

The Myths of Syndicalism

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Contents

The Golden Age of Syndicalism	3
Post-WWI Syndicalism	4
Syndicalism and the Great Depression	5
WWII and the Post-War Era	6
Primitive Utopians?	6
Why Syndicalism Declined	7
The 1960's	8
The Neoliberal Era	8
The Re-Birth of Syndicalism in the 21 st Century	9
Bibliography	9

Syndicalism died after WWI. Syndicalism was done as a revolutionary movement by 1910. Syndicalism was finished off by Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Syndicalism was a primitive millennial movement which evolved into modern social democratic unionism. Or so many academic labor historians will tell you. (Although the situation has improved since this was first written in 1994.) The purpose of this pamphlet is to show that these conceptions are myths.

Before going any further however, syndicalism should be defined. In France, where the term originated, syndicalism simply means trade unionism and has no particular radical or anarchistic connotations. French speakers refer to libertarian syndicalism, revolutionary syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism when distinguishing the radical current from traditional trade unionism.

This pamphlet uses the term in its English sense — libertarian trade unionism — unions stressing self-management and direct action rather than parliamentary lobbying. Direct democracy and the maximum of local autonomy are also characteristic of the day to day life of a syndicalist organization. While all syndicalists share these attitudes, they are divided ideologically. Those who call themselves anarcho-syndicalists are inspired by anarchist theorists. Some of those who derive their views from a form of libertarian marxism are called revolutionary syndicalists or revolutionary industrial unionists. There are also divergent opinions on revolution which stretches all the way from from insurrectionists to the moderate reformist followers of P.J. Proudhon.

The Golden Age of Syndicalism

The oft-stated opinion that syndicalism flourished in the years prior to WWI is the myth of the “golden age of syndicalism”. As with many myths, a certain grain of truth exists. During the first decade of the 20th Century a form of syndicalism having faith in insurrection dominated in some areas. By 1910 this tendency had run out of steam and continued to have some influence only in Spain. In North America and Northern Europe the insurrectionists were never influential.

Nor were the unions particularly large organizations. Membership tended to be small and fluctuating. The CGT which claimed 360,000 members in 1910 may have had as few as 4000 members four years later. By 1913 the Canadian IWW had almost ceased to exist.

FORA	Argentina	70,000
CGT	France	360,000
Canada		9000
USI	Italy	>80,000
IWW	USA	18,400
CNT	Spain	50,000

SYNDICALIST UNION MEMBERSHIP 1910–12 (600.000 total)

These figures are an underestimate as they do not include the British movement, other Latin American countries and Eastern Europe. However, as you will see, far from being a Golden Age, overall membership was small, and this was only a **formative** period.¹

¹ The British movement is an example of the difficulties encountered when trying to compile statistics on syndicalist strength. (British syndicalists worked within existing unions) Nevertheless they were responsible for the formation of the shop stewards movement, the South Wales Miners’ movement and the 1913 Dublin General Strike.

Post-WWI Syndicalism

WWI was a set-back for syndicalism. Unions split into pro and anti-war factions and in some countries such as Canada and the US, syndicalist organizations were proscribed and persecuted. But the movement came out of the war stronger than ever. More than two million workers joined the CGT in 1919 and the Italian USI had about 500,000 members. Unions mushroomed and syndicalism spread throughout Latin America and Eastern Europe.

For some unions like the CGT and the USI, this year marked the high point of their strength, as the former split into two factions and the latter was crushed by the fascists. The Bolsheviks also destroyed the burgeoning Russian syndicalist movement. But for the rest of the world, the early 1920's marks syndicalism's zenith.

FORA	Argentina	200,000
FORA IX	Argentina	70,000
CGT	France	600,000
OBU (1920)	Canada	41,000
IWW	USA	40,000
CNT	Spain	500,000
IWW	Chile	10,400
FAU	Germany	120,000
NAS	Holland	22,500
CGT	Mexico	30,000
CGT	Portugal	150,000
FORU	Uruguay	25,000

MEMBERSHIP IN 1922 (1.8 million total)

Even with close to two million members, this list grossly underestimates syndicalist strength worldwide. Statistics on the Australian and Brazilian movements are fragmentary and inconclusive, yet the majority of Australian workers were members of the One Big Union and the Brazilian anarcho-syndicalist movement was strong enough to support a daily newspaper. There were also federations in all the South and Central American countries as well as in Eastern Europe. The Swedish SAC is not included, nor any of the other Nordic unions. Many syndicalists also stayed outside of the federations in independent unions. Others, such as those in Great Britain, worked as radical caucuses within the social democratic unions.

A word on the inclusion of the French CGT. About this time, the revolutionaries within the federation were pushed out and formed the CGT-U, having about the same number of members as the old CGT. The CGT-U, was, however, controlled by the Communists and hence cannot be considered syndicalist, even though many militants remained faithful to the cause. Within two years the anarchist faction of the CGT-U had had enough of their Leninist "allies" and broke away to form a third CGT, the CGT Social Revolutionary. The old CGT, while purged of its revolutionary faction, did not opt for social democracy, but for Proudhonism. Hence, it still represented a form of syndicalism. The post-war, post-split CGT progressively evolved in a more "moderate" direction as the years went by, and while revolutionary syndicalists still belonged to

the organization, the CGT itself could no longer be considered syndicalist, in the sense that the term is generally used.

The year 1922 also marked the formation of the syndicalist international, the International Workers Association, which formed a libertarian counterweight to the Communist and Social Democratic Internationals. Most of the national federations joined except the Canadian and Australian OBU, the North American IWW and the Proudhonist CGT.

Syndicalism and the Great Depression

Early-on in the Great Depression, the syndicalist movement had lost some of its influence and membership. The Argentine FORA, in the middle of an internal wrangle in 1931, was suppressed by the military, never to regain its importance within the trade union movement.

FORA	Argentina	100,000
CGT-SR	France	6,000
OBU	Canada	24,000
IWW	Canada	4,000
CNT	Spain	500,000
FAU	Germany	50,000
CGT	Chile	25,000
CGT	Mexico	80,000
SAC	Sweden	35,000
IWW	USA	26,000

MEMBERSHIP IN THE EARLY 1930's (total 850,000)

The Mexican CGT split into fragments. The Spanish CNT stagnated after the bleeding it took from the employer-sponsored gun thugs (*pistoleros*) and the Primo de Riviera dictatorship. The Portuguese CGT was crushed by the Salazar dictatorship. But the social democratic unions did not fare much better. (In Great Britain the TUC had 6.5 million members in 1919 and only 3.7 million in 1928.) This situation was similar in other countries.

Against these losses also came some gains. Though the Chilean IWW was beaten into the ground by the Ibanez dictatorship, the remnants created a new federation called the CGT with 25,000 members. During the Spanish Civil War, the CNT rose to more than two million members. The growth of the CNT had positive effects for the French syndicalists, increasing their number.

As the 1930's dragged on, the situation worsened for syndicalism, The German movement was liquidated by the Nazis and a left-right combination of Stalinists and Falangists destroyed the Spanish CNT in 1938–39. Brazilian syndicalists felt the lash of the Vargas regime. The French CGT Proudhonists united with the Communist CGTU and were eventually swallowed up by them.

The following list underestimates syndicalist forces in the post-1939 period. The Dutch NAS still existed and the Cuban syndicalists were a major force on the island. In France, about 280,000 workers were enrolled in unions led by revolutionary syndicalists – in spite of Communist and “moderate” efforts. Syndicalism remained an influence in Bolivia, Peru and other Latin American

countries. But even after taking this into account, there is little doubt that the global movement had been fatally weakened.

OBU	Canada	9,000
IWW	USA	20,000
SAC	Sweden	40,000
CNT-B	Bulgaria	10,000

MEMBERSHIP IN 1939 (79.000 total)

WWII and the Post-War Era

After WWII, the Communist unions benefited most from labour militancy. The countries liberated from Fascism did not see a mass return to the syndicalist unions. Those that did re-form were mere shadows of the past. The IWW had a brief and minor renaissance only to lose all its organized shops by 1950. In France, the old Proudhonists split from the Stalinist CGT in 1947 to form Force Ouvrier, and by no stretch of the imagination could this union be considered syndicalist, though it clung to some syndicalist concepts.. In 1956 the Canadian OBU joined the AFL-CIO dominated Canadian Labour Congress.

In Chile in 1953 syndicalists elected 4 members to the directorate of the CUT and were instrumental in its formation. Cuban syndicalists controlled a number of important unions and were part of the revolutionary process that was unfolding on the island. They even had a daily newspaper, *El Libertario*, in 1958.² Three years later, the Castro government finished off the Cuban syndicalists – something neither the Machado nor the Batista regimes were able to do.

The last functioning unions were the Swedish SAC and the Dutch OVB. Possibly, some small unions remained in Latin America, most probably in Chile and Bolivia. For the rest of the world the syndicalists were reduced to tiny caucuses or aging remnants of once proud organizations.

Primitive Utopians?

Labour historians are at last challenging the cliché that syndicalist were violent, impractical millenarians. One of the best examples of this trend is Barbara Mitchell's, "The Practical Revolutionaries", an analysis of French anarcho-syndicalism. Professor Mitchell shows how most descriptions of syndicalism have been tainted by a hostile Marxist bias and that far from being woollyheaded utopians the French unionists were extremely practical.

The "revolution now or nothing" types were few in number, regarded as "fanatics", and were mainly intellectuals. (Exemplified by Georges Sorel who had almost no influence on the membership.)

Syndicalism grew out of the history, needs and aspirations of the working population and was not a set of ideas imported from outside by an intellectual elite. Militants were not particularly interested in philosophy or ideology, but sought **practical means** to improve the lot of the working class. This was best accomplished through direct action. had little to do with violence

² Interview with Cuban Anarchist, Frank Fernandez

and was a way of uniting workers who would otherwise be divided by trade or creed. Workers, whether Catholic or atheist, Socialist or Republican, tended to unite around practical matters such as forming a co-operative, joining a boycott or supporting a union, whereas they would be divided by an ideology or party.

Direct action also made immediate changes possible, for French syndicalists rarely made the mistake of splitting reform and revolution into two water-tight compartments. Unlike parliamentary reforms which empowered the state, direct action empowered the workers and therefore each successful action was like a little revolution.

Why Syndicalism Declined

Syndicalism's apparent demise did not come about through evolution from "primitivism" to "sensible" business unionism. The major reasons for its defeat were external. Communist, fascist and military dictatorships crushed the movement in Argentina, Brazil, Russia, Germany Italy, Bulgaria, Spain and Portugal. Government repression also played a part in the weakening of the Chilean and American IWW and the Mexican CGT. It is important to point out that the syndicalist unions which survived into the 1950's only did so in countries with democratic governments — such as Holland, Sweden and Canada. **Tyranny killed syndicalism.**

A second reason was the Communist Party. It attempted either to destroy or take over syndicalist unions and the result was a weakening of these organizations. Everywhere the Communist Party harmed syndicalism. Some unions suffered more than others at their hands. In France the CGT was split in two and in Brazil they used strike-breaking and violence against the syndicalists. The Communists role in Spain undermining the CNT is well known.

In countries where syndicalists were a minority faction of the workers' movement, conservative unions were a major source of opposition. This is especially true of Canada and the United States where the AF of L. worked day and night to destroy the One Big Union and IWW. The Australian OBU found a stumbling block in the right-wing and racist Australian Workers Union.

Another factor; all trade unions, syndicalist, communist, and social democratic, suffered major defeats in the 1920's and early 1930's. Syndicalism's decline was part of a tendency which effected all trade unions. Employer and governmental opposition played a major role in this, but other reasons existed as well. One was the decline of older industries such as coal mining — a major area of trade union support. So too, was the continuing decline of the skilled trades and the resulting losses for the craft unions. The migratory workers upon which the IWW depended to a large degree were largely replaced by a sedentary work force.

Two other factors helped undermine syndicalist influence. One was co-optation by corporatism, as seen in the Chilean situation where the Ibanez regime's "legal unions" split the "moderate" and "militant" syndicalists. The other was a difficulty in resolving the dilemma between daily "bread and butter" demands and revolutionary goals. The "moderates" tended to water down the movement, eventually abandoning the long-term goals of syndicalism. The more ideological, on the other hand, tended to turn a movement into a marginalized sect.

Anarcho-syndicalism suffered from the problem of being out of step with history. Centralisation of political and economic power was **the** tendency of the 20th Century. Scientism proclaimed the rule of experts and ordinary people were dismissed as too incompetent to run their own affairs. Other than anarchists, almost everyone else deemed society "too complicated" for direct

democracy and decentralization, let alone self-management. Stalinism and Fascism were only the most brutal aspects of this authoritarianism.

The 1960's

Although syndicalist unions were at their lowest ebb by the 1960s, paradoxically, many of their ideas were being taken seriously for the first since the 1920's. The concepts borrowed from syndicalism were direct action and *autogestion*. (workers control.) Several national federations such as Quebec's CSN and the French CFTD adopted these concepts.

There were several reasons for this. One was the decline in Communist influence and the anti-authoritarian feeling among the youth. But one must not discount the work of anarchist militants, who though few in number, were effective in promoting the idea of workers' control in Great Britain and France in the early 1960's.

The Neoliberal Era

The harsh economic and political environment of the 1980's dampened the enthusiasm for syndicalism. (*Autogestion* was even abandoned by the CFTD as early as 1974.) The Solidarnosc Movement in Poland incorporated many syndicalist ideas but most of this was lost. The democratization of Spain after the death of Franco saw the rebirth of the CNT, which briefly gave hope for a return to strength of traditional syndicalism. In 1979 they had 300,000 members, but within two years most of these were gone and the CNT faced a serious faction fight. By the early-1990's recession, the Spanish membership figures are probably lower than in 1987.

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc brought about an influx of syndicalist activity in Eastern Europe, but this was confined to very small groups. All things considered, there was been no real rebirth of syndicalist unions in the 1980's and 1990's, since the nadir point of the early 1960's. These groups remained a small fringe of the trade union movement.

Thus, a revitalization of traditional syndicalism (i.e. separate revolutionary unions) seemed an unlikely future prospect. The best one could say was that as long as capitalism existed **syndicalist ideas** would still have influence.

CNT-AIT	Spain	63,000
CNT-U	Spain	11,000
SAC	Sweden	7,000
IWW	USA	500
IWW	Canada	100
CNT-F	France	500

MEMBERSHIP IN 1987 (82,000 total)

The Re-Birth of Syndicalism in the 21st Century

With the resurgence of the class struggle world-wide, as exemplified by the Argentine *piqueteros* in the late 1990's and the factory-occupation movement soon after, has come a re-birth of syndicalism. While the membership of syndicalist unions does not number in the millions like in the 1920's and 30's, there must be several hundred thousand syndicalists world-wide. The movement has certainly not been in this good a shape since the end of the Second World War, if not before that time.

The most spectacular syndicalist advance is in Spain. After the CNT split in the 1980's, one group changed its name to the CGT. Since then, it has grown to about 70,000 members and is supported by about one million Spanish workers. The CGT is now the third largest labor federation in Spain.³ The CNT still exists with maybe 5000 members. The COBAs (Base Committees) of Italy, of which several are overtly syndicalist, and though I have no membership figures, they influence hundreds of thousands of workers. (The old Italian anarcho-syndicalist union, the USI, works with the COBAs and is experiencing growth.) While other union federations are small by CGT or COBA standards (or **any** standards for that matter) the point must be made that they are **functioning** unions and not mere propaganda groups made up of students or aging remnants from the "old days." Furthermore, syndicalism has a growing, and not a declining influence, unlike the years following WWII.

The CNT-F of France, down to a couple of hundred militants in 1994, reorganized and is now a vibrant union with 4000 members.⁴ Sweden's SAC has organized white collar workers and has about 10,000 members. THE US IWW is organizing workers again and has about 2000 members. The IWW is also involved in the UK (500 members) and in Germany and Austria. Ireland has its Independent Workers Union with 1,000 members. In Greece, syndicalists grouped about 10 years ago in the ASE. They are still a small group but are also expanding their influence and membership.⁵ Syndicalist unions now exist in many of the former Eastern Bloc, and some of them are no longer propaganda groups but functioning unions. Workers Initiative of Poland is organizing in a dozen cities. The Siberian Workers Confederation and the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation are active in Russia

Another phenomenon is the development of class struggle or "alternative" unions, allied with, and influenced by, syndicalists. These include France's SUD unions and Chile's CGT-Mosicam. Many African and Asian radical trade unions sent delegates to the 2007 Paris Syndicalist Conference and have become attracted to the ideas they found there, so the movement is spreading to areas where it has never been before. Indeed, never in history has syndicalism been as widespread as it is today.

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