

Reclaiming Syndicalism

From Spain to South Africa to Global Labour Today

Lucien van der Walt

May 2014

Contents

Unions today: Organisation without social transformation?	5
After statism: The loss of union vision	5
The limitations of social movement and political unionism	6
Reclaiming syndicalism: Prefiguration, democracy, anti-capitalism	7
Political, autonomous, anti-statist	9
A viable alternative?	9
Transformation from below: Syndicalism as revolution	10
Counter-power, counter-culture: The CNT in Spain	10
The Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939: Resist, occupy, produce	11
Some conclusions	12
References	13
Biographical note	15

ABSTRACT: Events like the 2012 Marikana police massacre of miners in South Africa bring into sharp relief core features of today's crisis-ridden, inequitable world order, wherein labour and human rights abuses multiply in a vicious race-to-the-bottom. Union politics remain central to developing responses to this system. But unions, like other popular movements, face the core challenge of articulating an alternative, transformative vision — especially given the crisis of social democratic, Marxist-Leninist and nationalist approaches.

This paper engages debates on options for the broad working class — and, showing the limitations of business unionism, social movement unionism, and political unionism — suggests much can be learned from anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalism, both historic and current. This is a tradition with a surprisingly substantial, impressive history, including in the former colonial world; a tradition envisaging anti-bureaucratic, bottom-up trade unions as key means of educating and mobilising workers, and of championing the economic, social and political struggles of the broader working class, independent of parliamentary politics, party tutelage and the state; and aiming, ultimately, at transforming society through union-led workplace occupations that institute self-management and participatory economic planning, abolishing markets, hierarchies and states — a programme substantially and successfully implemented in the remarkable Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939, also discussed in the paper.

The paper closes by suggesting the need for labour studies and industrial sociology to pay greater attention to labour traditions besides business unionism, social movement unionism, and political unionism.

Union politics remain central to the new century. It remains central because of the ongoing importance of unions as mass movements, internationally, and because unions, like other popular movements, are confronted with the very real challenge of articulating an alternative, transformative vision. There is much to be learned from the historic and current tradition of anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalism. This is a tradition with a surprisingly substantial and impressive history, including in the former colonial world; a tradition that envisages anti-bureaucratic and bottom-up trade unions as key means of educating and mobilising workers, and of championing the economic, social and political struggles of the broad working class, independent of parliamentary politics and party tutelage; and that aims, ultimately, at transforming society through union-led workplace occupations that will institute self-management and participatory economic planning, abolishing markets, hierarchies and states.

This contribution seeks, firstly, to contribute to the recovery of the historical memory of the working class by drawing attention to its multiple traditions and rich history; secondly, to make a contribution to current debates on the struggles, direction and options for the working class movement (including unions) in a period of flux in which the fixed patterns of the last forty years are slowly melting away; thirdly, it argues that many current union approaches — among them, business unionism, social movement unionism, and political unionism — have substantial failings and limitations; and finally, it points to the need for labour studies and industrial sociology to pay greater attention to labour traditions besides business unionism, social movement unionism, and political unionism.

To do this, this paper considers what progressive trade unions can learn from an engagement with the anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalist tradition — especially given the current crisis of social democratic, Marxist-Leninist and nationalist approaches. Worldwide, unions are grappling with the challenges posed by today's crisis-ridden, inequitable world, in which labour and human

rights abuses multiply in a vicious race-to-the-bottom. On the other hand, however, unions are haunted by the failure of the Keynesian welfare state, by the collapse of nationalist models like import-substitution-industrialisation, and by the implosion of the Soviet model.

This situation was recently brought into sharp relief in post-apartheid South Africa, where much hope had been placed in the ruling African National Congress (ANC), to which the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and the South African Communist Party (SACP), are formally allied. Strikes in a mining sector based on cheap labour were marked by union schisms and, in August 2012, by the police massacre of 34 workers at Marikana.

Events such as these, and ongoing frustration with ANC policies, were the backdrop for momentous decisions by COSATU's biggest affiliate, the 335,000-strong, radical National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). In December 2013, it rebelled against COSATU resolutions by breaking with both parties, its general-secretary Irvin Jim stating 'It is clear that the working class cannot any longer see the ANC or the SACP as its class allies in any meaningful sense' (Letsoalo and Mataboge, 2013). NUMSA, with roots in the independent 1980s trade union left (the 'workerists'), and, more recently, a formal commitment to Marxism-Leninism, has supported the ANC programme since 1987.

In charting a way forward for 2014, however, NUMSA has stopped short of simple answers, choosing instead an open-ended process of building a 'movement for socialism' and a 'united front' of popular movements. NUMSA has started to pay more attention to its 'workerist' past, while leaving its future options open. This openness signals, at least in part, a cautious and potentially innovative approach: post-apartheid South Africa is littered with failed attempts to form left alternatives. Significantly, however, the union has rejected ties with the new Economic Freedom Fighters party: its 'centralised, commandist' structure and corrupt leaders were deemed incompatible with NUMSA's traditions of bottom-up decision-making and anti-capitalism ('Economic Freedom Fighters,' in NUMSA, 2013).

But what does a 'movement' for radical change mean in the 21st century? If the state, including the nominally leftwing ANC state, has proved so dangerous and unreliable an ally for organised labour, is it possible to recover union traditions that are radical, even anti-capitalist, yet autonomous of state power? Answering such a question requires, I would suggest, critically examining a broad range of experiences, and I would further suggest that an engagement with syndicalism would be especially fruitful.

The syndicalist tradition has recently been the subject of several important works and a rapidly growing scholarship (notably Damier, 2009; Darlington, 2008; Ness, 2014), which has also made some important organizing breakthroughs. It influences, for example, sectors of the Solidarity-Unity-Democracy unions in France (SUD, *Solidaires Unitaires Démocratiques*) and parts of the Italian COBAS (*Comitati di Base*, 'committees of the base'). In Spain, meanwhile, the anarchosyndicalist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) represented in 2004 around two million workers through the workplace elections (Alternative Libertariae, 2004), making it that country's third largest federation.

Today's CGT is one of the several important heirs of the classical Spanish anarchist movement which, centred on the National Confederation of Labour, or CNT, launched in the 1930s one of the most ambitious attempts to reshape society ever undertaken. This experience, which built upon decades of building a counter-hegemonic consciousness and movement, and years of careful reflection, planning and militant struggle, saw thousands of workplaces and millions of acres of land placed under worker and peasant self-management, the radical democratisation of the

economy and a transformation of daily life, including gender relations. As a concrete example of this syndicalist praxis and its relevance to current union renewal, this paper will pay close attention to the Spanish Revolution of 1936–1939.

Unions today: Organisation without social transformation?

A core reason for reclaiming the syndicalist tradition is that it helps address the great challenge of today, for unions as for other popular movements. The great challenge is not developing better organising strategies. It is the great challenge of developing a vision of social change that fundamentally shifts wealth and power to the popular classes, and a commensurate strategy to achieve this vision above all. It is at the level of vision that organized labour currently flounders.

In terms of numbers and organising, unions viewed globally are actually doing fairly well – this despite major challenges and some real defeats. Union density remains substantial in many Western countries, especially in the state sector (Connolly, 2008: 18). Unions have also shown resilience, even growth, of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Pillay and van der Walt, 2012), where they are often ‘one of the very few societal organisations’ with a ‘sizeable constituency, country-wide structures and the potential for mobilizing members on social or political matters’ (Schillinger, 2005: 1). Many unions can mobilise substantially more people than their formal membership (for example, *The Economist*, 2006). The new International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and the creative use by unions of International Framework Agreements (IFAs) show innovative approaches to organising neglected sectors. Militant, left-wing trade unionism continues to exist, including formations influenced by anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism, and by other traditions including classical Marxism.

After statism: The loss of union vision

The very successes of unions in winning gains in wages and working conditions, and in areas of civil and political rights and social justice, inevitably pose a larger question: how to move from defensive and partial struggles to a larger, transformative project that can fundamentally change the balance of power and wealth in society? Without such a change, every gain by working and poor people is under continual threat, for the simple reason that they are a subordinate, disempowered class in a social order geared against them – a system that does not operate in their interests, and that only makes concessions when forced to do so.

But what, exactly, does a progressive project mean, after the failures of the big projects of social democracy, Marxism-Leninism, and import-substitution-industrialisation? For example, given its numbers, its power and its deep popular roots, NUMSA’s commitment to a ‘movement for socialism’ has enormous potential, unmatched by previous left projects in South Africa, yet faces the same challenge as its predecessors – and indeed, of unions elsewhere.

Generally organised labour has struggled to develop a clear alternative to the current order – a problem that unions share with many other popular class sectors. The Arab Spring is the latest example of a series of struggles against the impact of neo-liberalism, and against authoritarian governments, that has been defined and limited by largely negative aims: anti-globalisation, anti-privatisation, anti-oligarchy, anti-dictatorship. But without a positive programme, space created by successful struggles is quickly captured by neo-liberal parties (witness one-time trade

unionist Frederick Chiluba's Zambia in the 1990s), business oligarchies with empty slogans ('Yes, We Can': Barack Obama's Democrats, with their war and austerity), and religious and nationalist fundamentalists (Egypt's resurgent Muslim Brotherhood, and its tussle with the military is a case in point).

Union responses to the larger challenge of vision have often fallen into three broad categories, none of which has proved satisfactory historically— and certainly, none is satisfactory today. Firstly, there is economism, or business unionism, which seeks to avoid larger issues altogether by focusing on immediate bread-and-butter issues of wages and workplace conditions. The problem is that the wages, conditions and employment itself are deeply shaped by the larger social order, and working and poor people face challenges at work, and outside work, that go far beyond wages and conditions. Business unionism certainly cannot address these issues.

The limitations of social movement and political unionism

A second approach, dubbed 'social movement unionism', has sought to forge alliances and campaign beyond the workplace, stressed democratic unionism, and played a role in fighting against repressive governments and employers. The problem is that social movement unionism stops short of a clear programme for systemic change, beyond demands for democratic reforms. The content of those reforms, and of that democracy, is left opaque; its politics tends to the problem of being defined by what it opposes, rather than what it proposes.

In most cases, unions in the social movement union tradition have moved fairly quickly into the third approach, political unionism. This involves unions allying with a political party aiming at state power, in the belief that this will provide working class access to, and benefits from, state power and policy-making. Variants of political unionism include social democracy, in which unions ally with mass parties seeking to capture parliament; Marxism-Leninism, in which unions are led by vanguard parties aiming at the creation of revolutionary dictatorships; and nationalism, in which unions join a national bloc aiming at wielding a national state.

A core problem has been that such alliances, rather than strengthen unions, have often subordinated unions to states and ruling parties, enmeshing them in networks of patronage, institutions of class collaboration and political alliances that have limited their autonomy, vision and, often, their internal democracy, meanwhile, workers and unions are divided into rival blocs of party loyalists.

One version of this problem is a continual exodus of unionists into prestigious state employment, which has few effects on state policy, yet damages union capacity and promotes careerism amongst unionists. The 2014 South African elections saw 12 senior COSATU figures rewarded with senior state appointments (Musgrave, 2014; for more on this process and its effects: Buhlungu, 2010). In more extreme cases, unions have been transformed into 'transmission belts' between the 'vanguard' and 'the mass', relaying demands for more output while disciplining recalcitrant workers (e.g. Lenin, [1920] 1965: 21, 31–32).

The other core problem is that the project of political unionism, with its statist project, is faced with the general crisis and failure of the left's statist projects. Keynesian and related social democratic strategies still exercise a certain fascination, but their viability is questionable. Besides the problem that such strategies have had little success outside of the advanced industrial countries, it is difficult to deny that the regulatory institutions, relatively closed economies, eco-

conomic booms and insurgent working class movements that forced the emergence of the classic Keynesian welfare state no longer exist.

Even at its (rather impressive) best, the Keynesian welfare state's real gains for working people were marred by substantial inequalities in wealth and power and massive union and societal bureaucratisation: initial opposition to the model came not from the right but the left, with demands around self-management, gender equity and environmental issues (Wilks, 1996: 97). Its existence was to a large extent contingent on its compatibility with the goals of capitalists and state managers: as those goals changed, in the face of factors like capitalist crisis and globalisation, the system was phased out (for variations on this theme: Pontussen, 1992; Swenson, 1991; Wilks, 1996).

Although classic Marxist regimes retain some attraction, including in unions like NUMSA, their record raises serious questions. It is marked indelibly by massive repression (not least, of labour and unions), economic inefficiency and crisis, and inglorious collapse (precipitated in substantial part by deep working class discontent). Even their achievements in social welfare must be viewed with some scepticism.¹

This has drastically undermined the old confidence that these represented a compelling, superior 'new civilization' (e.g. Webb and Webb, 1937). A growing literature, in fact, demonstrates that these Marxist regimes were always deeply shaped by global capitalist dynamics (e.g. Sanchez-Sibony, 2014) and confirm, in many respects, the old anarchist and syndicalist argument that they represented a form of 'state-capitalism' (e.g. Sergven, [1918] 1973: 122–125).

Writers who wish to insist that such experiences were not the 'real' Marxist project, or misrepresented Marx, have to deal with the unpleasant reality that this was the dominant Marxist project, including for the great majority of Marxists, and provides the only historic cases of revolutionary Marxist rule.

Meanwhile, nationalist import-substitution-industrialisation has faded as a policy option (Waterbury, 1999). Its legacies are uneven, and sometimes positive, but the project itself is no longer viable. Even at its most successful, however, the model was typified by authoritarian regimes and by substantial labour repression and union cooptation (e.g. Freund, 1988: chapter 5): cheap labour was, after all, one of the major subsidies to 'national' capital provided by state intervention in capital-poor countries.

Reclaiming syndicalism: Prefiguration, democracy, anti-capitalism

This brings us to the fourth approach, syndicalism. There is, admittedly, much confusion regarding what syndicalism encompasses. This is, for example, true in the South African context where syndicalism is often misleadingly used as a term for militant but apolitical unionism. This follows the tendency of Lenin, Poulantzas and others to dub syndicalism a form of 'left economism' (Holton, 1980: 5–7, 12–13, 18–19), a proposition that is itself rooted in the notion that unions are, by their nature, reformist and narrow unless subordinated to a political party (e.g. Toussaint, 1983).

¹ The much-lauded Cuban healthcare system is in fact deeply segmented: official statistics and observations of its tourist and elite sectors obscure the serious inequities and shortages experienced by most Cubans (e.g. Hirschfeld, 2001). Repression of dissident doctors is also well documented (e.g. Reiner, 1998).

Such labelling errs in two main ways: on the one hand, the record of a union like NUMSA, which is playing a decisive role in rebuilding the left project, without party tutelage and, indeed, in defiance of the SACP, completely confounds notions that unions are inherently reformist, left to their own devices; on the other hand, they manifestly fail to grapple with the ideology and history of actual syndicalism.

Syndicalism promotes a vision of a society free of social and economic inequalities, with a participatory democratic economy and society that extends into the direct control of the workplace and a bottom-up planned economy; in this society, hierarchy and elite control over economic and other resources is removed.

In speaking of the working class, too, it had an expansive approach, including all wage earners, skilled as well as unskilled, urban as well as rural, and their families and defenders: this was not a narrow project for men in hard-hats alone. For example, today's syndicalist unions like the CGT include many white collar workers, technicians and professionals; the 1930s CNT included not just industrial workers, but 'peasants and field-workers' and the 'brain-workers and the intellectuals' (Rocker, [1938] 1989: 98–99).

Also of especial interest is the prefigurative approach of the movement, that is, the strategy of developing, in its daily life, the basic moral, political and organisational infrastructure and daily practices of the new society. Rather than embrace an instrumentalist approach, in which ends justify means, syndicalism, like the anarchist movement in which it is rooted, stresses that means shape ends and, therefore, that today's politics must foreshadow tomorrow's future.

Consciousness, developed through struggle, education and participation – a revolutionary counter-culture – wedded to a flat, decentralized, inclusive, pluralist and pragmatic, yet militant and autonomous style of union organisation – a counter-power, opposed to the institutions of the ruling class – are to be forged in daily struggles, until ready and prepared for the final assault.

But in the final assault there would be both rupture – the removal of the old regime – and continuity – in that the unions, and their allies, already carried within themselves the basic framework of the new society, including the means of occupying workplaces and placing them under self-management. Syndicalist unions thus combine 'the defence of the interests of the producers within existing society', including in political struggles, with 'preparing the workers for the direct management of production and economic life in general' (Rocker, [1938] 1989: 86). Or, in the words of the old South African revolutionary syndicalist paper, *The International*, it involves (1917):

.... One Big Union of all wage workers... aggressively forging ahead gaining strength from each victory and learning by every temporary set-back – until the working class is able to take possession and control of the machinery, premises and materials of production right from the capitalists' hands, and use that control to distribute the product entirely amongst the workers ... It takes every colour, creed and nation. Revolutionary Industrial Unionism is 'organised efficiency'. Every worker in every industry; every industry part and parcel of one great whole.

Political, autonomous, anti-statist

With this ethos, syndicalism envisages a militant class-struggle unionism that empowers members while minimising internal hierarchy, and actively opposing domination and oppression by nation, race and sex – within the larger society, but within the union too. Historically, it promoted political education and struggle around larger social and political issues, and forged alliances with a range of other popular movements, including neighborhood, youth and political groups, while steering sharply clear of alliances with all political parties aiming at state power.

To use the state, with its hierarchical character and deep alliance with capitalists and landlords, contradicts the basic syndicalist project of constituting, from the bottom-up, a militant and autonomous working class movement able to replace hierarchy and exploitation (including by the state). Moreover, the state is no ally of the working class, providing a place of power and wealth for a political elite that is allied, structurally, to the corporations, themselves a place of power and wealth for an economic elite. Reliance on electoral parties is viewed as futile, serving mainly to deliver the unions up as voting cattle, while promoting passive reliance on officials, bureaucrats and the (hostile) capitalist state (Spitzer, 1963: 379–388). Allying with vanguard parties to create revolutionary dictatorships is also incompatible with a bottom-up movement for self-management; such regimes can only repress, never emancipate, the popular classes.

Syndicalist anti-statism does not, it must be stressed, mean disinterest in political issues, for syndicalism fights for ‘political rights and liberties’ just as much as it does for better wages (Rocker, [1938] 1989: 88–89, 111). However, it does not do so through parliaments and the state, but outside and against both, with the trade union, ‘toughened by daily combat and permeated by Socialist spirit’ and bringing to bear the power of workers at the point of production, the ‘lance head’ of these and other broader working class battles (Ibid.).

A viable alternative?

To what extent was syndicalism ever an important tradition, worthy of serious consideration? And to what extent can its project be seen as one that is more than merely rhetorical i.e. to what extent did it achieve both its immediate and ultimate objectives?

A complete answer to the first question exceeds the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that the view that anarchism and syndicalism were ‘never more than a minority attraction’ (e.g. Kedward, 1971: 120) has been widely challenged by a ‘small avalanche’ of scholarship (Anderson, 2010: xiii) demonstrating the existence of mass anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalist unions in the Caribbean, Latin America and parts of Europe, in countries as diverse as Argentina, Bolivia, France, Cuba, Peru, Portugal, The Netherlands as well as of powerful syndicalist movements elsewhere, including Britain, Czechia, Hungary, Italy, Japan and Russia, and the lasting imprint of both on popular and union culture. In colonial and postcolonial countries, including Bolivia, Egypt and South Africa, these formations played an important part in struggles against imperialism and national oppression; they pioneered unions in countries as diverse as China, Egypt, Malaysia, and Mexico. Syndicalist unions were also involved in major uprisings and rebellions, including in Mexico (1916), Italy (1913, 1920), Portugal (1918), Brazil (1918), Argentina (1919, 1922), and Spain (1909, 1917, 1932/3).

Nor did the story of these movements end in 1914 (or 1917): many syndicalist movements and currents peaked in the 1920s and 1930s, as in Peru and Poland, and a number survived – sometimes undergoing big bursts of growth, as in postwar France (Damier, 2009: 193) and Chile– in the years that followed. For instance, syndicalism remained an influence in Argentinean, Brazilian, Bolivian, Chilean and Cuban unions into the 1960s, and among Uruguayan workers and students in the 1970s (Mechoso, 2002), with a massive revival in Spain in the 1970s and early 1980s; other notable cases include the guerrilla war of the anarchist Chu Cha-pei in Yunan, China, against the Maoist regime in the 1950s (H. L. Wei interview in Avrich, 1995: 214 et seq.). The 1960s revolts and the New Left, the post-Berlin Wall era, and in contemporary and Occupy movements (for anarchists in Occupy Wall Street: Bray, 2013) and radical unions (Ness, 2014) have all provided vectors for new anarchist and syndicalist influence and growth.

Transformation from below: Syndicalism as revolution

Regarding the second question, the extent to which syndicalism achieved its immediate and ultimate objectives, a growing literature generally indicates that syndicalist formations generally had and have an impressive record of promoting oppositional working class movements, of organising durable movements with pragmatic yet principled programmes and democratic practices, of winning real economic, political and social gains, and in providing space for the elaboration of radical alternatives and human dignity. ‘Embedded in larger popular movements and countercultures, linked to other organised popular constituencies, taking up issues that went well beyond the workplace, playing a central role in community struggles, and at the heart of a project of revolutionary counterculture, including the production of mass circulation daily and weekly newspapers, the historical syndicalist unions were social movements that never reduced the working class to wage earners, or the aspirations of the working class to wages’ (van der Walt and Schmidt, 2009: 21).

Counter-power, counter-culture: The CNT in Spain

What, then, of the ability to move from prefiguration to figuration, from counter-power to taking power, from revolutionary preparation to revolution? There are a number of important cases of the concrete and positive anarchist and/or syndicalist programme being implemented in various degrees, including in Macedonia, Mexico, the Ukraine, and Manchuria. But the case in which syndicalist unions played the most central role remains that of the Spanish Revolution of 1936/1939.

The most important union federation in Spain was the 2-million strong CNT, in a population of around 24 million: if we keep the proportions, and translate them onto today’s larger South African population, the CNT would have been 4-million strong i.e. twice as large as COSATU. The CNT organised in a wide variety of sectors, with a major presence in the industrial region of Catalonia, but it also had a rural presence and important strongholds elsewhere in the country (for material on the CNT and the Revolution, see inter alia Ackelsberg, 1985; Ackelsberg, 1993; Amsden, 1978; Bosch, 2001; an overview can be found in Hattingh, 2011; contemporary accounts and oral histories can be found in Dolgoff 1974; Fraser, 1979).

The CNT was strong but bottom-up, well-organised but decentralised, and very, very militant. Its union structure was relatively flat, with a minuscule full-time staff, with decisions centred

on the local membership, which met regularly in general assembly and appointed mandated delegates, roughly equivalent to shopstewards. In terms of struggles, emphasis was placed on direct action, rather than the use of industrial courts and arbitration, or parliamentary politics, as a means of promoting self-confidence, self-reliance and self-activity.

CNT activities were ambitious and wide-ranging. It had a history of partial and general strikes, and had actively joined rent strikes and other protests; it had cells working within the armed forces; and it had an enormous presence in many working class neighbourhoods, running centres that provided meeting spaces, classes and a range of cultural activities; it was closely linked to anarchist youth, women's and propaganda groups. In addition the CNT published and distributed vast numbers of books and pamphlets: by 1938, it ran more than 40 newspapers and magazines, including many mass circulation dailies (Rocker, [1938] 1989: 146), and had a radio service.

In short, the CNT had an enormous impact on working class and peasant consciousness, stressing revolution as direct working class and peasant control of society, including self-management of workplaces through CNT structures. The most radical CNT militants organised in the semi-clandestine Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI): not a parliamentary party or a Leninist vanguard, the 30,000-strong FAI was an anarchist political organisation that aimed to promote the CNT project and the revolutionary struggle. It is, finally, worth noting that the CNT and FAI vastly overshadowed the Spanish Communist Party, which struggled to move to get above 10,000 members.

The Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939: Resist, occupy, produce

In July 1936, there was an attempted military coup, backed by the most conservative sectors of the ruling class. Armed CNT militants stopped the coup in most of Spain; sections of the armed forces came over to the CNT, as did members of the moderate unions. A large CNT militia, numbering around 120,000, defended much of the country.

In the cities, CNT structures quickly took over large parts of industry. In Catalonia province, workers within hours seized control of 3,000 enterprises, including all public transportation, shipping, electric and power companies, gas and water works, engineering and automobile assembly plants, mines, cement works, textile mills and paper factories, electrical and chemical concerns, glass bottle factories and perfumeries, food processing plants and breweries. Most of these were placed under direct workers self-management through assemblies and committees. Where employers remained at the company, they were either made to report to workers' control commissions, or to join the commission – in which case they were paid the same wage as everyone else, and decisions were made democratically. The workers' control structures emerged directly out of CNT structures: crudely, CNT assemblies now ran the factories, and the 'shopstewards' committees acted as the control committees. Then factories were linked up, first by industry and then by region: so, for example, the CNT metal union provided the means of coordinating the metal industry, and through the CNT, coordinated this with other industries.

The CNT also had an important impact, in this period, on the rank-and-file of the rival social democratic union, the General Union of Labour (UGT), who were also drawn into collectivisation en masse, especially in the countryside; in a number of cases, joint CNT-UGT collectives were established. In the countryside, perhaps two thirds of farmland came under various forms

of bottom-up collectivisation: by some estimates, a further five to seven million people were involved here, besides the two million in the urban collectives.

This was not a system of nationalisation, in which the state took over, nor yet of privatisation, but of collectivisation, the roots of which lay deep in decades of preparation. The revolutionary period saw substantial changes in many areas of daily life. Income, in the collectives, was delinked from ownership, and to a large extent, from occupation: in urban areas, especially, people were 'paid' on the basis of family needs; in many rural areas, money was completely abolished. Divorce was made available, and CNT halls were sometimes used for revolutionary weddings. The CNT's allies, *Mujeres Libres* (or 'free women') meanwhile ran further education and mobilisation campaigns among women.

There was a general effort to restructure work, to make it more pleasant, more healthy and less stressful: as an example, small and unhealthy plants were replaced by large, airy ones, which were cheaper as well as healthier. The unemployed were given work, with unemployment dramatically reduced while output increased and hours decreased. The collectives were not, it should be added, 'owned' by the workers – they were run by them; they could not be sold or rented out. It was the larger network of collectives, born of the CNT, that had possession; it was through congresses and conferences that changes could be made.

The larger project of the revolution stalled, however, for a range of reasons. One myth, that should be disposed of at once, was that the CNT and FAI lacked a concrete plan to remake society, or to defend, with coordinated military force, the revolutionary society. The CNT had organised a series of armed uprisings in the early 1930s, and developed a clandestine military structure coordinated through local, regional and finally, national, defence committees; its May 1936 congress reaffirmed the need for coordinated military action, based on the unions, in the event of revolution (for the CNT's 1936 programme: CNT [May 1, 1936] n.d.; for a fuller critique of the claim that the CNT lacked a concrete programme or military perspectives, see van der Walt, 2011: 195–197). The CNT militias formed in 1936 emerged directly out of the earlier clandestine CNT military (Guillamón, 2014), just as the CNT collectives emerged directly from the CNT union branches.

First and foremost, the revolution stalled following a tactical decision in late 1936 to form a broad anti-fascist bloc against the (by no means defeated) army plotters. Significant moves towards planning the economy from the bottom-up did not develop far beyond the provincial level; the collectivisation of the financial sector was aborted; the CNT's Popular Front allies sabotaged its collectives, slowly destroying the Revolution and demobilising the revolutionary spirit that had halted the coup of 1936; in the end, the Popular Front, now abandoned by the CNT syndicalism or anarchism, was itself crushed by the plotters of 1936, who instituted four decades of dictatorial repression.

Some conclusions

The point of the above exposition is not to present the CNT as perfect, but to underline, rather, a core part of the constructive history of syndicalism: it showed that industry and agriculture could be run effectively without the profit motive, and without bureaucratic hierarchies, and that a working class, inspired by a great ideal, can remake the world.

To prove the CNT was flawed is possible; to draw critical lessons on its history is necessary; however, to dismiss the possible contribution of this and other syndicalist experiences to current labour challenges is, however, mistaken. Syndicalism has historically played a very important role in the history of the working class movement, not just in Spain, but elsewhere; it is a tradition that bears close scrutiny, for to 'recall anarchism', and anarcho-syndicalism, 'which Leninist Marxism suppressed', is, as Arif Dirlik argued, in his study of the Chinese movement, to rethink the very meaning and possibilities of the left tradition, and 'recall the democratic ideals for which anarchism ... served as a repository' (1991: 3–4, also pp. 7–8).

This anarchist and syndicalist repository is one that bears investigation, not as a simple cure-all for all difficulties, but as a basis for reflection and renewal in labour movements and in scholarship. As part of confronting the challenges facing today's unions, there is everything to be gained from broadening our understanding of the history and traditions of the labour movement. For scholars of labour studies and of industrial sociology, too, there is a need to pay greater attention to traditions like anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalism, both in theorising labour, and in understanding its pasts, presents, and possible futures.

References

- Ackelsberg, M.A. (1985) 'Revolution and community: Mobilisation, de-politicisation and perceptions of change in Civil War Spain', in Bourque, S. and Divine, D. (eds.) *Women Living Change*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ackelsberg, M.A. (1993) 'Models of revolution: Rural women and anarchist collectivisation in Spain', *Journal of Peasant Studies*. 20 (3): 367–388.
- Alternative Libertaire (November 2004) 'Spain: CGT is now the third biggest union', *Alternative Libertaire*.
- Amsden, J. (1978) 'Industrial collectivisation under workers control: Catalonia, 1936–1939', *Antipode: A radical journal of geography*. 10 (3): 99–113.
- Anderson, B. (2010) 'Preface', in Hirsch, S.J. and van der Walt, L. (eds.), *Anarchism and syndicalism in the colonial and postcolonial world, 1870–1940: The praxis of national liberation, internationalism and social revolution*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.
- Avrich, P. (1995) *Anarchist voices: An oral history of anarchism in America*. Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.
- Bosch, A. (2001) 'Collectivisations: the Spanish Revolution revisited, 1936–39', *International Journal of Iberian Studies*. 14 (1): 4–16.
- Bray, M. (2013) *Translating anarchy: The anarchism of Occupy Wall Street*. Winchester, UK/ WashingtonDC: Zero Press.
- Buhlungu, S. (2010) *A paradox of victory: COSATU and the democratic transformation in South Africa*. Pietermaritzburg: University Of KwaZulu-Natal Press.
- CNT (May 1, 1936) (n.d.) *Resolution on libertarian communism as adopted by the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo, Zaragoza, May 1*. Johannesburg: Zabalaza Books.
- Connolly, H.M. (2008) 'Exploring union renewal in France: An ethnographic study of union activists in SUD-Rail'. PhD thesis, University of Warwick.
- Damier, V. (2009) *Anarcho-syndicalism in the twentieth century*. Edmonton: Black Cat Press.

- Darlington, R. (2008) *Syndicalism and the transition to communism: An international comparative analysis*. Aldershot, Hampshire and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Dirlik, A. (1991) *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Dolgoff, S. (ed.) (1974) *The anarchist collectives: Workers' self-management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936–1939*. Montréal: Black Rose.
- Fraser, R. (ed.) (1979) *Blood of Spain: An oral history of the Spanish Civil War*. New York: Pantheon.
- Freund, B. (1988) *The African worker*. Cambridge, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
- George, Z. (22 December 2013) 'Numsa breaks official link with ANC alliance', *Daily Dispatch*.
- Guillamón, A. (2014) *Ready for revolution: The CNT Defense Committees in Barcelona, 1933–1938*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Hattingh, S. (2011) 'Anniversary of Spanish Revolution: What lessons?', *South African Labour Bulletin*. 35 (2).
- Hirschfeld, K. (2001) 'Socialism, health and medicine in Cuba: A critical reanalysis'. PhD thesis: Emory University.
- Holton, R.J. (1980) 'Syndicalist Theories of the State', *Sociological Review*. 28 (1): 5–21.
- Kedward, R. (1971) *The anarchists: The men who shocked an era*. London, New York: Library of the Twentieth Century.
- Lenin, V.I. [1920] (1965) 'The trade unions, the present situation and Trotsky's mistakes', in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 4th English edition.
- Letsoalo, M. and Mataboge, M. (20 Dec 2013) 'Gatvol Numsa cuts ties with ANC', *Mail and Guardian*.
- Mechoso, J.M. (2002) *Acción directa anarquista: Una historia de FAU*. Montevideo: Recortes (4 volumes).
- Musgrave, A. (25 May 2014) 'Politics Creates Vacuum in Unions', *Business Report*.
- Ness, I. (ed.) (2014) *New forms of worker organisation: The syndicalist and autonomist restoration of class struggle unionism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- NUMSA (2013) Secretariat Report to NUMSA Special National Congress, December 17 to 20, 2013.
- Pillay, D. and van der Walt, L. (2012) 'Introduction: Assessing the politics of organized labour in Asia, Africa and Latin America at the start of the 21st century', *Labour, Capital and Society/ Travail, capital et société*. 44 (2): 3–25.
- Pontussen, J. (1992) 'At the end of the Third Road: Swedish social democracy in crisis', *Politics and Society*. 20 (3): 305–332.
- Rocker, R. [1938] (1989) *Anarcho-syndicalism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Reiner, L. (1998) 'Cuba: Doctors imprisoned', *The Lancet*. 351: 441–442.
- Sanchez-Sibony, O. (2014) *Red globalization: The political economy of the Soviet Cold War from Stalin to Khrushchev*. Cambridge, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press.
- Schillinger, H.R. (March 2005) 'Trade unions in Africa: Weak but feared', Occasional Papers, International Development Cooperation: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Sergven, M. [G.P. Maximoff] [16 September 1918] (1973) 'Paths of revolution', in Avrich, P. (ed.) *The anarchists in the Russian Revolution*. London: Thames and Hudson.

- Spitzer, A.B. (1963) 'Anarchy and culture: Fernand Pelloutier and the dilemma of revolutionary syndicalism', *International Review of Social History*. 8: 379–388.
- Swenson, P. (1991) 'Bringing capital back in: Employer power, cross-class alliances, and centralisation of industrial relations in Denmark and Sweden', *World Politics*. 43 (4): 513–544.
- The Economist* (27 April 2006) 'French trade unions: Power without responsibility'.
- The International* (1 June 1917) 'Revolutionary Industrial Unionism'.
- Toussaint (1983) 'A trade union is not a political party: A critique of the speech 'Where FOSATU Stands'', *African Communist*. 93: 35–47.
- van der Walt, L. (2011) 'Counterpower, participatory democracy, revolutionary defence: Debating Black Flame, revolutionary anarchism and historical Marxism', *International Socialism: A Quarterly Journal of Socialist Theory*. 130: 193–207.
- van der Walt, L. and Schmidt, M. (2009) *Black flame: The revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*. Oakland, CA: AK Press.
- Waterbury, J. (1999) 'The long gestation and brief triumph of import substitution industrialisation', *World Development*. 27 (2): 323–341.
- Webb, B. and Webb, S. (1937) *Soviet communism: A new civilization*. London and New York: Longmans, Green and Co. Second edition.
- Wilks, S. (1996) 'Class compromise and the international economy: The rise and fall of Swedish social democracy', *Capital and Class*. 58: 89–111.

Biographical note

LUCIEN VAN DER WALT is a Professor of Industrial and Economic Sociology at Rhodes University, in Grahamstown, South Africa. He has published widely on labour and left history, political economy, and anarchism and syndicalism. He is also involved in union and working class education. [email: l.vanderwalt@ru.ac.za]

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Lucien van der Walt
Reclaiming Syndicalism
From Spain to South Africa to Global Labour Today
May 2014

Retrieved on 26th June 2021 from mulpress.mcmaster.ca
van der Walt, Lucien (2014) "Reclaiming Syndicalism: From Spain to South Africa to Global
Labour Today," *Global Labour Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 2, p. 239–252. Available at:
digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca

usa.anarchistlibraries.net