

# Workers Autonomy, Anarchosyndicalism, Anarchism

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The question of autonomy was already linked to the first historical manifestations of the working class. By autonomy, we mean the independence of the workers movement with respect to other classes, especially the radical factions of the bourgeoisie that tried to use the working class as shock troops for their own purposes. It therefore means self-activity, self-organization, political and economic self-orientation. The International Workingmen's Association was the first organization that expressed workers autonomy in its motto: "The emancipation of the workers must be the task of the workers themselves." The way to realize this autonomy, however, proved to be a divisive issue in the International, which split into two groups: the "Marxists", advocates of the parliamentary struggle and central authority, and the "Bakuninists", enemies of politics and of all authority, advocates of revolutionary action. The defeat of the Paris Commune exacerbated these differences, bringing about a separation between political action and economic struggle; for the Marxist social democrats, the former was supreme, and for the Bakuninist anarchists, the main focus was preparation for the revolution. Social democratic dominance, especially in Germany, took the form of the creation of workers parties in which electoral tactics necessarily assumed priority over the trade unions or syndicates, while in those countries where anarchist influence was predominant, particularly in Spain, the workers associations employed anti-political tactics. On the one hand, voting in favor of gradual reforms and the political mediation of conflicts; on the other, direct action and the insurrectionary strike oriented towards revolutionary ends. The social democracy considered itself to be the vanguard of the proletariat and most of its proponents aspired to the gradual conquest of the bourgeois State, which was to be achieved step by step thanks to a tightly organized and disciplined movement. Organized anarchism, on the other hand, was oriented towards a movement without general staffs and with a high degree of spontaneity, aspiring to the direct establishment, without any transition or intermediate stage, of an egalitarian non-statist social regime based on the free federation of producers' associations. The concept of the Producer or the free worker emerged during this period in opposition to the concept of the Wage Worker or the slave of capital.

Revolutionary syndicalism was a doctrinal current that proclaimed the independence of the trade unions from the parties, and advocated the trade union struggle as the only specifically working class form of struggle. Born in France with the creation of the Federation of the Bourses

du Travail in 1892 and then the CGT in 1895, it constituted a reaction against the fragmentation brought about by the parties and against the subordination of the social struggle to the parliamentary arena. It was therefore an attempt to bring about class unity above and beyond any and all ideology by relying on the trade unions, institutions that were not only supposed to devote themselves to the economic struggle and workers control, but were also supposed to become the instruments of social organization and management of production in the post-revolutionary period. Revolutionary syndicalism did not denounce political action, but kept aloof from it; its tactics were direct action against the employing class, boycott, sabotage and the general strike, thanks to which the revolutionary process would take shape. The trade unions, previously simple institutions of self-defense, were no longer considered to be merely fortresses against exploitation, but the motor forces of the revolution and builders of the new society. The nationalist tidal wave of 1914 submerged the trade unions, however, which opposed neither military mobilization nor the war. This meant the end of revolutionary syndicalism as a majority tendency in France, but in Spain revolutionary syndicalism took a step forward: the CNT maintained an anti-militarist stance and adopted a decentralized trade union structure based on local federations and unitary trade unions [*sindicatos únicos*], similar to the structure of the American IWW, which embraced all the trades in each industry. At the La Comedia Congress of 1921, libertarian communism was adopted as the goal of the CNT. At subsequent meetings the CNT decided not to join the Red Trade Union International promoted by the Bolsheviks and to prohibit militants who had become members of political parties from serving in responsible positions in the organization. Thus, what was later known as anarchosyndicalism took shape. Attempts to revise these positions at the reorganizational Congress of El Conservatorio, in 1931, encountered strong opposition from anarchist sectors. The proposal to authorize political action and to transform the trade unions into industrial federations on a national scale triggered strong internal opposition, leading to a split in the CNT, and its unity was not restored until the Zaragoza Congress in May 1936, after mutual concessions on the part of the opposed factions. The revolutionary civil war would confirm the constructive and administrative character of the trade unions as true unitary institutions of the working class after the UGT-CNT alliances, but would at the same time belie their anti-militarism and apoliticism: the trade union bureaucracy, supported by the ideological anarchist bureaucracy, behaved just like a real patriotic party, and led the working class to disaster.

While the need for effective and free self-organization did not encounter any barriers that could not be breached in the democratic countries, in the absolutist countries such as Russia the workers associations were condemned to an underground existence, and were therefore unable to exercise much influence. The trade unions were not a practical force, since most of the workers remained outside of them. During the insurrectionary movement of 1905, the working class in St. Petersburg spontaneously created a new unitary organization which brought together all the proletarian currents, whose purpose was to transform the masses of striking workers into an effective fighting force: the Council of Workers Delegates, or Soviet. The Soviet was the organization that responded to the need for mounting offensive operations; it meant that the workers, most of whom were previously unorganized, had gone on the offensive. It was “the natural and spontaneous form of every major revolutionary action of the proletariat”, the result of a mass strike, in the words of Rosa Luxemburg (today we would call it a wildcat strike). The mass strike was differentiated from the general strike of the revolutionary syndicalists by virtue of its spontaneity, since it was not proclaimed after a long period of preparation, and the essential role

was played by the unorganized workers, not by the trade unionists. The parties and trade unions were instead dragged along by the revolutionary wave, very much contrary to their intentions. By forming the Council and due to the fact that the Council was dedicated to organizing all facets of social life, a transition was made from economics to politics and, as the wildcat strike gradually assumed the character of a regular war, the transition was also made from politics to revolution. The Councils therefore represented collective interests that were far greater than merely economic interests. They were autonomous institutions of the proletariat, but they did not represent the workers in their capacities as members of this or that trade, profession or job, but rather as members of a class. They were revolutionary democratic class institutions, the embodiment of workers autonomy in attack mode, when the proletariat was determined to defeat its enemies and prepared to direct production itself and manage society without the employers and the representatives of the State.

In 1917, the Russian revolutionary situation once again saw the Workers Councils take center stage, this time to be joined by the Councils of Peasants, Sailors and Soldiers. These Councils obviously did not emerge in order to modify the terms of the labor market by raising the price of labor power, but in order to take the place of the municipal councils, the parliaments and the rest of the State apparatus. They embodied the form of the revolution, which no party and no trade union could represent. They constituted its immediate mass expression. To the extent that victory was not certain, their position was insecure and, as was the case in 1918 in Germany and Hungary, where the influence of social democracy was decisive, the Councils were diverted towards conservative positions that caused them to limit their own prerogatives and finally led to their dissolution. As instruments of the destruction of capitalism they occupied a position that was opposed to the trade unions, which, zealously acting in the interests of their own self-preservation, were stubborn supporters of the framework of negotiations with the bourgeoisie. The trade unions arose in an era of capitalist expansion and formed part of the institutional order, where a trade union bureaucracy was nourished with interests similar to those of the bourgeoisie. Once capitalism entered into crisis, they could no longer perform their defensive and regulatory role, since for the proletariat it was no longer a question of reinforcing its position within capitalism, but of putting an end to capitalism. Thus, in response to the general passivity of the trade unions, along with the wildcat strikes and occupations, other organizational forms arose such as strike assemblies, factory committees and coordinating committees. These structures soon transcended the economic framework and carried out political actions, and as a result they provoked the opposition of the trade union and party bureaucracies. At a higher stage of organizational development, these structures gave way to Workers Councils. But every revolution that allows the previous forms of State power to subsist or that allows new forms of State power to be constructed, only digs its own grave. In Germany, the social democracy was able to paralyze the councilist dynamic in order to subsequently break it down into its component parts, so as to make possible the suppression of the councils by police and military means. In Russia, the Bolsheviks were able to establish a police apparatus and an army which, constructed separately from the Councils, facilitated the growth of a political-State bureaucracy that would domesticate the whole council system and transform it into a mere decorative feature, but not without first destroying the councils that resisted these attempts in bloodbaths such as Kronstadt and the suppression of the councils of Southern Ukraine (the Makhnovists). In Spain, in 1936, the unitary trade unions played the same role as the Councils with respect to the defense of the revolution, production and administration. The slogan, "All power to the trade unions", was the translation

of the Russian slogan, “All power to the Soviets”. The Spanish revolution, however, did not destroy the bourgeois State but attempted to use it to consolidate its gains, and was compelled to surrender one conquest after another, with the aggravating factor of nourishing the growth of a workers bureaucracy that became one of the main factors responsible for the defeat of the revolution. When the counterrevolution was unleashed, that is, when the State restored its forces, both the terrain of the Councils as well as that of the revolutionary trade unions were diminished, since they did not know how to, and were incapable of, containing and destroying the State. After a short period of decline, in which they were transformed into technical institutions of mediation and co-management, both disappeared.

Workers Councils are often confused with Factory Councils; they are in fact two completely different things. Factory Councils emerged during the occupations movement of March 1921 in Turin as institutions that organized the workers in their workplaces without the intercession of the trade unions. A precedent for them may be found in the English Shop Stewards of 1915–1920, and the Russian Factory Committees. The Factory Councils were rank and file representative institutions with economic functions related to “workers control” of production. They therefore lacked the political-administrative functions of the Workers Councils, which pertained to a higher stage of the class struggle. They largely exercised functions that previously fell under the jurisdiction of the trade unions, such as the direct representation of the workers or the management of production against capitalism. The Factory Council was not the definitive formulation of class autonomy in the pre-revolutionary period, but only its first step. The Factory Councils formed part of the Soviets in Russia and ended up being mixed with them in Germany, before they were finally destroyed. The need for Councils was not resuscitated by the defeat of fascism in the Western capitalist bloc; but the Councils did reemerge in the Stalinist bloc. The Council system reappeared in Hungary in 1956 as the popular response to police terrorism and party dictatorship, and at the same time called for the reorganization of the economy on really socialist foundations rather than on the house of cards of State capitalism. This gave rise to the parallel formation of Revolutionary Councils (which included artists, writers, soldiers, students and government officials) with clearly political-administrative functions, and Workers Councils (or Factory Councils) which replaced the corrupt trade unions of the regime as the genuine representatives of the economic interests of the workers. The Council system was revealed to be the only democratic alternative not only to the dictatorship, but also to the parliamentary system. The direct democracy of the assemblies is as far removed as possible from the pseudo-democracy of the parties, because only in the Council system is the realization of the political principles of equality and freedom possible. The Council Republic of Hungary lasted twelve days before it was destroyed by Russian tanks. What is remarkable is the fact that the regime had no problems making economic concessions, knowing full well that in that sphere, in any event, crises would not jeopardize its power. The repression directed against intellectuals, however, was implacable. Real freedom is not born from labor and consumption, but from thought. A submissive people is a people that does not think, whether because it is not allowed to think, or because it has lost the ability to think. This principle is totalitarianism’s great contribution to domination. The period of reconstruction that followed the Second World War led to a long period of economic expansion that encouraged social pacts oriented towards economic development. During subsequent moments of crisis—May ’68 in France, the Carnation Revolution in Portugal, the Assembly Movement of 1975–1977 in Spain, the Autonomist Movement in Italy, *Solidarnosc* in Poland, the fall of the Berlin Wall—factory councils arose under different names, but only had an ephemeral exist-

tence. The working class lacked the level of coherence and cohesiveness sufficient to impose its own solution and drive events forward in a revolutionary direction. These outbursts were nothing more than ephemeral anti-capitalist lightning bolts condemned to a rapid extinction, since the market economy, by incorporating bureaucratic State capitalism, was capable of overcoming with relative ease the contradictions to which it gave rise.

To oppose councilism to anarchosyndicalism would be sterile and absurd, since both forms of autonomy arose in particular local conditions, with different traditions and different degrees of organization, and militant workers with diverse ideologies participated in them. Now that the stage of globalization has come to an end and the last developmental cycle of capital has concluded, the main problem is of an altogether different nature, that is, the problem of the extremely low level of combativity of the mass of wage workers, their scarce willingness to organize and even less to conceive perspectives of liberation. It is not just that the masses show absolutely no interest in questioning the society in which they survive; for their resignation contributes to that society's stability. The question of why the working class has ceased to act like a working class has been asked for more than thirty years and there is no easy answer to this question, but any subversive activity has to begin by answering it in a convincing way. No theory of proletarian revolution has been able to survive such a disappearance and such conformism without damage, and anarchism is no exception. For the decline of the revolutionaries goes hand in hand with the decline of their theories, which are now pale doctrinaire reflections of an idyllic and mystified past. The most disparate organizations, ideologies and attitudes take shelter under the label of anarchism, and their common denominator is confusion, cultural isolationism [*guetismo*] and their insufficient presence or absolute absence in the rare instances when conflicts do occur. There is, however, one aspect of anarchism that remains untarnished, the rejection of authority, of politics and of the State, which no subversive project can avoid confronting. And, from the traditions of councilism and anarchosyndicalism, we still have the examples of unity, direct democracy and autonomy. The groups that share these minimal libertarian and councilist demands—the autonomous groups—must shed light on the current condition of the working class which will help to catalyze a really social, anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movement, and this task is mainly (although not exclusively) theoretical. In any case, militant activism must not entrench itself in a position that corresponds to a particular stage of debate and social struggle on the part of the oppressed and the disadvantaged. The function of an autonomous group is to contribute to a higher degree of consciousness of grievances and oppression, which would tend to materialize in the creation of more or less formal organizations of self-defense. The only goal towards which such groups can aspire is that of arousing the self-organization of social dissidence in the course of struggles that will not fail to arise. These struggles are their medium and only in them must they seek their examples. Only on the basis of these struggles will a movement of economic, political and social secession be capable of emerging, a movement that will finish off capitalism and the State: two words, but one thing.

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