

The Unions' Life After Death

Recipes for a new labor movement

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“Solidarity means that we stand up for one another and expect something from each other, even if we don’t like the other very much or even understand each other.”

— Frances Tuuloskorpi

Syndicalism is a movement of labor unions that aims for a vision beyond both capitalism and the nation-states. In two previous essays, Rasmus Hästbacka touched on this vision and strategies to reach it. The following essay concludes with recipes for rebuilding the labor movement.

A vision is pointless without strategies to reach it. Strategies are pointless without a movement that can pursue them. At least in Europe and North America, we need to “bring back the movement in the labor movement,” to quote Labor Notes.

The late union veteran (and *ASR* co-founder) Sam Dolgoff underlined that even lousy business unions in the USA have radical and democratic undercurrents. These currents among the rank-and-file occasionally burst through the surface and push both union bigwigs and bosses to reach better deals. But the bigwigs get back on top again and again. Therefore, Dolgoff drew the conclusion that workers need to build new unions, syndicalist or IWW unions.

Likewise, American writer Tom Wetzel argues for building new unions. Another approach is to reform old mainstream unions from within. The latter is advocated by Kim Moody, Jane McAlevey and others. In Sweden, a similar approach has been advocated by Frances Tuuloskorpi within the Social Democratic LO unions. The syndicalist SAC — *Central Organization of Workers in Sweden* — is independent from LO. Likewise, the Swedish Dockworkers Union is independent.

Two traps

Anyone who wants to bring back the movement — whether in old or new unions — must wrestle with two traps. The first trap can be called *the reformist trap*. This means that the driving people in unions are integrated with the business world and the state. As representatives in the workplace, they end up above the staff in close cooperation with the bosses.

The second trap can be called *the radical cloister trap*. This means that union activists are marginalized from the working class. As voices in opposition, they end up outside the collective of co-workers and have no influence in the workplace. They become radical spectators in the stands.

This way of describing two traps on the arena of class struggle is inspired by the historians Wayne Thorpe and Marcel van der Linden (see the anthology *Revolutionary syndicalism: an international perspective*). These historians refer to Western Europe in the era of welfare capitalism. I disagree with them on a crucial point. They seem to see only two ways to go, either integration or marginalization, but to me it’s obvious that there is a third path forward: mobilization.

Mobilization

Syndicalists who organize on the job try to avoid both integration and marginalization. I think most syndicalists would agree that the ambition is to act within the collective of co-workers, develop the capacity to mobilize the collective and maintain that capacity.

Perhaps the mentioned historians Thorpe & Linden are correct that it was impossible, at the peak of Western welfare states, to attract big masses with a syndicalist program of class struggle for socialism. In 1952, SAC adopted a Declaration of principles in which the class struggle for socialism was removed (or very diffuse). The Declaration advocated producer cooperatives, but that rhetoric was seldom translated into practice. As Ingemar Sjöo has showed, Swedish syndicalists continued to mobilize class struggle after World War II pretty much like before (readers in Swedish can consult Sjöo's book *Fackliga fribrytare*).

Later on, syndicalists participated in a dockers strike in 1969, a miners strike in 1969–70 and a lumberjack strike in 1975, among other conflicts. Eventually, SAC's focus shifted from collective struggles to individual grievances. The latter means client service run by representatives. Primary tools in client service are negotiations and the law. SAC's shift was hardly inevitable. SAC could have invested more in organizing by educating new generations, but it didn't.

Syndicalism was officially restated by SAC in 1976 through a new Declaration of principles. But the practical work of SAC still needs to be shifted from client service to collective action.

If syndicalists are to succeed with mobilization and formulate winning recipes, it is necessary to take a closer look at syndicalist movements where they are today. My perspective is of course limited by my vantage point, the Swedish labor market. Whether my recipes (which I will formulate below) are valid in other countries, is for people in those countries to judge.

Network of organizers

Syndicalism reached a peak as an international movement before the First World War. After the defeat of the Spanish Revolution 1936–39 and yet another World War, syndicalism has not yet recovered. For decades, syndicalist organizations have been marginalized. So, how can syndicalists move from the margins and play a greater role in class struggle? I have come across three different approaches.

The first approach is to *not* build a union (in the usual sense) but instead create a network of organizers. In such networks, most members are expected to be active organizers in their workplaces. The purpose is not to recruit many members but to bring many co-workers together, irrespective of union affiliation, and mobilize collective action. Thus, the network tries to promote cross-union cohesion and action.

This approach has recently been advocated on the Counterpunch website by my union comrades Gabriel Kuhn and Torsten Bewernitz. I like the practical and forward-looking attitude of the approach, but I think a network is too fragile. Workplace organizers need a union support structure, otherwise their burden will be too heavy (frankly inhuman). The best support structure within SAC are our Locals, industrial branches and workplace sections. These cannot exist without many members.

Cadre union

The second approach in class struggle is to build a cadre union. By the term cadre union I am not referring to bolsheviks or secret conspirators. I am referring to organizations that require members to be not only active but also “revolutionaries,” i.e. convinced adherents of a fundamental transformation of society. Cadre unions are ideological unions in the sense that the ideological threshold for becoming a member is very high.

A pretty well-known proponent of cadre unions is the anarchist and historian Vadim Damier. According to Damier it has been a mistake by syndicalist unions to let non-anarchists join the unions. His recipe is “pure” anarchist organizations. I am not convinced that an anarchist contempt for ordinary workers is any better than the old Christian contempt for heathens.

Furthermore, I’m puzzled by the fixation on labels. Has Mr. Damier never met people who label themselves anarchists but in practice act in authoritarian ways and walk straight into reformist traps of integration? I have come across many. I don’t see why I should trust self-proclaimed anarchists or “revolutionaries” more than workers in general.

Let’s assume that a cadre union can somehow control that only real anarchists or “revolutionaries” are granted membership. Wouldn’t that be a recipe for even worse marginalization? The risk of stepping into a radical cloister trap is pretty obvious. A cadre union *can* function as a network of workplace organizers, for sure, but it will still be too fragile (I believe).

In 1922, the IWA/AIT — International Workers’ Association — was formed. In those days it consisted of big syndicalist unions in many countries. Today it consists of some big unions, including newcomers in Asia, but also small groups who have chosen the cadre path. In 2018, a new association of unions was formed: the ICL —International Confederation of Labor. Members of ICL continue the efforts of building what can be called popular movement unions.

Popular movement union

Popular movement unions welcome workers in general. They don’t require every member to be an active organizer or a convinced “revolutionary.” Such unions are also called *open class organizations*. Their approach is a classic syndicalist approach. It goes back to the North American union Knights of Labor and the so-called First international in the 1800s.

I have argued extensively for a broad popular movement (against narrow cadre unions) in the US labor magazine ASR. If a more promising approach exists, I am not aware of it.

The above-mentioned comrade Gabriel Kuhn has replied in ASR and restated the network approach. I have in turn made a point that I want to underline here, namely: an open class organization doesn’t exclude creating networks of organizers. On the contrary, the class organization should always reach outside its own ranks and act in unison with as many workers as possible. This can be done by building various forms of cross-union groups, forums and networks.

In short, I recommend syndicalists to develop both their workplace sections and the cross-union cooperation with other co-workers. This recipe can be summed up as a dual-track syndicalism.

Avoid integration

If the open class organization can lead syndicalism out of the margins, how can the other trap be avoided, integration? For starters, it is wise to recall the basic values of syndicalism: union democracy, solidarity at work and independence from all religious and political organizations.

Then comes a big challenge or rather a permanent wrestling match. Two types of union work have to be balanced. On the one hand, *client service* run by union representatives. On the other, *organizing* that is driven by grassroots. Simply put, unions should do both but focus on organizing.

A *small* union that focuses on client service will probably become marginalized. To be honest, this is what has happened to the Swedish SAC. *Big* unions that are dominated by client service will probably become integrated with corporate managers and the state apparatus. A tragic example are the big unions in Sweden.

A majority of Swedish employees belong to unions and work under collective agreements. But the ability of Swedish unions to defend workers' interests is declining. Worse still, top union officials are currently supporting attacks on workers' rights. Furthermore, the union bureaucracies promote industrial peace through harsh suppression of members who demand more democracy within the unions and act collectively on the job. This is the reformist trap.

If the basic values of syndicalism are sound, then it's not too surprising that the big unions in Sweden are falling sick. They follow a recipe that is the opposite of syndicalism: top-down governance, craft chauvinism and loyalty to both the business world and the state.

I have written extensively on the Swedish tragedy, and how syndicalists are struggling to revive the lost art of organizing, in the above linked articles. Organizing is also at the center of my forthcoming book Swedish syndicalism. Here, it will suffice to repeat the need for a long-term vision. An open class organization that doesn't articulate a post-capitalist vision will probably get stuck in integration and corruption.

Common objections

As said, I support the project of building an open class organization with a long-term vision. There are six often repeated objections to this project.

The first objection is rather silly and goes like this: *Humanity will never live in a world without nation-states*. In reality, nobody knows because nobody owns a crystal ball. To assume there will always be nation-states, is like when medieval Europeans assumed there will always be feudalism.

The second objection is the following claim: *All attempts by utopians to create a paradise have led to hell on earth*. There are of course many attempts by authoritarian leaders to create utopias, from small religious cults to Mao Zedong's China. But are utopian ideas really the root of these evils? Aren't authoritarian institutions the big problem? Would Mao's dictatorship have been pleasant if he lacked visions? Anyhow, in contrast to all utopian dreams (or nightmares), syndicalists have never tried to carve an end goal in stone. Syndicalists offer visionary sketches intended to be revised in practical experiments.

The third objection (or skeptical question) goes like this: *What if the working class doesn't want to implement the syndicalist vision?* Well, then it cannot be implemented (and shouldn't).

If workers use syndicalist unions to improve their lives within capitalism, but don't push the frontline further, it will still be an achievement of great value.

The fourth objection comes from syndicalists who bear the burden of client service: *The burden becomes too heavy if we build a mass union!* But we don't have to offer more help in individual grievances. My view is that we already should offer less. At the same time, we should offer more members training in organizing and help to build workplace sections. That is to develop more solidarity, a better solidarity than client service.

The fifth objection comes from syndicalists who are strong believers in the long-term vision. *What if lots of non-believers join the class organization? That would undermine the organization's capacity to advocate and fight for the vision!* Well, I assume that you who are strong believers have strong arguments for your case. I encourage you to try to convince the skeptics, all skeptics who fancy a conversation. Make your case! I'm with you. Let us not hide in a radical cloister.

The last objection is raised by syndicalists who are afraid to let all sorts of a**holes into the class organization. *Is the organization open to homophobes and racists, even nazis and Satanist pedophiles?* A class organization cannot control what people think or feel in secret, but there are of course certain values or behaviors that must be promoted.

As said, the basic values of syndicalism are solidarity, democracy and independence. If the values of a homophobe or racist is expressed at work, then it's a violation of solidarity. Thus, the person cannot be a member of the union. Likewise, people who don't respect the democracy or independence of the union cannot be members. For security reasons alone, nazis cannot join the union. In the case of SAC, our union is officially feminist and anti-racist.

The paradox of syndicalism

If we are to build open class organizations, we must handle a paradox, a contradiction. On the one hand, the organizations should convey a long-term vision. On the other, it should be made clear that our unions don't require every member to be convinced supporter of the vision.

I have already encouraged those who are convinced supporters to try to convince more people. Far more important, I believe, is that members participate in class struggle since this is a practical school and a nurturer of the thirst for freedom. Workers who organize on the job will start the process of figuring out how the world works and probably hunger for more.

It is organizing, rather than client service, that will foster class consciousness. The expression "class consciousness" will probably sound like corny boomer-talk to the younger generations. So, let's talk about *insight* and *competence* instead — and add *thirst for freedom*.

Self-organization in unions today prefigures the self-management of workplaces and communities tomorrow. Syndicalists who do thirst for more, want a world of free and equal people. That's all.

Rasmus Hästbacka

Read the fourth bonus article here, about making plans for action on your job.

Rasmus Hästbacka is a lawyer and has been a member of the Umeå Local of SAC since 1997. The essay draws from a forthcoming book, Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice. More articles by the author can be found in Anarchist Library here.

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First published in the summer of 2022 on the website of US labor magazine ASR. The third in a series of three essays about syndicalist vision, strategy and movement building. In a fourth bonus article, the author relates these themes to making plans for action on the job. The fourth article was first published on the US union site Organizing Work. The author is a member of the Swedish union SAC.

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