Cornelissen. He was concerned to see the economic struggles of anarch@-syndicalism in relation to certain political struggles, referring primarily to anti-militarism, anti-clericalism, and the cooperative movement

in his time and context. This involves more than extra-parliamentary politics, but rather, if you will, anti-parliamentary socialist politics "on the street." In contrast to organizational dualism, it would thus not be an explicitly anarchist organization (or its substitute) that is supposed to deal with the political questions, but different, independent social movements that often merge into one another. Nevertheless, grassroots unions are still mainly concerned with the economic field. It could be discussed whether this approach is comparable to what I described above as "intersectional class struggle."

I see a fourth strand in the ideas of Rudolf Rocker. I call them occasional politics. Rocker emphasizes that the accusation that Anarch@ syndicalists are "apolitical" is completely false. Rather, they would not vote for political reasons, because the political sphere of the bourgeois-capitalist state is being squeezed. The focus here, of course, is also on labor struggles and union organizing. But where it makes sense, anarchist syndicalists should, for example, also actively participate in rallies, criticize ruling politics in a differentiated way, or think about and campaign for alternative political models. For this reason, Rocker also actively advocated council democracy and described it as an adequate political form of organization for a libertarian-socialist society. (The council model was first developed in the Russian Revolution of 1905. Basically, it is a continuation and renewal of the concept of decentralized autonomous communes since 1870).

As can be seen from my delineation, I think the first approach of „one union for everything“ is understandable, but overall too short-sighted. The organizational dualism is more plausible in my eyes, but it does not change the reasons why there is a political void and can also be thought very schematically and dogmatically. I have more sympathy for a good relationship of anarch@-syndicalist unions to self-organized socialist politics in different areas and for the approach of opportunity politics. Thus I understand anarchist syndicalism primarily as a social movement. The extent to which this overlaps or can cooperate with other movements depends on whether these have a similar understanding of politics, and a striving for autonomy and self-organization.

In the end, however, this is an individual position that is not inherently more correct than others. As I said, my main aim in this contribution was to map basic considerations in anarchist syndicalism, to reflect on them, and to make them discussable.

## **The (anti-)political tension in anarchist syndicalism**

It has become clear that I have argued in contradictions. On the one hand, I have established that a radical critique of politics, a distancing from it, the opposition of the economic sphere and the reference to it, are characteristic features of anarchist syndicalism. On the other hand, I have worked out that focusing solely on the economy and completely ignoring the political sphere creates a void that can undermine the concerns of anarch@ syndicalists in the long run. This is especially true if they neither fetishize the past anarch@-syndicalist tradition nor remain merely a sectional union, but actually want to work out a constructive social-revolutionary perspective. The contradiction between politics and anti-political reference points and moments is not a logical problem, but arises from the fact that politics is constituted in the present form of society as a relationship of domination of governance, often assigned to the state and appropriated by it.

According to my line of argument, anarch@-syndicalism is therefore not apolitical or non-political. In theoretical terms, it is rather to be understood as (anti-)political. This means that politics should continue to be eyed skeptically and criticized. It is worthwhile to be self-critical

in dealing with our ideas of "politics" and to ask ourselves what other possibilities for action exist or which we already practice (even beyond anarch@-syndicalist activities...). The problem with politics can only be overcome to the extent that the dominant capitalist and state relations of domination (as well as those of origin/attribution ethnicity, in gender and nature relations) are replaced in a processual way by libertarian-socialist social relations. In principle, the conditions of the political field imposed on us and the enormous inequality of political power can always be further dismantled and reduced - which, however, is not a question of good concepts, but of counter-power.

The interconnectedness of economic and (anti-)political struggles cannot be easily resolved in Anarch@-syndicalism. And the reason for this is that historically as well as today it emerges from the fusion of grassroots union activists, disappointed party socialists and movement-oriented anarchists. It is only because, for example, Pouget, Cornelissen, Rocker and others were anarchists who then turned to union work that anarch@-syndicalist unions differ from sectional unions - which makes them interesting. As I said, in my opinion, anarch@-syndicalists can never completely avoid politics, as problematic as it is. The fact that the tension between politics and anarchy cannot simply be dissolved makes other insights and practices possible.

## **Direct Action, Social Revolution and Libertarian Socialism**

Thus, direct action was and is developed to confront entrepreneurs directly, rather than going through the negotiation process led and preformed by politicians or demanding social policies from the state. When social laws are enacted that represent an improvement in the lives of many people, this cannot and should not be done through political demands (whether party-based or extra-parliamentary), but through the pressure of autonomous self-organization from below. Instead of relying on more social laws, it is crucial that these become a practical reality. For example, a minimum wage is of no use to all those who are forced into undeclared work, labor rights are of no use if they are constantly undermined by entrepreneurs, and legal trade union freedom is of little value if it only applies to certain unions or is made impossible by repression.

Behind the position and way of thinking presented here is still the reference to a social-revolutionary perspective. This is not a question of acting and fighting more and more, more actively or more seriously. Instead, the question is how anarch@-syndicalist practice is understood and with what concern it is implemented. Even if the real utopia of a libertarian-socialist form of society seems far away, it is worth orienting ourselves towards it even in our everyday struggles. Because it should be about the whole and the fundamental change of the framework conditions of our actions.

If a constructive approach is associated with anarchist syndicalism, it is also worthwhile to take the vision of a libertarian-socialist form of society as orientation. The fact that we are light years away from its comprehensive realization does not, in my opinion, change the meaningfulness and value of such an orientation. But this means to name more precisely at least some of the desirable basic conditions of a desirable social form (with regard to socialization, collective enterprises, syndicalist forms of organization, etc.). Its realization remains a question of the balance of power and its change, thus remains a question of organization, consciousness-raising and action of libertarian-socialist forces - but this is exactly what a shared vision, assumed to be feasible and realistic, serves for. In order to be able to work this out, it is necessary understand the field of ten-

sion of (anti-)politics better, from which even anarch@-syndicalism cannot completely escape, and to find a productive way of dealing with it.

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Anarch@syndicalism and (anti-)politics  
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