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The Case for Community Syndicalism

Keir Snow

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Community organisation has been a staple of socialist activity for centuries, however, unlike workplace activism, community organising has been subject to less attention in terms of theory and strategising. This article will argue that the ideology and practice of workplace syndicalism has many concepts that apply equally to community organisation, and can provide a useful framework in which to operate.

So firstly, what is Syndicalism? In the workplace syndicalism stands for many things, primarily that workers should ultimately take power in society, using their own organisations, the trade unions, to wield this power. Syndicalism is also associated with industrial unionism, placing itself in opposition to unions drawing artificial divides between workers based on their skill set. De-emphasis of parliamentary politics is another key facet of Syndicalism, which instead advocates that major change will be primarily wrought through the struggle of trade unions on economic ground, avoiding political positioning that may alienate sections of the labour movement.

Historically, Syndicalism as a movement reached its peak in the early twentieth century, where its emergence often coincided with waves of industrial conflict. In Britain the Industrial Syndicalist Education League, which represented hundreds of thousands of workers, was founded in 1911, at the beginning of the “great unrest” period leading up to the First World War. Whilst in the UK the Syndicalists eventually became the main opposition to bureaucratic leadership within the Labour movement, in other countries such as France, the Syndicalists were successful in becoming the dominant force in the unions¹. Syndicalism also influenced many of the great socialists of the time including James Connolly, who spent his years in the United States working as an organiser for the Syndicalist union the IWW.

Sadly, the outbreak of the First World War and the rise of Leninism spelt death for much of the syndicalist movement, however its achievements last to this day, unions having been forced to amalgamate under syndicalist pressure in order to be more effective and shop stewards being empowered within their structures. Syndicalism was to go on to influence the munitions strikes during World War 1 and the Red Clydeside movement around John Mclean and the Glasgow SLP².

So can Syndicalism be adapted to community struggles? Clearly it would be foolish to assume that an ideology developed around industrial struggles must automatically map onto community activism, to examine whether syndicalist ideas are applicable to community struggles, we must first examine the differences between workplace and community organisation. In its present state, community organisation in the UK is far weaker than workplace organisation. What bodies do exist, community councils, residents groups and

¹ See the CGT's *Charte d'Amiens*

² Socialist Labour Party, a Deleonist political party heavily influenced by Syndiclaism and central to the Red Clydeside movement.

tenants associations, are generally moribund or hopelessly tied into partnership with local councils, whilst having no real mass membership, and hence no genuine claim to represent the communities they originate from.

Within the community the levers of power are also very different from in the workplace. Classically the withdrawal of labour is seen as the weapon the workers may wield to gain results, this works because such a withdrawal, through strike action, causes their employer to lose money. If we think about levers in a similarly economic manner in the community, where there is no labour to withdraw, we realise that the obvious means of financial damage is the withholding of rents. However, issues in the community often centre around service provision rather than being directly related to the land lord, and so levers must also be found that can be used against the local council. There are several options here, which broadly fall under the category of “direct action”, for example, blocking major roads will have a knock on economic impact about which the council will be concerned.

However, whilst there are clear tactical differences in how day to day struggles may be won, the basic organisational needs in the community and workplace are the same. Just as in the workplace, in the community working class organisations are best when they are permanent, not temporary and based around single issues as the latter does not allow a body of experience and influence to grow from struggle to struggle.

In the community, ultimately, socialists wish for the working class to take control. In order for such control to be exercised effectively, the working class needs local organisation as well as workplace organisation, as whilst the running of the economy might naturally be decided upon by workers deliberating in their places of work, it would seem to make little sense to have workplace-based unions decide over which roads need tarmacking in a residential area.

Here to we can borrow from workplace syndicalism, and its models of bottom-up democracy, where geographically disparate groups can federate together and take collective decisions, whilst still remaining accountable to the membership at the base. As in the workplace, the empowerment of ordinary members to influence decisions that effect the whole organisation, and consequently their community, is a powerful motivator and ensures that corruption can be easily expunged from the organisation.

Of course, such democracy is worthless if not backed up by a unified and hence powerful organisation. Whilst workers might be divided by craft unionism on the basis of their trade, communities too can be divided organisationally, most frequently along religious lines. Typically religious groups hold a lot of social capital in communities and religious sectarianism can often be a powerfully divisive force. Such division is best overcome by finding issues which unite people across these divides, and use said issues to build united, and hence more powerful, organisations.

Politics can also play a similar role to religion both in workplace and community organisations. Parliamentary politics is a divisive force, there has never been a unified party or political position the whole of the socialist movement and working class has supported. This was true 100 years ago and even more so today. Many people find party politics as a whole alienating, with around half of the population not voting, and those who do vote are likely to be disinclined to join a community organisation which allies itself with a party they do not support.

As with in the workplace, this political neutrality does not mean that the union or community organisation ought to abstain from politics, merely that it should enter into politics on the basis of issues around which it can unite its members (initially these will be simple economic demands, higher wages, lower rents etc) and should steer clear of taking sides electorally or ideologically.

However, as sensible as these simple principles may seem, we cannot ignore the fact that syndicalism has had its limitations historically. There is no point in resurrecting a dead ideology uncritically, as clearly syndicalism's failure to survive the first half of this century means that it has weaknesses that need to be explored. In spite of its short life however the Syndicalist movement did empower the labour movement through its emphasis on solid organisational principles and militant action, such an empowerment, both in the community and workplace is needed now more than ever. Syndicalist ideas as as relevant today as they ever have been, and through their application I believe we can build powerful community organisations capable of challenging the power of the state and bringing socialism to our communities.