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Anarchosyndicalism against fascism

A response to recent insinuations

Laure Akai

31 October 2015

The question of anarchosyndicalism's theoretical stands against fascism, as well as its long history of fighting against it, is certainly deserving of a long, well-documented article. But that is not what this is going to be. Rather, I would like to take on some recent insinuations, published in relation to the Michael Schmidt case, that there is some sort of inherent link between fascist ideology and anarchosyndicalism. This idea, I find, is grossly incorrect, but one which has been floating around for a while. However, as I come from a region where anarchists have actually flirted with fascists and sometimes ideas have intersected, I am interested in seeing how this can happen, with a view towards eliminating racist, nationalist, ethnopluralist and other ideas unworthy of an egalitarian anarchist movement.

A few weeks ago, one anarchist was observed linking syndicalism to fascism on the internet and now, in the 5th part of the expose on Michael Schmidt, Alexander Reid Ross and Joshua Stevens seem to posit whether there is a positive correlation

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between national and anarchist syndicalism. What they are saying is not exactly clear for me and I will quote the passages to let readers contemplate what is being said.

„A clear example of this strategy appears in Schmidt’s understanding of nationalism and anarchism in terms of syndicalist thought. “I don’t think that there is any real correlation between anarchist syndicalism and national syndicalism,” Schmidt told us in our interview — a strange denial given that a number of origin voices within national syndicalism, including Mussolini, Valois, and De Ambris, either had been or were supporters of anarchism. However, Schmidt did admit, in a rather glaring contradiction of his own stated views, “I do feel that there is the possibility of purist syndicalism in the post-revolutionary period approximate [to] national syndicalism[.]” In other words, as in the case of the “proper Boerestaat,” a de facto white nationalist state in Africa could function on the basis of syndicalism — i.e., there is not only a correlation, but a positive correlation between national and anarchist syndicalism.”

and

„Schmidt sought to forward white nationalism using an approximation of anarchist syndicalism as leverage to reopen the colonial legacy of the Afrikaner volkstaat. „

Due to somewhat ambiguous language, I could imagine that either the authors are claiming Michael Schmidt sees a correlation between national and anarchosyndicalism, or that they do. In either case, the correlation is posited in the article.

Anarchosyndicalism needs to be more relevant to people, this is for sure. And it also needs to gain in strength. But it cannot compromise its positions to do so.

If anybody does not get the dilemma, they can look at our situation. For anybody who is not aware, Poles just voted in a Parliament consisting of 6 right-wing parties, with a few fascists here and there. Without going into a long explanation of how the right-wing got working class people hooked, it is enough to say that it is easier to get working class people by your side with nationalist slogans and by carefully avoiding talking against the church, about womens’ rights, etc. The conclusion is not hard to draw: if our main goal is to grow and show we are „mass”, then the easiest way to achieve this is to turn a blind eye, be soft on nationalism, etc.

At some point, Schmidt even suggests that anarchists should use nationalism more, to get those people on their side.

For us, this would just be counterproductive. Using soft nationalism to attract people to a movement which should be anti-nationalist is not likely to get the effect you want.

Anarchosyndicalism, by its definition, must be antifascist. There is no correlation between it and national syndicalism or fascism.

But any time that the anarchist aspect of syndicalism is drowned under the issues of „pragmatism”, „massiveness”, and all other points that seek to water it down, there is a risk of the organization simply losing its anarchist character. This I think has already happened a few times. This doesn’t mean that these organizations will be infiltrated by fascists, but when people start sweeping incidents under the carpet, this increases the chance that some really bad ideas can infect them.

Let’s not turn a blind eye to this issues. The Michael Schmidt case has, I hope, because of his celebrity, drawn attention to potential problems and how certain ideas could be smuggled into our movements. Let’s not let this happen.

So if you tell me syndicalism can be nationalist, I would say that is true. But anarchosyndicalism, which is predicated on an egalitarian society, cannot be.

In some countries, this question is problematic, because some people use the terms „syndicalism” and „anarchosyndicalism” interchangeably and don't see much of a difference. This makes a lot of confusion in my opinion. Another issue is related to the conception of the organization. There are some tendencies which might stress the economic and class focus of a union and want to downplay other issues of egalitarianism. This tendency is visible in the political thought of Michael Schmidt, among others. My opinion is that this way of viewing anarchosyndicalism threatens to make it not anarchist syndicalism, but some form of syndicalism.

Many years ago, our forefathers and sisters (but mostly men), split with the Marxist train of thought. The IWA was later born, refusing to compromise on the issue of the Party and State, in the name of the class struggle.

A century later, some anarchists and anarchosyndicalists, frightened that they are too irrelevant, actively seek the cooperation of authoritarian leftists in building a „mass movement”. Having problems with „the mass”, some proponents of class anarchism, anarcho-communist and anarcho-syndicalists, have resorted to „broadening” the tradition, to focusing on class but downplaying other important issues of egalitarianism. In essence, they are approaching the Marxist position of building an International where everyone will fight against capitalism as the most important thing and the issue of anti-statism or other specific anarchist claims are put on the back burner. This is something that is happening now and is a concrete threat to the anarchist character of anarcho-syndicalism. It is much more relevant than the threat of fascist infiltration. However, for the organizations and movements which have already moved to the „broad tradition”, infiltration can be an issue.

In my opinion, anarchosyndicalism cannot have any correlation with national syndicalism for exactly the same reason that anarchism cannot have any correlation with national anarchism. Both anarchism and anarchosyndicalism, are ideas which are supposed to be essentially egalitarian, therefore, all other ideas which divide people or assign them hierarchical roles in society are anathema to the beautiful idea that I and many comrades hold in our hearts: a world where the divisive and categorizing ideas of nationalists really have no place.

I really don't think this should be hard to understand. National anarchists exist, they call themselves anarchists, but for most legitimate anarchists, they are people who have encroached on our idea and perverted it. There is no shortage of anarchists screaming at the top of their lungs that National Anarchism is not anarchism, just like there is no shortage of anarchosyndicalists fighting against national syndicalism and other ideas related to nationalism and fascism.

This should be painfully obvious. Therefore, anybody who argues that there is some intrinsic correlation between anarchosyndicalism and national syndicalism or fascism, in my opinion, is mostly tendaciously showing their dislike of this anarchist tendency. Because why would anyone give credibility to the anarchists denouncing National Anarchism, but not to the anarchosyndicalists denouncing national syndicalism? Why not say anarchism has a correlation with National Anarchism because some nationalists wanna call themselves anarchists?

This, of course, does not mean that there is no problem for anarchosyndicalism in relation to nationalism and other matters. But simply this problem is similar to the problem faced by any other anarchist: how to keep these ideas away and effectively fight their growth. It may come as a surprise to the ones insinuating otherwise, but anarchosyndicalists, at least the legit ones, are no less antifascist then they are.

Since I have been talking about the problems of nationalist ideas encroaching on the anarchist movement for the last 25 years, I certainly hope that none of the „syndicalism is close to fascism” people will claim that I support a fascist ideology or something of the sort. I hope rather that they will hear me out and stop making such insinuations that are essentially untrue.

To deal with the issue itself, the encroachment of nationalist ideas has been a problem in the places I lived, Russia and Poland, but it is clearly not limited to these. For example, there are also some types of nationalists in Spain. And if we talk about fascism, we can see that in the US, for the last 40 or so years, there have been tendencies which clearly were attractive to the far right. If we put a microscope to it, we would find that some post-left celebrities had considerable interaction with essentially right-wing nuts and even came out in defense of white secessionist militias (like Hakim Bey, who I debated the issue with more than once).

This problem clearly is not something exclusive to anarchosyndicalism. To say so is ingenuine. It would be like saying that some ecological anarchists went to the far-right, so there is a correlation between ecology and fascism.

I am curious what Reid Ross will say about Russia. (There is a chapter about it in his upcoming book.) There were quite serious problems there and, what might be news for some, is that, quite sadly, the problem was noticeable in certain circles of people calling themselves „antifascist”. I wonder if Reid Ross also will expose the long cooperation of some Russian „antifascists” with Russian nationalists?

In case people are not aware, antifascism has a long tradition as an official ideology, promoted by the state in some countries. In these places, a type of patriotic anti-fascism developed. There are also traditions of patriotic leftism, such as the PPS in Poland. Currently, with the situation in Ukraine, we saw a strong move of nationalist antifascism, trying to pass itself off as something „anti-imperialist” and gaining support amongst

things, that a union cannot invigilate in the politics of their individual members.

In my opinion, this is not a question of invigilating or not; it is a question of taking clear stands and consistantly incorporating this into your organizational politics. Anarchosyndicalism, by definition, is connected to the creation of anarchism and is more clearly interested in anarchist means. Among other things, the organization must function according to our non-hierarchical principles and must avoid certain collaborationist and hierarchical models. Our ideas must clearly demonstrate a rejection of nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia and other ideas which run counter to the idea of egalitarian society. This has to be not only in theory, but in practice.

Anything else isn't really anarchosyndicalism.

To come back to Michael Schmidt and the points made by the authors of the expose or by some other people, it may be worth pointing out that Michael Schmidt is not an anarchosyndicalist and never was one. That said, he certainly spoke a lot about anarchosyndicalism and tried to define it more to his liking. However, this does not prove any correlation between anarchosyndicalism and national syndicalism. This proves that Michael Schmidt, who had, at the very least, poor national politics, tried to create a confused and revisionist vision which would include the likes of Connolly in a „broad” tradition that he and Lucien van de Walt tried to fashion.

One thing needs to be pointed out. Often in this or other discussions, people use the terms „syndicalism” and „anarchosyndicalism” interchangeably. This is quite annoying and shows that people are not too clear about what they are talking about. For me, „syndicalism” is an extremely broad term, meaning „unionism”, and with more implied characteristics than expressed ones. Syndicalism in fact can be nationalist, socialist or whatever. It can also be anarchist. Because syndicalism is not connected to anarchism, only to unionism.

that the mainstream press printed an article about it as well. Again, I will not go through all the details and arguments because it is simply sickening.

We never hid the fact that this happened (although we see plenty of people trying not to see this, just like some people did not want to come to terms with the fact that Schmidt is a sleazy racist and probably worse). But we reject any notion that this proves that anarchosyndicalists are close to fascists. Because for us, this is just more proof that these people are not anarchosyndicalists. And just like anarchists have a moral right to say that National Anarchists are not anarchists, anarchosyndicalists also have the right to say that certain people or tendencies are not anarchosyndicalist, no matter how they might label themselves.

The justifications I heard for many weeks during the internet debates of this topic showed that, despite all the references these people made to anarchosyndicalism, they were quite far from these ideas. It is important to note that only many, many weeks after did the organization respond, claiming that member simply did not know he was running in elections with a few fascists. And the explanation that „we criticized him”, was taken a sufficient for some organizations to declare the problem solved. In fact, most of the criticism instead went to anarchosyndicalists who opposed this, who were attacked while defending their members' rights to do as they want. This has been argued for many years as the definition of freedom and anarchism. Tellingly, the whole incident did not result in any expulsion or similar process against that person, who was back on the street at a demo with at least one of the fascists shortly after.

I don't think here I have to explain much why electoral escapades and fascists have nothing to do with our anarchosyndicalist ideals. What is more relevant is the way that they justify these things to themselves. That is, by arguing, among other

people in places like Spain, Italy and Greece. Some anarchists were among those supporting.

In Russia, the organization Autonom, plus projects connected to it, had many people who fell into the patriotic camp and eventually it had a split, with nationalists and homophobes breaking off or forming their own distinctive faction. The problems with their increasingly frequent cooperation with nationalist elements and problems with discussion with this had gone on for many years.

A rather long article would be needed to understand all the intricacies of this, but maybe I could mention one case to illustrate how certain ideas get legitimized in anarchist movements. National identity, as people may know, has been a point of manipulation by the Soviet state and then later by Russia. Patriotism has always been fueled by threats from the outside. In recent years, this has grown to include threats to „unique Russianness”. The global world is seen as encroaching on Russian culture. With these ideas, people who were nationalists were able to pass themselves off in the anti-globalist movement with no problem. So one of the main Eurasianists of Ukraine was active in the PGA for a bit (and was their „infopoint”) and Indy-media chartered a right-wing nut in Russia ... This kind of thing was becoming rather common since many leftists and some anarchists are focused anti-Westernism and anti-Americanism and see it as some equivalent of their ideas. Nationalists were able to go around in these movements, presenting their ideas as some legitimate defense of their ethnicity. And many an anarchist defended this as being distinctly different than nationalism.

In the case of one person, who currently is one of the right-wing „anarchists” and homophobes poisoning the scene in Russia, a huge amount of debate was generated concerning his ideas. In this case, we found anarchosyndicalists in Russia presenting very coherent argument, comparing his ideas to ethnopluralism and pointing out the problems for anarchists.

In short, the ideas of this person mean that people of other ethnicities inherently threaten pure ethnic identities, thus a kind of cultural separation must remain in place.

I wouldn't like to get into all the details, arguments and counterarguments of this case because I had enough of it already when it was happening. But I would add that anarchists were threatening to beat up one of the anarchosyndicalists making the anti-nationalist analyses. Later, the mood of homophobia increased amongst self-professed anarchists. Arguing shit like, LGBT issues divide or scare the working class and are „secondary” (an argument we've heard numerous times in Poland as well), some homophobic anarchist tendencies grew, threatening LGBT activists who wanted to participate in some demonstrations. Then actually there was a physical attack on another anarchosyndicalist for their support of joint actions with feminist and LGBT activists.

Here, I specifically mention the positions of my anarchosyndicalist comrades for a reason. It was they who most consistently, over many years, criticized the influx of not only national, discriminatory and neo-fascist ideas into the anarchist scene and clearly said that we have nothing in common with them. On the contrary, some anarchists took the position that we should in fact find the common things and only that attitude could result in the growth of the anarchist movement. The other attitude, more critical, was usually labelled „sectarianism”.

(Now, when a few of their old comrades are more clearly close to fascism, they create the narrative that they were „infiltrated” or that people changed their views.)

This is important because I believe there is some kind of connection with tendencies to water down anarchism to a minimum, seek out common points with as many people as possible and to becoming the victim of fascist and nationalist influence. I don't want to make this into an absolute correlation – because it isn't. But I see this to be a tendency where I live as well.

In Poland there is a very long history of anarchist cooperation with the right and the influx of right ideas. A careful study of our „secret stash” in our library is very telling. The „secret stash” started years ago when we decided that we couldn't, in good conscience, sell certain „anarchist” or anti-globalists publications that we kept getting from people, so we put all that stuff in the refrigerator, where it could be read rather by people who wanted to criticize it. The stash contained lots of shit, like articles saying things like if the author doesn't like black people, it's not anarchist to force him to be with them, or booklets espousing something close to national syndicalism, discussing Sorel's and Pilsudski's ideas. The anarchist movement, in short, produced a lot of shit in their publications and continues to sell more, in the name of „open-mindedness”. For, for example, if you go now to Poznan, you can find a new right-wing book on Franco sold in the anarchist bookstore. Since some of my comrades were involved with the arguments on that, let's just say that, in short, there are enough anarchists who will argue that anarchist bookstores have some sort of moral right to sell things like this and are not too concerned that they are actually spreading dangerous ideas.

If we dig deeper, we probably would find some more people around the world whose idea of libertarian behaviour would legitimize the distribution of books published by the far-right.

The difference of opinion on this issue has been sharply debated here for at least the last 15 years. Most recently this has been a topic in the anarchosyndicalist movement, so here I will add something to the question of whether or not anarchosyndicalism can have any correlations with national syndicalism.

Last year, during elections, at least two members of the organization Workers' Initiative, which sometimes calls itself anarchosyndicalist (although sometimes not), ran in elections with fascists or right-wing nationalists. The more famous case was in my city (Warsaw) and the member is a very prominent member of that union and long-time activist. It was famous enough