

Basic Anarcho-Syndicalism

(Revolutionary Unionism)

Local Federation of the CNT-AIT Sevilla (Spain)

Contents

Part One: The Goals and Structure of the CNT	3
What is Anarcho-Syndicalism?	3
How is it different from other unions and social movements?	3
The basic structure of anarcho-syndicalism: the union branch	3
Functions of the anarcho-syndicalist unions	4
Human and technical means	4
Legal advisors to the CNT	5
What is the union committee?	6
Committee members are not paid	7
Part Two: The CNT in the Workplace	7
The Union Section	7
The Union Elections	7
Daily Activity of the Anarcho-Section	9
Relations Between the Section & the Union	11
Workplaces and Sectors Without Enterprise Committees	11
Relation of Your Union with Other Local Unions of the CNT	11
How is the Local Committee Chosen?	11
Means of Relation and Co-ordination Between Local Federations: The Re- gional Confederation	12
Relations Between Different Regional Confederations: The National Confederation	13
Why are Committees Elected this Way?	13
How Do the Unions of the CNT Make Decisions?	13
Part Three: The CNT's Revolutionary Principles	14
Affiliation	14
The Principles of Anarcho-Syndicalism	14
Direct Action: The Tactics of Anarcho-Syndicalism	14
The Final Goal of Anarcho-Syndicalism	15
Voting in the Anarcho-Union	17
Translator's Comments	19

Part One: The Goals and Structure of the CNT

What is Anarcho-Syndicalism?

Anarcho-syndicalism is a current of thought and principles that appeared at the end of the 19th century. It has these fundamental characteristics:

- The goal of organising the world's workers for the defence of their immediate interests, and to obtain improvements in their quality of life. To form unions to achieve this.
- The creation of a structure in which there are neither leaders nor executive power.
- The desire for the radical transformation of society, a transformation to be brought about by the means of a Social Revolution. Without this goal of transformation, anarcho-syndicalism does not exist.

Another name for anarcho-syndicalism is revolutionary syndicalism.

How is it different from other unions and social movements?

Anarcho-syndicalism has the conviction that the causes of social inequality and injustice, are based on power, on the principle of authority, which puts a minority in charge, disposing of the wealth produced by society and maintaining its privileges by means of violence, and the obedient majority, has no more than what it needs to survive and must suffer the violence of the minority. Consequently, anarcho-syndicalism, in order to eliminate injustice opposes the principle of authority, decision-making by the elites, and the ultimate representation of power: the State.

Contrary to the hierarchical Organisation and authority of the State-Capital, and its repressive apparatus, anarcho-syndicalism poses its Anti-Organisation. This involves a process, in which decisions are made at the base, in which the people participate, in which there is no leadership (or it is very limited), there is no repression, and there exists full liberty and equality in the exchange of ideas, opinions, and initiatives. Anarcho-syndicalist organisation resembles that of the State-Capital as little as possible. It is thus an anti-organisation when compared to the authoritarian model existing nowadays.

The basic structure of anarcho-syndicalism: the union branch

The CNT is a union, a confederation of industrial union branches. A union branch is a group of people who work in the same branch of production, to defend their interests. The unions of the CNT are industrial unions, contrary to what are called trade unions. Trade unions, for example, divide health workers into the nurses' union, the medical technicians' union, doctors' union, etc. In contrast the CNT health workers form the Union of Public Health, without distinction to professional categories. This structure was adopted at the Sans Congress in 1918. It was agreed on because it was seen as the most practical in struggles with capital.

Everything in the CNT revolves around the union. An industrial union in health, for example, is formed by the people who work in health within the same city, who meet as a local union. There they discuss the problems of their industry. Likewise industrial unions are formed for metallurgy, construction, wood-working, food processing, etc. If there are not enough people (at

least 25) to form an industrial union, as it often happens, they constitute a Sindicato de Oficios Varios (SOV) [a union of varied trades] with a minimum of five people. As the SOV grows and a group of people in a distinct industry becomes sufficient, it reorganises into industrial unions. For example, a SOV of 300 members could have 30 in construction, 50 in metallurgy, 200 in public services, and 20 in other industries. They could, if they desired, form three industrial unions (construction, metallurgy, and public services) and leave the SOV with only 20 members.

The union decides its issues by means of the Union Assembly. The assembly is its highest decision-making body, attended directly by members. It is not mediated by outside committees, delegations, etc.

The majority of other union organisations — at least they claim its that way — base their decisions on the assembly. But there is a great difference with respect to anarcho-syndicalism. The assembly is considered to be the supreme means for decision-making, but they hold the assembly only once a year, for example. Immediately there are written the rules for the creation of other structures, union council, committee meeting, executive board or whatever, which decides between assemblies, with all executive power passing in practice to these structures.

In the anarcho-syndicalist union, in the industrial union, it is the assembly that always decides. There exists no board, no committee, delegates' council, no director, no executive... that can decide between assemblies. Later the major functions of the CNT committees will be explained. Other names by which the industrial union are called are "one union," or "one industrial union."

Each time an assembly is held it is important that someone makes a record of what is said there. The record reflects the opinions of those persons taking part, the debates, the agreements that are made and who agree to carry them out. In order to write and to maintain records we write our history.

Functions of the anarcho-syndicalist unions

The unions of the CNT concern themselves with all subjects related to the defence of its members, and for this they provide themselves with all available means, human, technical, economic, and legal. They plan actions to be taken against employers, make studies of working conditions, file grievances over health and job security problems, and seek all information possible concerning the operation of the enterprise (supplies, suppliers, profits, subsidiary companies, contracts, labour policy, conversion plans...). This is important on the one hand to not be taken by surprise by capitalist plans, and on the other, for the eventual arrival of the day in which we take over the enterprise. They have the capacity to conduct strikes, to assist in dealings with the authorities, and to negotiate on behalf of the members. They prepare training courses, study days, and conferences. They provide for legal defence of workers and imprisoned members. The union is the school of the people. In it we must come to see in the injuries of others as injuries to ourselves, to develop through conversations, thought and debate, to become multi-talented, to learn to take initiative... Depending on the number and activities of the people in the union, the union will be well or poorly equipped.

Human and technical means

The first thing members of an anarcho-union must do is to evaluate the forces that they have, and to continue to plan activities that can be carried to completion. By achieving the possible

we can approach the impossible. This is important because inactivity or failure always leads to demoralization. There are also technical means available, such as telephones, FAX, photocopiers, word-processors, computers and printers, a hall for meetings and archives, including a moving record for our people of the glorious epoch, when everything was done by hand and the backs of old mules. Certainly to achieve all the former, requires development.

What gets membership, which is most important, is that everyone seeks the means to make the union grow. What is absolutely certain is that the anarcho-syn- dicalist union only grows where there are problems and conflicts, and it is the role of union militants to discover them and provoke them.

For a century activism was very strong. The people wanted to be unionised in spite of repression. That was when there was a period of union growth, and the desire for social transformation was widespread. Today this no longer exists, having been replaced by a narrow individualism, cynicism, and consumerism instigated by the capitalists. We must understand that our message in this society is not widely shared — for the moment — and that a large part of our initiatives are met with indifference. We must not lose spirit.

Legal advisors to the CNT

The CNT does not have legal advisors in order to be run by lawyers. There are sufficient members who have some experience in labour law, or have studied it. In case of doubt, the CNT consults lawyers with whom it has contact. It is necessary to be informed of the laws as they exist, by means of official provincial bulletins, of the assembly of the corresponding region or state, and of all the information over the enterprises to which they apply.

In this world of hostile and unjust laws, we have to defend our rights and the better we know them, the better we can defend them. The better we know the laws, the less the necessity for legal representation. But the least legal intervention will come with the greater strength of the union.

We would like to make it clear that the purpose of all labour law is to benefit capitalism in general, to defend its privileges and to permit its robbery without risk, preventing the direct confrontation between labour and capitalism. The State makes the rules of the game which always benefit the employers, so that the legal system:

- Is expensive. To function within it requires the payment of high fees. To get lawyers to open their mouths never costs less than a thousand dollars. Much more to take a case, or handle legal documents, without which no magistrate needs to deal with it.
- Uses language which is difficult to comprehend by ordinary people. It is made this way to augment the ignorance of the people, since to know a thing is to understand it, to indicate a power to control it, and this is not in the interest of a legal caste which wants to impose its will without question.
- Is slow. It prolongs the processes that could be solved rapidly by means of direct negotiations.
- Considers the conflicting sides to be children, incapable of solving their own problems.
- Is very complex. It requires a great deal of skill to manoeuvre within it. Many of its statutes are contradictory, with traps and no real clarity or rationality to it.

To rely on lawsuits is a course which always favours the employer, such that even when the judge sides with labour, and assesses damages against the capitalists, the only thing which has been done is to give us what is already ours, and what triumphs is the idea that in spite of the faults of a system which is slow, bureaucratic, expensive, pernicious, domineering, corrupt and incomprehensible, we have to give it power over us.

To know the laws makes it possible to demand their implementation, which succeeds on many occasions. But in addition it is necessary to know when to break the laws, to employ common sense and to plan to follow the path that is the most short, simple and economic to do something.

To use lawsuits, however, violates our form of existence, which rejects the institutions of the State. Nothing is possible to achieve through magistrates that could not be done with concrete actions. According to our principles, the only tactic useful for its militants is Direct Action. Lawyers to the CNT manage, therefore, those limited cases in which there are not enough forces to reach the goal by Direct Action. The lawyers function within the contradictions in which anarcho-syndicalism is forced to operate.

What is the union committee?

The union assembly chooses people to keep open local union halls, maintain relations with other unions, handle correspondence, collect dues, issue the union journals, handle literature orders... Simple tasks which in general the union assembly delegates to achieve its goals. These people form what is called the union committee, which is divided among the following secretaries for:

- *Organisation*, responsible for internal union relations, membership lists...
- *Education, culture and archives*, editor of educational materials, organiser of the library...
- *Press and information*, responsible for media relations.
- *Treasury and financial matters*, collecting dues.
- *Law and prisoner support*, to gather official bulletins, information on laws, contracts, to inform the union of labour law problems, dispense funds in cases of detention, imprisonment, to deal with lawyers...
- *Union organising*. To help develop plans for action in workplaces, unionised or not. *Social activism*. The same as above but dealing with non-union questions: ecology, anti-militarism...
- And the *General Secretary*, representing the confederation.

All of them form the union committee, together with delegates from specific union sections within industry where the union is active. This is in theory, because if the union desires a smaller committee, it might drop some secretaries (press and education, for example). And if it wants, it could invent another secretary, thus increasing the committee. But what is really important is:

Committee members are not paid

All the committees are mechanisms for management and co-ordination, with no power to make policy. The only decision-making bodies are the union assemblies. If in the case of dire emergency or necessity they have to decide something, they would have to account for it to the assembly, which would decide if their action was correct or not.

All mandates are revokable at anytime. The assembly is free to demand the resignation of the officers if it wishes. The duration of a term is two years, with possible re-election for one more year as maximum. It is required that officers be rotated.

The committee, as a body, cannot make proposals to the union assembly.

All the members of the committee have to be confirmed at the next assembly after their election. All officers are always at the disposal of the assembly.

Members of political parties may not hold office in the confederation.¹

In all assemblies the committees have to account for the activities of the secretaries.

The committees of the CNT do not express their individual opinions. When they open their mouths, they do it in the name of the entire organisation and its agreements.

These limitations guarantee that every officer acts without self-interest. It is a barrier to avoid the growth of a bureaucracy, and to limit to the minimum possible the development of leaders, dictators and authority in the heart of the union.

The committee of the CNT must be a mechanism of facilitation, administration and co-ordination, not a power group.

Part Two: The CNT in the Workplace

The Union Section

The CNT members in a workplace are collectively known as the Union Section. The union section functions by means of assemblies, in which the concrete problems of the union are addressed. In the struggle with the employer, the union section must achieve freedom of action, propaganda, affiliation and defence of affiliates, the right to hold assembly, and the right to sign contracts on the union's behalf. Such is the legal environment today, and the state of the union movement, that the CNT has to fight day by day to attain former rights now endangered, since the employers refuse to recognize the anarcho-union, due to its tactic of boycotting the union elections.

The Union Elections

The union elections were an invention of the employers and the UCD government of the time at the end of the 1970s, to regulate the reawakened labour movement. After the death of Franco and the collapse of his vertical [government-dominated] unions, the country was shaken

¹ The restriction against members of political parties to serve on union committees, was adopted in the 1930s as a means of defending the unions against control by the Communist Party. No restriction was made against authoritarian communists belonging to the confederation as workers. But these people belong to parties which aspire to become vanguards and guides of the workers, and one of their tactics is to infiltrate independent organisations in order to control them. For this reason it is necessary to limit their aspirations to have power.

by a series of strikes and mass protests in which the protagonists were primarily, the people themselves, and in order to cope with this situation unionism was institutionalised.

The largest unions, the UGT and CCOO and the rest, with the exception of the CNT, accepted a system of bargaining by means of a new invention: the enterprise committee. The enterprise committee is chosen by means of a secret ballot between candidates representing the unions. As soon as the enterprise committee is chosen, the employer discusses agreements only with it. The union elections are held, more or less, every three to four years. After the elections, the government announces the results. Only those unions which exceed 10% of the votes are given representation to sit and discuss and negotiate with the government.

The elections are always won by UGT-CCOO, who number approximately 200,000 members. Other unions like Basque Workers Solidarity (ELA-STV), the USO, the Galician inter-union, or unions of sanitary professions, etc. obtain smaller results (between 7,000 and 3,000).

The government evaluates these vote figures in order to give economic subsidies and to professionalise the unionists who work in its facilities. Also the employer by means of collective bargaining, subsidizes the enterprise committees and occasionally sits some of its members on its board of directors. It is necessary to make clear that the CNT does not accept subsidies, neither from the State nor the employer, since these are the organisations that must be combated, and the CNT does not want to lose its independence to confront them.

The acceptance of a system of privileges, subsidies, and union institutionalisation, has after more than a decade led to the practical disappearance of the idea of the union as a social transformer, because:

- The union elections remove the power of decision from the people. In the workplace only the committee makes decisions during its mandate.
- The union elections always give victory to the most reactionary candidates, who always win in an individual and secret vote.
- The persons elected to the committee have a fixed term and are not subject to any discipline. They represent you although you don't want them, they negotiate in your name without your permission, they don't call assemblies if they don't want them, they limit what you can discuss or agree on with the employer, etc.
- In consequence, all negotiations are in the hands of the committee.

The CNT rejects the principle of authority, and therefore, representatives with unchecked power. If the CNT were to enter into the system of union elections, executive delegates, paid functionaries and government subsidies, it would reproduce exactly that which it is trying to abolish. The price which the CNT pays for maintaining some consistency (total consistency and purity does not exist), was to experience two organisational splits by persons who preferred to conform, rather than face the difficulties of making progress by anarcho-syndicalist action, and instead to build a union based on elections-subsidies-officials. These splitters formed what is today the Confederacion General del Trabajo (CGT).

In practice, the CGT, while having gained greater freedom, to have available funds to pay its functionaries, it has obtained insignificant electoral results (0.67% in the last elections with some 1,620 delegates in the enterprise committees). According to the laws elaborated by the mass

sociologists Friedrichsen-Hoffman, in a democratic election by ballot box, the candidates most reactionary always win. (First principle of secret voting.) If by some heavenly miracle it should gain a higher representation, in the course of its mandate it would turn reactionary. (Second principle of secret voting.) And if, incredibly, at the end of their mandate it would remain progressive it is certain that the next election would not repeat the results, and it would be relegated to third or fourth place. (Third principle of secret voting.)

If in order to accomplish something it is necessary to vote it should always be by raising hands in assembly. The results are always different and more beneficial in general, according to anarcho-syndicalist ideas.

Another difficulty for the CNT is that its union sections, although legal, do not have any rights if they don't participate in the elections. Therefore the section must win these rights day by day.

Daily Activity of the Anarcho-Section

When a section begins to function, that is to say, when two or three members at whatever workplace decide that they are fed up beyond endurance, they have to obtain:

- An understanding of the many problems of their co-workers and to become in tune with them. To win simple demands and thus create a sympathy towards the section. These questions should be resolved by a direct approach, by speaking directly to the boss, supervisor, etc. If this doesn't work, the union should intervene with its classical arsenal (negotiation-pres- sure-boycott-sabotage-strike etc.), and if for whatever reason these don't work, or if the balance of forces are impossible, or if it would be necessary to spend more energy than we are ready for, you can seek a judicial settlement through the legal representative of the union (the local union secretary).
- Legal recognition of the section in regards to the CEMAC and the employer. Legalisation does not assume an establishment of any guarantee nor right. But it permits that in some cases, the union could call a legal strike and other activities, and to retain a lawyer.
- Identification of the enemy, which is on one side the employer, and on the other, in 99% of the cases, the enterprise committee and the rest of the unions which collaborate with it. It is necessary to augment the contradictions and to not let any pass. But we do not ever lose sight that the real enemy is the employer, and that the other unions can have members and militants with good intentions.
- The section needs to participate in the Health and Safety Committee of the centre. If one does not exist, then the union should promote its creation. One way or the other, the section should elaborate its plans for safety on the workplace, and the prevention of sicknesses, and accidents.
- The collection of full data about the workplace, worker benefits, economic plans, redundancies, organisational structure, management salaries, habits and characteristics of the boss... This serves, overall, to anticipate anti-union plans, and also for the hypothetical self-management of the workplace.

- The production of bulletins, information leaflets concerning the issues, explaining the views of the CNT. The point always is emphasised that it is the workers who must decide in the assemblies.
- The anarcho-section would struggle to make the employer recognize the collective representation of the workers, that is to say, that the representatives elected by the assembly have the right to negotiate, which today is solely in the hands of the Enterprise Committees.
- When the Enterprise Committee calls a general assembly, to speak in these as the CNT, to win agreement with our proposals. To reject the taking of secret votes. The secret vote is always reactionary. In the assembly when the vote is open, the people can count for themselves, so that nothing can be hidden, they lose their fear and gain a common sentiment that can see things clearly.
- If the assemblies decide things which go against the position of the CNT section, the section would respect the decision if it does not violate CNT principles, but we would not agree to it if it does, and we would always defend our positions.
- If there should come a time in which the incompetence and treason of the Enterprise Committee or the institutionalised union is very evident, it would be time to plan to overthrow the Committee, and propose that it be replaced by direct representation of union sections and by workplace assemblies.
- In case of a strike, to win a majority, or at least a minority presence, on the strike committee. It is necessary that the decision to strike be decided by a majority in the general assembly, and that at that same assembly a strike committee is named which would be in charge of relations between the assembly and the employer. This is the only case under the existing labour law, where the employer is obligated to talk with the representatives of the assembly.²
- The section must respect the general assemblies, but not forget that we are a union, which organises workers, and therefore we have our own positions.
- It is necessary to emphasize that a larger CNT, is the best guarantee that the decisions of the assemblies would be respected.
- The section must be conscious that a factory assembly can be manipulated. If the employer and the other unions see that they are losing their positions, they will send into the assembly all their forces: the Enterprise Committee, the union sections of the collaborationist unions, the foremen, the supervisors, etc. The CNT union section will be accused of lacking representation, of not giving alternatives, of being terrorists and so forth. This will come about, sooner or later, according to the balance of forces and the will to resist. This struggle will not be easy.

² Otherwise the employer need only talk to the Enterprise Committee, which is not bound by the decisions of the worker assembly. — Translator's note

Relations Between the Section & the Union

The section names a person who co-ordinates with the union and its committee, another who represents it in dealings with the employer, and another who handles funds. In case of problems that exceed the abilities of the section, recourse is taken to the union, which is the centre of life of the anarcho-union, and which sustains the section. In the same way, the union can request the aid of the section. The positions follow the same pattern as in the union, and it is recommended that these responsibilities be rotated throughout the entire section.

Workplaces and Sectors Without Enterprise Committees

There are places of the “submerged economy”, temporary work, etc. There are places in which employment hangs by a thread, wages are poor, working conditions are unhealthy, and the employers dismiss without a thought any who raise their voice. It is advantageous for the section to request the aid of the union so that pressure can be exercised by people upon whom repression can't fall. In these workplaces direct action often produces better results, because judicial means is almost always unhelpful, except to demonstrate a firing has been due to anti-union repression. It is necessary to make clear that to function as a union in a workplace, does not require an all or nothing approach. It includes a trial period. A dismissal for union activity is a dismissal to eliminate a radical, it is the only case in which the employer is required to reverse, (if you can prove it). The majority of the previous recommendations are also valid here, even better, because at times there exist no other unions.

Relation of Your Union with Other Local Unions of the CNT

In the case in which different unions of the CNT, (construction, metalworking, food services, public services, etc.), exist within the same city, these join together in what is called a Local Federation (F.L.) which co-ordinates itself by means of a committee. This committee has the same duties as the union committee and the same attributes. The local committee therefore is an organism of relations, administration and development of accords that have been mandated to it. In no case is it an executive group.

How is the Local Committee Chosen?

The local committee is chosen in a Local Plenary Meeting of Unions, a meeting of the different local unions (Oficios Varios [General Industries], Health, Construction...) with mandated delegations, limited to written instructions taken previously in their respective assemblies. This assembly of delegations names a general secretary and treasurer. The rest of the responsibilities: press, education, archives, legal, etc. are covered by a person from each union branch.

The Local Plenary Meeting of Unions makes decisions within local limits. For this it is necessary that the unions hold their respective assemblies and come to agreements beforehand. The Local Plenary Session is convoked by petition of a union to the local committee.

What happens if there is only one General Industrial union in a locality? The union in question can gather with other nearby localities and form a district federation, with the same attributes as a local federation.

Means of Relation and Co-ordination Between Local Federations: The Regional Confederation

When various unions of a particular geographic entity establish relations, they form a Regional Confederation of Labour. For example, the Regional Confederation of Labour of Andalucia-Canarias. The geographical limits can be modified by the will of the unions, and regions can be merged (this requires the agreement of both regions), just as they can divide themselves (if desired by 75% of the unions).

The unions of the Regional Confederation make decisions in common by means of the Regional Plenary Meeting of Unions. The delegations of the different regional unions carry the direct responses of agreements taken by writing at their own assemblies. The Regional Plenary Meeting of Unions is responsible for deciding all the questions within its respective geographical limits. To provide co-ordinative activities, the plenary meeting names a person who represents the regional confederation, who acts as general secretary of a regional committee. At the same time a locality is elected to be regional headquarters. The rest of the secretaries of the regional committee, (treasury, legal, prisoner-defence...) are elected in a plenary meeting of local unions where headquarters is located, and each union names a person to carry out the duties. It is a little complicated, but perhaps an example would clarify things:

The "Oficios Varios" [General Industrial] unions of Cadiz, Sevilla, Grenada, Cordoba, Jaen and fifty more from different localities, meet in the Regional Plenary Meeting and name Juana Perez, from the SOV of Cadiz, as regional secretary for the Regional Confederation of Labour of Andalucia-Canarias, and designate the Local Federation in Cadiz as headquarters. The Local Federation of Cadiz is composed of unions in Metal, Construction, Graphic Arts, "Oficios Varios," Public Service, Chemicals and Retirees.

These unions meet in Local Plenary Meeting and elect the rest of the secretaries proposing a person from each one of these.

Together these secretaries (General, organisation, legal, information, archives, etc.) form what is called the Permanent Secretariat, which together with the local secretaries of the region, form the Regional Committee.

The Regional Committee is an organ of co-ordination, management, and administration. It cannot make decisions or agreements. It can only work on the tasks it has been assigned. It can be recalled at any moment, by a plenary meeting of the total region, which could question the continuation of the committee. It would have a maximum duration of three consecutive years and is always followed by a newly elected one, it would have to be approved by a regional plenary meeting afterwards. The members of the committees cannot make proposals to the plenary meetings and assemblies. It must be made clear that the sovereignty of the Regional Confederations always rests with the industrial unions.

The functions of the Regional Committee are the same as in the other committees, except for the greater geographical area that it encompasses.

Relations Between Different Regional Confederations: The National Confederation

The different regional confederations that operate within the borders of power dominated by the Spanish state, form the National Confederation of Labour [CNT], The regional confederations reach agreements in the National Plenary Meeting of Regions, which delegations attend with agreements written in their respective Regional Plenary Meetings of Unions. The National Plenary Meeting of Regions has the capacity to make agreements within its geographical limits and to name a national general secretary and a local federation to be the headquarters of the National Committee.

For example’. The confederations of Gallega, Murciana, Astur-leonesa, etc., meeting in a national plenary of regions elects Belinda Fernandez of the Metalworkers of Barcelona, as general secretary of the CNT. The headquarters of the National Committee is relocated to the Local Federation of unions in Barcelona, which is composed of 32 unions, and which meets in a local plenary to elect the rest of the secretaries. These people, Belinda Fernandez and the others elected from Barcelona, form the Permanent Secretariat of the National Committee of the National Confederation of Labour. The rest of the National Committee consists of the general secretaries from each region. The functions of this committee are the same as those previously explained for other committees and are bound by the same limitations.

Why are Committees Elected this Way?

It is done this way to avoid homogeneous committees. Other organisations elect slates of candidates, factions and programs, build coalitions to win office and from there gradually promote the politics of the winning side. According to anarcho-syn-dicalism, however, committees should have neither programs nor politics. The direct election on the part of the unions guarantees the heterogeneity and diversity of the committee. Any type of representation involves some executive power, but the CNT minimizes the power in the hands of the more active and informed individuals.

How Do the Unions of the CNT Make Decisions?

By means of the CNT Congress. To the congress come the direct representatives of the unions independently of the region or local to which they belong, with written agreements from their own previous assemblies. The congress decides over the general activity of the CNT to avoid different regional confederations acting against each other. The congress can also choose a new national committee and decide on as many matters that seem relevant to the unions. From its foundation in 1910, the anarcho-union has celebrated seven congresses, the last three since the death of Franco.

The congress is convoked by the National Committee when there exists sufficient necessity, when new or contradictory situations have arisen which require a response. Then it is convoked a year ahead of time, the convocation is ratified by a National Plenary of Regions, the themes for discussion are presented and a debate commences within the unions some seven months before the opening date. The congresses of the CNT are always very tempestuous. Usually the first sessions deal with technical matters, how to vote, how the discussions will proceed, which dele-

gations will be accepted, the reading of greetings. It is also traditional that the members repeat and defend their agreements to the point of congestion, which leads to a passionate atmosphere.

Part Three: The CNT's Revolutionary Principles

Affiliation

Anyone can voluntarily belong to the anarcho-union, with the exception of police, soldiers and members of security forces. No ideological qualification is necessary to be in the CNT. This is because the CNT is anarcho-syndicalist, that is, it is an organisation in which decisions are made in assembly, from the base. It is an autonomous, federalist structure independent of political parties, of government agencies, of professional bureaucracies, etc. The anarcho-union only requires a respect for its rules, and from this point of view people of different opinions, tendencies and ideologies can live together within it. Ecologists, pacifists, members of political parties... can be part of the CNT. There will always be different opinions, priorities and points of view about concrete problems. What everyone has in common within the anarcho-union is its unique way of functioning, its anti-authoritarian structure.

Revolutionary syndicalism defends itself against the manoeuvres that would convert the union into a tool of the political parties, or a profit-making enterprise for some individuals, or a platform for leaders, or a personality cult, or a rigid ideological structure. Because of this the CNT usually repels hierarchical or authoritarian personalities. The CNT is an open structure, but its members have to know where it stands and for what.

The Principles of Anarcho-Syndicalism

The anarcho-union is based on three fundamental principles: Self-Management, Federalism and Mutual Aid.

Self-management means self-government. The anarcho-union desires that individuals, workplaces, villages, cities and all other entities, manage their own affairs, without the interference of any authority.

Federalism presupposes autonomy, and is the bond which joins in free union all groups, as much economic as social. Federalism is the basic principal that prevails within the structure of the CNT, which is nothing but a confederation of sovereign organisations, not subject to a central power.

Mutual Aid is seen as a better system of development, in contrast to the competition which exists in the capitalist system. Mutual Aid sees the world as a whole, in spite of different races, languages and cultures.

In consequence, anarcho-syndicalism is anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, antimilitarist, anti-centralist, anti-theocratic, anti-nationalist... Or if you prefer, libertarian, communists, pacifist, secular, internationalist...

Direct Action: The Tactics of Anarcho-Syndicalism

The word tactic signifies action taken on the terrain of concrete situations. Direct action presupposes action without intermediaries, the direct solution of problems by the interested parties.

Direct Action is a rejection at the same time of the activities of parliaments, magistrates, [bureaucratic] committees, governments, etc. in the affairs of the people.

Example'.

- You decide one month to go on strike requesting improvements in the terms of employment and to stop implementation of management's production plan. The same strike with the same strike call can be carried forth by means of Direct Action, made in an assembly of all the workers and their delegates elected from the different departments of the workplace; or by Mediated Action, in which the strike is called by the [official] enterprise committee, which negotiates without informing nor asking the opinion of the assembly, and with the intervention of the [government] labour authorities who can dictate a settlement.
- You have been fired. Direct Action means that your problem is taken up as the problem of the anarcho-union and by your fellow workers, who spread the word, exert pressure, job actions, sabotage, etc. in order to get your reinstatement. Mediated Action goes directly to a lawyer and awaits the action of a magistrate.

The only type of action approved by the anarcho- union, is the tactic of Direct Action, in all its congresses since 1910.

Nevertheless, and to be frank, it is necessary to consider the times and our [meagre] forces. We have to resort at times to a type of mediated action by way of our legal offices and the labour magistrates. We always prefer to solve our problems without resort to lawyers, who tend to put our sovereignty into the hands of the judicial system, prolonging processes which could be more quickly resolved without it, and spending a great deal of money to maintain an expensive, parasitical, pernicious and useless legal system.

But there are times in which for lack of a resolution, or support from the people... there remains no other remedy than to resort to a lawyer, or else do nothing. For this reason on occasion it has been proposed to accept into the accords of congresses, the use of direct action preferably, but mediated action when other remedies don't exist. It has not been done, because as long as Direct Action is held to be the only tactic acceptable to anarcho-syndicalist militants, we will maintain a commitment to it, and every time that we act contrary to Direct Action, we are aware that we are breaking an accord. If we admit a type of tactic against our structure and we swallow the indigestible, it is possible that when we have enough strength and enough people to carry out our point of view without supporting legal norms, we will not be able to see it and will routinely appeal to the tribunals.³

Direct Action is always quicker, cheaper and more effective than recourse to mediation. It has the disadvantage of requiring more energy and courage to carry

The Final Goal of Anarcho-Syndicalism

Anarcho-syndicalism wants to transform society. It wants to abolish the capitalist system and the state. It believes that no one has the right to impose their will on others in order to rob and exploit their labour, and to maintain this system supported by an apparatus of organised

³ It might make more sense to adopt a clearly defined and more consistent policy on when legal means may be used, and set some limits, than to officially denounce such tactics but pretend not to notice that the union is using them. — Translator's note

violence and terror which is the state and its police system. There exists a large quantity of literature dedicated to a critique of the capitalist system, and we are not going to dwell much on this theme.

In order to arrive at this transformation, the anarcho-union affirms that there exists no other means than the Social Revolution, an abrupt change by which the authoritarian structures are demolished. It is the end of a process and the beginning of something new. The revolution occurs when the people collectively see it as necessary, when the moral, ethical, philosophical and economic basis of the system is seen as bankrupt. It is not a predictable phenomenon, nor realized by a minority, but you prepare for it, then there comes a moment when it is possible, something breaks loose, and it happens. The role of the anarcho-union is to build upon the contradictions of the system, to make clear to the people the falsehood, the deception, the exploitation committed by a ruling minority, and to be present during the revolutionary process to incite it if possible, and to avoid on the side of the revolution the self-seeking benefit of minorities, vanguards, parties, etc., and on the other, when the counter-revolution comes, that the people lose as little as possible of what they gained. The revolution must abolish property, the state, governments, police, the army, universities, churches, banks, industries, the competitive and individualist mentality... and establish new structures and forms of life.

The revolution is thought, liberty and desire in action. People who have lived through revolutionary times describe them as a festival of lights, sounds and joy. It is not a bath of blood and violence such as they show on television. The people stop in the street and talk, this happens always and is very important. They talk about everything, they talk with people of other languages and they understand them because they want to communicate with you. They talk about things that nobody before had ever said and that now comes out naturally, without effort. They accomplish things which days before would have been inconceivable... Whoever has seen such moments on any occasion will never forget them.

The revolutionary act is an act of the people. It is realized by the existing people with all their defects. There has been a debate over the centuries whether the revolution could be brought about through normal beings, who are more or less as forceful, authoritarian, violent as is this sick society, or by people who are better formed and who carry within them the form of future behaviour and have been changed by education and other methods. In general, although there are as many opinions in the anarcho-union as there are persons, the CNT holds the opinion that the revolution will be realized by the people as they are today, and that the way to form persons in liberty and responsibility is first to have a social transformation. That is to say that it is first necessary to change the social structure and the people will change afterward. It likewise happens that the revolution purifies people, at least until the time in which the counter-revolution comes, and the longer the revolution lasts, the better they become.

In spite of this idea, the anarcho-union makes an effort to turn the union into a school of the people, transmitting through it by means of constant debate with other schools of thought, and foreshadowing the future society by creating here and now, a structure similar to that which we hope to substitute to authoritarian society, a new moral and ethical way of life.

The capitalist state has taken on the responsibility over the decades, with the valued aid of the establishment unions and political parties, of inculcating us with the idea that revolution doesn't bring anything more than disasters, and that in our developed western civilizations, democracy is the only viable invention. The CNT is certain that the social revolution is the only worthwhile, sincere and realistic future for the human species, that the revolution is not the bloodbath de-

picted in films and history books. The revolution must be treated as a process that is gestating now, that will arrive, as it always arrives, and we should be prepared to meet it without fear, and add fuel to the blaze. Whether it will be provoked by a strike, by a military coup, by a crash in the stock market, by the refusal to pay taxes, by a capitalist war, by factory occupations, by an invasion of immigrants, is something that we can't know. That which is certain is that a large CNT, merged with the people, will be the revolution's best guarantee of triumph, and that what has happened in previous attempts, in which the state has reasserted itself and the same conditions in a different guise, does not happen again.

The structure that society will take once the revolution is carried out, is that which the confederation calls, *Comunismo Libertario* [Libertarian Communism], an economic system in which each person will take from society what they need, and will give in exchange what they are able.

The CNT and the Spanish people had the opportunity of developing the most profound and beautiful revolution in human history, during the period of social war from 1936 to 1939. They put into practice the ideas that have been expressed above, and demonstrated that a free life and equality doesn't depend on anything more than free will. For capitalism, it was necessary to wage a war of extermination, in order to destroy Utopia for the moment.

Voting in the Anarcho-Union

In the CNT voting is avoided and agreements are reached by consensus. Unfortunately when there are large numbers of people involved in the discussion it is more difficult to reach agreement and there comes a time when it is necessary to take a vote.

In local union assemblies this problem is resolved with ease. Normally votes are not taken because people within the union know each other directly and from their daily contact they are accustomed to having more or less the same ideas, and if it becomes necessary to vote by the number of those agreeing, each one gets a vote.

The problem arises when decisions have to be made in local or regional plenaries or congresses. It has already been explained that the basic structure of the CNT is the industrial union branch, or where these do not exist, the union of various occupations [SOV — *Sindicato de Oficios Varios*], Well then, there is no completely fair method for making decisions through voting.

- If each union gets one vote, a union of 1,000 members would have the same voice in decisions as a union of 50. Two unions of 25 (2 votes) could impose their opinion onto a union of 1,000 (1 vote).
- If votes are by the number of members, a union of 2,000 members would have 2,000 votes, and 100 unions of 20 members would have the same voice in decisions as just one union. The geographical distribution of 100 unions is wider than that of just one, but an agreement obligates all unions equally even though a small union would have the same responsibility to enforce it as a big union, in spite of the greater difficulty for the small one.
- We find besides the problem of minorities. For example, union A decides to go on strike by 400 votes against 350, and would have to support its decision to strike, since that was the outcome of its assembly. Union B of the same local federation says no to the strike by 100 votes to 25. Union C of the local federation says yes by a unanimous 15 votes. There are thus two unions in favour of the strike and one against, so a strike would be called if based

on one vote per union. But adding the negative votes together, 450 voted against the strike, leaving 440 in favour. In order to avoid these possible inequalities in the anarcho-union, when a vote is needed a proportional system is called upon, which bases the decision on the number of people voting one way or the other according to the following table:

From 1 to 50 adherents	1 vote
From 51 to 100	2 votes
From 101 to 300	3 votes
From 301 to 600	4 votes
From 601 to 1000	5 votes
From 1001 to 1500	6 votes
From 1501 to 2500	7 votes
From 2501 and beyond	8 votes

This system benefits minorities, but its results may be disputable. For example, ten unions with 25 adherents would total 250 members having 10 votes. This would be more votes than a union of 2,500, which with 10 times more members would only have the right to 7 votes. As you can see it is a mess.⁴

The reason the CNT does not look for another system is because in the present day it is not necessary. The agreements consented to after discussions can seem absurd to those who started with something else in mind in the anarcho-union, but they are extremely important for the union or region that defends their position. What one thinks about the outcome of all forms depends on your frame of reference.

Whenever there is voting, one has to recognize that what is being discussed is a problem of power, and in the anarcho-union therefore one must try to vote as little as possible, and reach agreement by consensus. All our votes are open, and with raised hands. They are never secret.

Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism

The CNT is not an anarchist organisation. This is something that must be made clear. The CNT is an anarcho-syndicalist union. Although there are many similarities between both things, there are also differences.

Anarchism is by definition illegal, a negation of the state, which cannot give it permission to live. Anarcho-syndicalism moves within legality: it legalizes its union sections and federations in order to function more easily. Anarcho-syndicalism operates inside of major contradictions.

The base of anarchism is the affinity group, a group of close friends, without regard to jobs, or geographic location. The base of anarcho-syndicalism is the [local] union of various occupations or the industrial union branch.

Anarchist action is theoretically more revolutionary than that of the anarcho-syndicalist. Anarcho-syndicalism struggles for immediate demands, a reformist activity, even if it is outside [capitalist] institutions and based upon its own forces.

⁴ Although perhaps no more so than in a representative body like the U.S. Congress in which tiny states like Rhode Island have proportionally more representation per citizen than populous states like California. — translator's note

Anarcho-syndicalism permits the coexistence within it of people of various ideologies: Marxists, Christians, Anarchists... it only requires that they be workers. Anarchist organisations are necessarily formed only of anarchists.

Anarchism functions more on the ideological level, in education, propaganda, information, cultural activity, as well as within anarcho-syndicalist unions... The union acts above all within the places of work.

Anarchism is more than an idea. Anarcho-syndicalism is more than a structure. Anarchists are supposed to be better persons than the social average, with better ethics and less egocentrism. Anarcho-syndicalism expects nothing more from its members than that they are workers and respect its structure.

Anarchism does not direct anarcho-syndicalism. For the latter it is more than enough to push forward its own projects. Besides, in Spain it has been anarcho-syndicalism that, on more than one occasion, has carried along, directed and employed for different purposes the anarchist organisations that supported it.

There exist good relations, fraternal, between the CNT and the different libertarian organisations on a national scale, which are in Spain, the FAI [Iberian Anarchist Federation], the FIJL [Iberian Anarchist Youth Federation], and Mujeres Libres [Anarchist Women's organisation], as well as with clubs, groups and individual anarchists. The vast majority of anarchists work within the CNT, and their organisations generally help the anarcho-union without conditions.

Translator's Comments

The three parts of this pamphlet were excerpted from a longer pamphlet. I dropped the historical quotations which accompanied the original to concentrate on the contemporary material as well as to save space and translation time. I also did not include the material concerning CNT positions on various bargaining topics like salaries, hours, redundancies, etc., as well as social issues like militarism, ecology, gay rights, etc. This material would have added little to the text since CNT positions on these issues do not differ from standard left-wing socialist and labour positions. What is unique about the CNT, and separates it from other Spanish unions, is its anarcho-syndicalist structure and practice.

What is important about this look into the CNT is it shows the similarity between the CNT and the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). Although the IWW is not officially an anarcho-syndicalist union, it functions in much the same way. Like the CNT, the IWW emphasizes building worker-run industrial union branches at the point of production. In geographical areas where this is not immediately possible, the IWW allows its members to organise into General Membership Branches, similar to the SOVs (Sindicatos de Oficios Varios) of the CNT. Like the CNT, the IWW maintains that direct action is the most effective form of worker resistance to employers, but also like the CNT the IWW is ready to use whatever legal recourse it can to protect its members when direct action is not possible.

There are differences between the CNT and the IWW, of course. Unlike the CNT, the IWW is not federalist. The branches and industrial unions of the IWW are self-governing, but the IWW has a mass elected General Executive Board with policymaking powers, although the Executive Board's actions can be over-ridden by member referendum. The IWW also gives its members an appeal process whereby union disciplinary actions or constitutional violations by local unions

can be overturned by higher bodies. These elected central bodies and powers give individual members in the IWW more protection from arbitrary actions by local unions than in the CNT, but it is at the expense of diminishing local authority. Neither the CNT's federalism nor the IWW's elected representation is a perfect system, and both depend on their membership's vigilance and common sense to see that their system is not abused.

The CNT may have some lessons for the IWW. In the coming months, the financial crisis within the IWW may force it to re-evaluate the way it is structured. Maintaining a central office with a paid General Secretary Treasurer and paid office helper may no longer be affordable. If the IWW can't straighten out its finances, a shutdown of its central office or a shift to an all-volunteer staff might be necessary. If this happens how will the IWW function as a centralized organization? Can its General Executive Board direct a non-existent or part-time General Headquarters? Perhaps adopting a more federalist structure with a General Secretariat composed of volunteers from the same or nearby General Membership Branches could be a solution. What this would mean for IWW members living in areas where there are not enough Wobblies to form a branch, is unclear. Would these individuals be forgotten by a decentralized IWW? Would a Secretariat based upon a single branch or region, serve the whole union's interest or just a local one? If the CNT is to be used as a model, we need to look at both its faults as well as its benefits.

In a forth coming issue, I would like to see a study of the SAC, the Swedish syndicalist union. The SAC may have its own answers to how to maintain a labour organisation with workers' control. Stay tuned.

— *Jeff Stein*

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Published by Zabalaza Books. These texts first appeared in English in the *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*. They are excerpts from a pamphlet published in 1998 by the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union, the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT), *Anarcosindicalismo: Basico*. The pamphlet is a training manual for new union members, to help them understand the CNT and how it functions. Translated by Jeff Stein.

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