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Lost Conversations

Questioning the legacy of anarchosyndicalism

Scott Nappalos

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There is more interest than ever in anarchosyndicalist unions, their history, and lessons for doing organizing in today's context. During its peak, anarchosyndicalism engaged millions of workers on every continent except Antarctica. Though the Spanish experience through the CNT and 1936 revolution stands out, anarchosyndicalism was perhaps stronger in Latin America and Asia than in Europe. Despite the depth of those experiments and today's interests, our knowledge of anarchosyndicalism is still poor.

Anarchosyndicalism is usually characterized by about being about principles and form of the anarchosyndicalist union. Emphasis is frequently placed on democracy, solidarity, and other values. Formal aspects of the union like direct democracy, autonomous locals, federations, the use of direct action, etc., are seen to carry inherent power to guarantee the desired future society. The problem partially lies with the anarchosyndicalists we find readily available in English. For instance Rudolph Rocker, the German anarchosyndicalist who in many way popularized the term, writes:

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“For the Anarcho-Syndicalists the labour syndicates are the most fruitful germs of a future society, the elementary school of Socialism in general. Every new social structure creates organs for itself in the body of the old organism; without this prerequisite every social evolution is unthinkable. To them Socialist education does not mean participation in the power policy of the national state, but the effort to make clear to the workers the intrinsic connections among social problems by technical instruction and the development of their administrative capacities, to prepare them for their role of re-shapers of economic life and give them the moral assurance required for the performance of their task. No social body is better fitted for this purpose than the economic fighting organisation of the workers; it gives a definite direction to their social activities and toughens their resistance in the immediate struggle for the necessities of life and the defense of their human rights.”¹

If you read Rudolph Rocker’s classic text on the issue *Anarcho-syndicalism*, he largely focuses on those issues and encourages thinking about it that way.² Anarcho-syndicalism’s friendly opponents likewise frame the debate around that conception, for example: Malatesta’s critique of syndicalism³ and with him anarchist’s right wing who propose to only work within the largest established institutions, and the anti-union sections of the Marxist ultraleft. Is ideology relevant or not? Is only focusing on form enough? How much form makes it syndicalist or not?

¹ Rocker, R. Anarchism and Anarcho-syndicalism. <http://libcom.org/library/anarchism-and-anarcho-syndicalism-rudolf-rocker>

² Rocker, R. Anarcho-syndicalism. <http://libcom.org/library/anarcho-syndicalism-rudolf-rocker>

³ Malatesta, E. (1925). Syndicalism and Anarchism. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/malatesta/1925/04/syndic1.htm>

Today's anarchosyndicalists often encourage this reading. Many anarchosyndicalist publications frequently put their agitation in terms of setting up certain structures or promoting libertarian ideas.

One of the main problems in evaluating this is that the history of anarchosyndicalism is nearly lost. With the experiences of the CNT in the Spanish Revolution of 1936 being for most purposes the height of anarchism, still very little has been translated or even studied.⁴ Even just looking at Spain, key texts from the Spanish experience have never made it into English. Consider that we have none of the works of the Libertarian Youth Federation (FIJL), who took similar positions to the Friends of Durruti, none of the original texts of the Mujeres Libres, none of the publications or discussions of the Friends of Durruti, or even the largest and best histories of the revolt. Worse still are other experiences. In South America anarchism was dominant in the labor movement for key periods, yet we have essentially none of the original texts or even histories translated. Taking the Argentinian FORA, even in Spanish most of the texts are out of print with few studies in the original language. The texts of Lopez Arango, Santillan, Gilimon, and other key theorists of the FORA are not in present print in Spanish and to our knowledge were never translated despite having been at the center of one of the largest and most significant anarchist milieus in the world. In many cases, even in Spanish original texts are out of print, and there is no online archive comparable to what is available in English through resources like libcom.org. Still less is known of or translated of other historically important anarchosyndicalist movements such as the Italian USI during the Red Years, the Korean and Japanese anarcho-syndicalists, the South African syndicalists, or

⁴ The work of Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt in *Black Flame* and *Cartography of Revolutionary Anarchism* both available from AK Press shed some much needed light on challenging a Spain and euro-centric view of anarchism.

even within the United States the foreign language sections of the IWW (of which many were ideologically anarchist).

Beyond the issues of language who the anarchosyndicalists were created problems for passing on their history. Most anarchosyndicalists were not wealthy or formally educated, coming from the global proletariat to a degree dissimilar to many other movements of their era. Like other parts of the broader ultraleft, anarchosyndicalist movements lacked institutional support (either by Moscow or academia) to reproduce their works, relying instead on the donations and voluntary labor of anarchist workers. Its treasures often lie still hidden in part by the proletarian nature of the movement, lack of professional theorists to catalogue and popularize its perspectives, and a dearth of resources to publish and distribute their works. With these factors in mind, when we take a textual and historical approach to anarchosyndicalism it is often based on fragments, semi-random pieces that have made it into English, and more frequently the biases of hostile commentators from the official left who were in opposition to the syndicalist currents.

Taking a few small cases, it will become clear how this is a limited perspective. Consider that anarchosyndicalism is typically charged with having been only focused on the workplace and on men. This is largely true in that there were clear issues in the movement of unquestioned patriarchy failing to build a powerful movement of women's workers, and a core focus on workplace struggles. Even a brief look at the history complicates the picture though. *Mujeres Libres*, an organization of women members of the CNT aimed at addressing patriarchy and developing its own militants, stands out as one of the most advanced feminist movements in the history of the left as a whole, and one that emerged within anarchosyndicalism as an attempt to expand upon its practices.⁵ Despite the interest in popular education, how little has been done to look at the

⁵ Acklesburg, M. (2004). *Free Women of Spain*. AK Press.

merely specific moments. Our own challenge today is to find our way through the maze of a changing world. Within these struggles there continues to be echoes of the experiences of the anarchosyndicalists.

practices of capacitation raised by the Mujeres Libres? Their concept of capacitation was that of increasing the abilities of women militants to intervene within struggles rather than as instruction or simply changing formal aspects of anarchosyndicalist organizations to address patriarchy. Capacitation offers an alternative view of education taken away from its elitist and intellectualist practices, and one based off key moments in struggle.

Capacitation was also raised in the writings of the FORA and debates within the Argentinian anarchist movement of the early 20th century, though I have been unable to find any in-depth discussion of it. Likewise in Argentina and Chile, a significant women's movement emerged that produced its own interventions such as anarchist communist women's publications, Resistance Societies specifically for women and women's struggles, and fights led by women. Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, and Brazil all had experiences with attempts to grapple with patriarchy and build movements both within the workplace and community led by anarchosyndicalist women.⁶ In Germany, the FAU-D attempted to construct women's leagues for self-education.⁷ There is next to nothing in English on these struggles and the material is difficult to find in Spanish, let alone Portuguese or German. Anarchosyndicalists were grappling with the dominant patriarchy of their time, and in key instances were creative in trying to address it and build proletarian women's organization. Little of this history is acknowledged, known even within the anarchist movement, or studied.

⁶ Maxine Molyneux's 1997 *Ni Dios, Ni Patrón, Ni Maridos: Feminismo anarquista en la Argentina del Siglo XIX*. http://www.cnm.gov.ar/generarigualdad/attachments/article/199/Ni_Dios_ni_patron_ni_marido.pdf; Bellucci, Mabel. (1989). *Anarquismo y Feminismo. El Movimiento de Mujeres Anarquistas con sus logros y desafíos hacia principios de siglo*. Buenos Aires.; Valle Ferrer, Norma. (2004). *Anarquismo y feminismo. La ideología de cuatro mujeres latinoamericanas de principios del siglo XX*. Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, Nº 9, junio. San Juan.

⁷ Solidarity Federation. (2012). *Fighting for Ourselves: Anarchosyndicalism and class struggle*. Black Cat Press.

The same is true of struggles outside the workplace organized by anarchosyndicalist unions. The Buenos Aires Tenant's Strike of 1907 was led by some of the women's Resistance Societies and women leadership within the FORA. Involving perhaps tens of thousands or so tenants, it was led primarily by the FORA and represented the intervention of the organization into social life beyond the factory walls as rents were climbing excessively in Buenos Aires.⁸ In 1931, the CNT pushed a similar mass rent strike against unsafe and increasingly expensive housing in Barcelona.⁹ Today's anarchosyndicalist organizations participate in struggles inside and outside the workplace from housing struggles to transportation and struggles around social benefits. Groups like Seattle Solidarity and the UK's Solidarity Federation take inspiration from anarchosyndicalism in doing organizing within a broader sphere of working class life, not limited to the walls of the shop floor. Far from an aberration, the anarchosyndicalist movement did not have a position on the centrality of the workplace as cleanly as some would place on it.

Anarchosyndicalism is often charged with overemphasizing unions and inheriting defects that all unions allegedly have. The history is a bit fuzzy here as some of the groups that are called anarchosyndicalist were equivocal or even rejected the label of union. Some writers and speakers of the FORA critiqued the title anarchosyndicalism preferring to call it an anarchist communist workers organization, if a union at all.¹⁰ In Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina the anarchist workers organization were built out of Resistance Societies or locality based organization of workers.¹¹

⁸ On the Tenant's Strike in Buenos Aires see Juan Suriano's 1983 *La huelga de inquilinos de 1907*. CEAL.

⁹ Worker's Solidarity Alliance. *The Barcelona Mass Rent Strike of 1931*. <http://workersolidarity.org/archive/rentstrike1931.htm>

¹⁰ Lopez Arango, E. (1925). *Syndicalism and Anarchism*. <http://libcom.org/library/syndicalism-anarchism>

¹¹ De Laforcade, Geoffroy. (2011). *Federative Future: Resistance Societies, and the Subversion of Nationalism in the Early 20th-Century Anarchism of the Río*

There were distinct organizations of trades apart from the mixed Resistance Societies. Even the French CGT arose first out of a federation of the *bourses du Travail*, local workers societies that combined culture, education, and mutual aid. The FORA itself went so far as to reject the industrial divisions of capitalist society altogether, and indeed ANY role for unions after the revolution.¹² The clean picture of unionist workers trying to build the future cells of society becomes problematized when one goes beneath the surface.

If we think about it, it is logical. Any movement that encompasses millions will have within it a wealth of experiences and conflicting perspectives that make pinning narrow frameworks on it difficult. This history and debate within the anarchosyndicalist movement has largely been lost and ignored, reducing its breadth to caricature and a naïve workerist economism by its enemies. Though these examples themselves are limited, they offer a chance to rethink what we believe about anarchosyndicalism, these movements, and our own practices in social movements, political ideology, and the path towards liberation. The real advances and lessons of anarchosyndicalism are yet to be fully tapped. Specifically very little has been done to look at the contribution anarchosyndicalists made to understanding how workers become radicalized, the relationship between ideas and activity, and struggling against the totality of working class life. We would be better served by viewing anarchosyndicalism as a global experience without trying to reduce it to narrow formulas, structures, or

de la Plata Region. E.I.A.L Vol. 22 (2). <http://www1.tau.ac.il/eial/images/vn22n2/laforcade-v22n2.pdf>

¹² Federación Obrera Regional Argentina. (1923). *Memoria presentada por la F.O.R.A al Congreso de Berlin de la Asociación Internacional del Trabajadores A.I.T.* <http://fora-ait.com.ar/ait/index.php?text=presentacionFORA1923>; Damier, Vadim. (2011). *Anarcho-syndicalism in the 20th Century*. Chapter 8. <http://libcom.org/library/chapter-8-ideological-theoretical-discussions-anarcho-syndicalism-1920's-1930's>