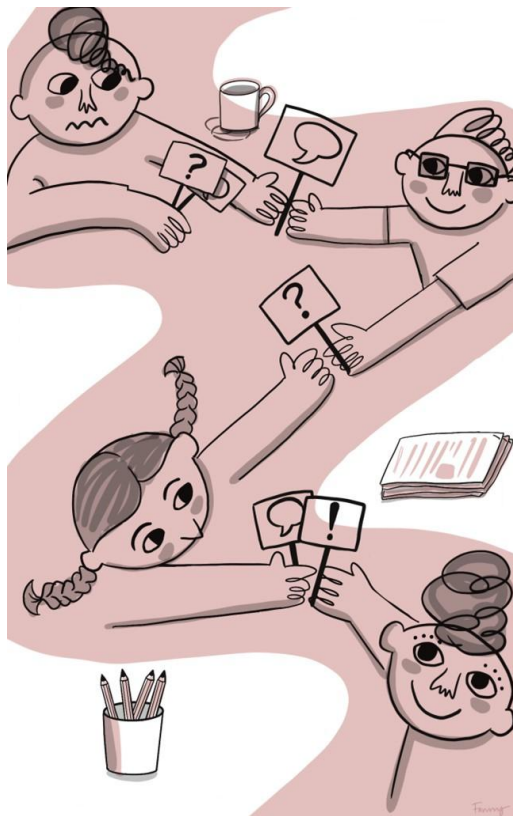


# What is Syndicalism And What is it Good For?

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**Rasmus Hästbacka of the Swedish union SAC highlights six leading ideas of syndicalism and their usefulness in contemporary class struggle.**

Syndicalism has emerged from class struggle. It is an international trade union movement that first arose in the 1870s in Spain, the USA, Mexico, and Cuba, and in time broke forth on all continents. SAC – the Central Organization of Workers in Sweden – was founded in 1910.

SAC is built on Local chapters open to workers in all industries, abbreviated Locals (or just LS). Several members at a workplace form a section. Several sections in the same industry in a locality form a syndicate, an industrial branch. All branches in an industry form a nationwide federation.

Syndicalists have drawn certain conclusions from class struggle about how this struggle can best be waged. These conclusions have become guiding ideas for our union work. I intend to highlight six ideas and give examples of their practical usefulness.

## **1. Union democracy**

The first guiding idea is union democracy. For syndicalists, the guiding star is that everyone affected by decisions should have the right to influence those decisions. We practice what we call base democracy. It's a combination of direct democracy and representative democracy.

To understand how this works in union practice, we can look at syndicalist operating sections, our job branches. They are called operating sections because the long-term vision is for workers to take over the operation of workplaces. Syndicalists often use the shorter term *section*.

In the section, the member base makes decisions, while elected representatives implement decisions – or at least ensure that decisions are implemented. Elected representatives also have the task of coordinating union activity and making decisions on urgent or less important matters.

The section's member meetings elect representatives and give them directives. This means that decisions on union demands, decisions on industrial action and decisions to reach agreements with employers are made by the member base – unless the base has delegated certain decision-making power to representatives.

The section's member meetings and elected representatives make majority decisions that are binding on all members. Representatives are accountable to the member meetings and can be removed at any time by these meetings. Member meetings can also overturn decisions taken by representatives.

### **Recent strikes**

To see the value of democracy in sections, we can relate it to strikes and other forms of industrial action. Thanks to being members of a syndicalist section, Swedish workers can decide on and carry out lawful industrial action. In most other Swedish unions, the bylaws state that the member base has no right to participate in decisions about industrial action.

Two years ago, a syndicalist section went on strike twice to demand its own collective agreement. This was the section at the MediCarrier healthcare warehouse within the Stockholm Region. The purpose was, among other things, to challenge unfair wage setting and gain the right to appoint health and safety delegates.

*The section at MediCarrier / Photo: Arbetaren*



In the first strike, the company brought in strikebreakers from staffing agencies. In the second strike, the company and the section accepted a compromise. The compromise was that all workers receive double pay on public holidays. It was a small but important partial victory and a point of departure for continuing the struggle.

If the workers had been members of a bureaucratic mainstream union and wanted to strike lawfully, they would have had to wait for a decision by the national union board. That often means waiting in vain.

### **Democracy in negotiations**

Union democracy also has great value in negotiations. In the autumn of 2021, Polish cleaners in Gothenburg went on strike at a company then called Perfect Maid. In negotiations, the cleaners won higher wages for everyone, they won pay also for the time spent driving company vehicles between different customer sites, and the right to use the vehicles to and from work.

I and local negotiators from Gothenburg LS participated as advisers, but it wasn't we who made the decisions. It was the collective of cleaners who decided to strike and then sign agreements with the employer.

## **2. Solidarity**

The next guiding idea is solidarity. Solidarity can be described as workers' common struggle for common interests. It is mutual aid for mutual benefit. Co-workers simply benefit from supporting each other against management.

Precisely because solidarity is fundamental, our sections are open to all employees except managers. Our syndicates (industrial branches) welcome everyone within a certain industry as members. Our LS welcome workers in all industries in a given locality.

An extension of solidarity is that syndicalists who are active in a section work on dual tracks at the same time. This means syndicalists promote cohesion both within the group of syndicalists

and the workforce as a whole. The first is cohesion within the section, while the other can be described as cross-union community.

An example of a section that has successfully worked on dual tracks is the above mentioned section at MediCarrier. The section has not recruited a majority of the workforce, but syndicalists enjoy broad trust on the shop floor, and their mentioned struggle gave *all* workers better pay.

### **Wage-extraction blockades**

By building a syndicate, solidarity can encompass workers at several workplaces. One example is the Construction Workers Syndicate within Stockholm LS (called Builders in Solidarity).



*Builders in Solidarity / Photo: Arbetaren*

One way to act as a syndicate is through so called wage-extraction blockades. This is a type of industrial action. When employers pay too little wages or no wages at all, Swedish unions have the right to use wage-extraction blockades.

In practice, these can consist of almost any kind of pressure and action. It is the purpose of recovering wage debts that makes it an extraction blockade. The Construction Workers Syndicate has used wage-extraction blockades against many different employers, with good results.

## **3. Independence**

The third guiding idea is independence – being a self-governing trade union. Our sections, syndicates and LS have no loyalty ties to political parties, the state or business world. We safeguard our independence because it gives us great scope to conduct militant struggle.

It doesn't matter whether you as a member vote left or right in parliamentary elections, or don't vote at all. The crucial point is that you don't bring party politics into the union. Party politics are kept outside the union.

Syndicalists not only build sections at workplaces but also cross-union groups. These are groups of co-workers who meet, regardless of union affiliation, to discuss and pursue common interests. In both sections and such groups, it is important to not get hung up on how co-workers vote.

#### **Workers drove out the foreman**

I will give an example of how a cross-union group won a struggle without support from established unions. It happened at a pharmaceutical factory in the county of Västerbotten where I worked many years ago.

The head of the factory rewarded one of his friends by making the person a foreman in one department. The problem was that the foreman knew nothing about the work there, and the workers in the department had long worked without a foreman. So, when the foreman walked around bossing people around with an arrogant attitude, there was a clash.

The workers told both the foreman and the head of the factory that the foreman had to leave the department. The head responded by calling the workers in one by one for interrogations and scoldings. But they stood their ground, and the foreman eventually disappeared.

In this struggle, it was of course irrelevant which parties the workers voted for. They had a common interest in getting rid of the foreman and gaining more influence over their work. In working life, it may well be that the co-workers you like the most vote for parties you think are absurd, while your worst bosses vote for your favorite party.

## **4. The dual function**

The fourth syndicalist idea is that trade unions should fulfil a dual function. It's described like this in SAC's Declaration of principles, adopted in 2022:

“In the short term, the struggle through unions is about enforcing immediate improvements in living conditions: higher wages, reduced stress, shorter working hours, an end to sexual harassment, better balance between work and leisure time/family, etc. In the long term, trade unions are tools for democratizing workplaces and thereby building equal societies. The production of goods and services must be managed by us who do the work.”

Democracy at work is thus a prerequisite for egalitarian societies, what we call libertarian socialism. But are worker-run workplaces enough to create an egalitarian society? No, this is commented on as follows in SAC's Declaration of principles:

“Democracy in the workplace is a necessary precondition for a classless society, but not a sufficient condition for an equal society. An equal society presupposes that the social hierarchies based on gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality and functional variation are also abolished.”

And furthermore:

“Democracy in the workplace means that the concentration of economic power is dissolved. The long-term vision of SAC is that the concentration of political power in state and supranational bodies should be dissolved as well. Power must be brought down to the people. Just as every workplace should be governed by the workforce, so too should every community be governed by the population.”

The dual function can be summarized with a metaphor: *The union is not only a tool for winning a bigger piece of the pie we produce. It's a tool for taking over the whole bakery.*

Syndicalists want to see the entire economy under workers' management.

*The syndicalist and sex educator Elise Ottesen-Jensen, known as "Ottar". As early as the 1920s, Ottar emphasized that labor movements cannot achieve the liberation of humanity until trade unions break their internal male dominance. Photo: Arbetaren.*

## 5. Feminism

The fifth idea is feminism. SAC was the first trade union in Sweden to call itself feminist. This happened at SAC's congress in 1994 by means of an addition to the Declaration of principles. Feminism was formulated there as an insight and a goal.

The insight concerns the fact that women as a group are subordinate and discriminated against in society. This applies to both cis women and trans women. Non-binary people are likewise punished for deviations from prevailing gender norms.

SAC's goal is simply to work for equality with a focus on the labor market and our own union. These are two parallel projects. We must break male dominance within the union to succeed in changing life in the workplaces.

By now, there is an enormous collection of facts about discrimination, for example at the Swedish Gender Equality Agency, Statistical Bureau and Discrimination Ombudsman. It's not only the case that women as a group have lower wages and worse employment conditions than men. Women are assigned worse tasks – worse in the sense that the tasks are more monotonous, less autonomous, have lower status, and provide less satisfaction and development.

The pattern is also that workspaces, tools and work clothing are adapted to male bodies, not women's bodies. In addition, women are targets of sexual harassment and sexual violence to a much greater extent than men.

So, what can be said about SAC's feminist work? I will be honest and admit that we haven't come very far yet. But there are certain initiatives within our union that have proven to bring results.

### **Gender power investigation**

SAC released a Gender Power Investigation in 2010. The investigation highlighted the extent to which female members participate in union work. Women participate to a fairly large extent at workplaces (in sections), but much less at the syndicate and LS level, and even less at the central level.

The investigation identified causes of this. One cause is that women perform the majority of unpaid domestic work, which makes it difficult to engage in union activity in their free time. Another cause is the existence of so called homosociality within SAC. Homosociality means



that men socialize with and promote each other while ignoring women (consciously or unconsciously).

### **Breaking the patterns**

One way to break the pattern is to focus more on workplace organizing and starting sections. There, many women can get involved at work during working hours. One way to break homosociality is to have clear formal structures within the union. This involves being meticulous about bylaws, minuted decisions and up-to-date information to all members. A lack of *formal* structures allows *informal* structures to take over, and homosociality is an example of an informal structure.

Another initiative is to appoint nomination committees that call members and tip them about positions of trust, courses and conferences. The nomination committees are then active year round and prioritize women. This has been shown to increase the number of women in elected positions and the number of female participants in courses and conferences. When female leaders become visible, they give the union a face. This in turn inspires more women to get involved.

The same initiative can and should of course be done when it comes to non-binary comrades. If the union gets more female and non-binary leaders, they inspire more members to become active.

## **6. Organizing**

I have touched on the following guiding stars: union democracy, solidarity, independence, the dual function and feminism. The best way to put these ideas into practice is to organize on the job. Organizing is not the same thing as recruiting members. Organizing is about workers developing and using their collective strength in a systematic way. *Then* we can speak of a fully-fledged syndicalist union.

Union democracy and solidarity is something we *do*, not something we *have*. Members need to meet and discuss common needs in working life, participate in decisions and carry out the decisions. Co-workers need to stick together and act collectively. Union democracy and solidarity is a living practice, or it doesn't exist.

Our independence as a union gives us great room for maneuver, but to make use of the opportunities we must organize. To seize power in the workplaces, we must again organize. It is by building member-run sections that workers can ultimately introduce staff-run workplaces in all industries.

Feminism of course also depends on organizing. The feminist perspective needs to be brought into sections and cross-union groups in order for feminism to produce results in workplaces. When the perspective is present at work and everyone feels welcome in the union community, the union becomes stronger and better at advancing the interests of all employees.

To summarize the guiding ideas of syndicalism in a single sentence, one can say thus: Unions must be run *by* the workers in order to be run *for* the workers.

If the working class doesn't have power over its own unions, it's impossible for workers to use unions to seize power over the economy. Then unions will stand in the way as a roadblock.

### **Rasmus Hästbacka**

*See also the article Organize! Yes, but how?*

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