

Strategy & Struggle

Debate Within the Solidarity Federation

Solidarity Federation

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About

In January 2009 Brighton Solidarity Federation produced the pamphlet “Strategy & Struggle” to seek a “clarification of the meaning of anarcho-syndicalism in the 21st century, and as a contribution to the debate over strategy and organisation.”

It provoked both discussion within the Solidarity Federation — where the pamphlet represented a minority viewpoint — and in the wider libertarian class struggle milieu, with reports of discussions from the Netherlands to Eastern Europe to the United States.

This document comprises of the original pamphlet followed by the discussion between individuals from Manchester, North London & Brighton Solidarity Federation’s. The document ends with a piece written by Tony from Manchester Solidarity Federation on the role of the anarcho-syndicalist union.

Strategy & Struggle

– Brighton Solidarity Federation

Introduction

“The spirit of anarcho-syndicalism (...) is characterised by independence of action around a basic set of core principles; centred on freedom and solidarity. Anarcho-syndicalism has grown and developed through people taking action, having experiences, and learning from them (...) the idea is to contribute to new and more effective action, from which we can collectively bring about a better society more quickly. That is the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism.”

– Self Education Collective (2001)¹

Anarcho-syndicalism is a specific tendency within the wider workers’ movement. As a tendency, it has a history of its own dating back over a century. In contemporary discussions many – self-identified advocates and critics alike – take the tradition as it was 50, 70 or 100 years ago as definitive of the tradition as a whole. There is also the fact that the tradition is a plural one, and its core principles have allowed varied, sometimes conflicting practices at differing times in its history. The anarcho-syndicalism of the CNT of 1930 was not the same as the CNT of 1980. The anarcho-syndicalism of the Friends of Durruti was different yet again. As was that of the FORA. And so on.

What this underlines is the need to clarify exactly what anarcho-syndicalism means in practical terms in a 21st century context. That is the purpose of this pamphlet.

This aim will be pursued by way of introducing the current industrial strategy of the Solidarity Federation (SF), with some historical context as well as theoretical clarification of the meaning of a ‘revolutionary union’, different organisational roles and the relationship between the form and content of class struggle. This theoretical clarification is solely for the purpose of informing contemporary practice, and not some mere intellectual exercise.

So we see anarcho-syndicalism as a living tradition that develops through a critical reflection on our experiences and adaptation to new conditions. It may well be the ideas presented here are not unique to any one tradition of the workers’ movement and may find resonance with those who do not identify as anarcho-syndicalists – if anything this is evidence of their validity. This pamphlet is written to contribute to new and more effective action, from which we can collectively bring about a better society more quickly; it is written in the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism.

¹ <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/selfed-collective-a-history-of-anarcho-syndicalism#toc457>

Classical Anarcho-Syndicalism

“Through the taking over of the management of all plants by the producers themselves under such form that the separate groups, plants, and branches of industry are independent members of the general economic organism and systematically carry on production and the distribution of the products (...) Theirs must be the task of freeing labour from all the fetters which economic exploitation has fastened on it.”

– Rudolf Rocker (1938)²

Anarcho-syndicalism emerged in the late 19th century from the libertarian wing of the workers’ movement. Stressing solidarity, direct action and workers’ self-management, it represented a turn to the labour movement and collective, class struggle in contrast to the concurrent tendency of individualistic ‘propaganda by the deed’ – assassinations and terrorist bombings – that had become popular with many anarchists following the massacre of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Classical syndicalists, including many anarcho-syndicalists sought to unite the working class into revolutionary unions. Like the ‘One Big Unionism’ of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) the goal was to build industrial unions until such a point as they could declare a revolutionary general strike as the prelude to social revolution. However, unlike the IWW on the one hand, and Marxists and social democrats on the other, anarcho-syndicalists rejected the separation of economic (trade union) and political (party) struggles.

They stressed that workers themselves should unite to fight for their interests whether at the point of production or elsewhere, not leave such struggles to the specialists of political parties or union officials or still less neglect political goals such as the overthrow of capital and the state in favour of purely economic organisation around wages and working hours.³ Furthermore they stressed that workers should retain control of their organisations through direct democratic means such as sovereign mass meetings and mandated, recallable delegates.

The goal of these unions – as suggested in the Rudolf Rocker quote above – was to expropriate the means of production and manage them democratically without bosses. As such, the dominant tendency saw building the union as ‘building the new society in the shell of the old.’ The same directly democratic structures created to fight the bosses would form the basic structure of a new society once the bosses were successfully expropriated.

Consequently, building the union was seen as one and the same as building both the new society and the social revolution that would bring it about. Class struggle became not just a question of (self-) organisation, but of building the organisation. As the union grew to a sufficient size and influence, strikes could be launched, culminating in the revolutionary general strike that would bring about libertarian communism.⁴ There was almost a blueprint for social revolution that simply needed to be implemented.

² Cited in <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/noam-chomsky-notes-on-anarchism>

³ “The anarcho-syndicalists also saw the need to combine the political and the economic struggle into one. They rejected pure economic organisation and insisted that the revolutionary union should have a clear political goal, the overthrow of capitalism and the state.” – <https://libcom.org/article/short-history-british-anarcho-syndicalism>

⁴ “Every strike, whether successful or not, was seen to increase the hostility between the classes and so stimulate further conflict. Strikes encourage feelings of solidarity and are a training ground for further struggles. The climax would be, after a long series of strikes growing in breadth and intensity, the revolutionary ‘general strike’.” – <https://libcom.org/article/short-history-british-anarcho-syndicalism>

This approach appeared to be vindicated with the outbreak of the Spanish revolution in 1936 in which the anarcho-syndicalist CNT played a prominent role. In Barcelona, factories, public transport and other workplaces were taken over and self-managed by their workers. In the countryside land was collectivised and libertarian communism proclaimed. However the revolution ended, tragically, in defeat, but not before the paradoxical spectacle of the CNT providing anarchist ministers to the government while it ordered insurgent workers off the streets.

The experience of Spain led to many criticisms of classical anarcho-syndicalism in addition to those which had already been made during its development in the early 20th century. To these criticisms we will now turn.

Criticisms of Classical Anarcho-Syndicalism

“The modern proletarian class does not carry out its struggle according to a plan set out in some book or theory; the modern workers’ struggle is a part of history, a part of social progress, and in the middle of history, in the middle of progress, in the middle of the fight, we learn how we must fight...”

— Rosa Luxemburg (1918)⁵

Criticisms have come from many quarters. We will focus here on four in particular which have relevance to developing anarcho-syndicalist practice as they share our goal of libertarian communism (unlike say, social democratic criticisms). Addressed in order of their severity, these four criticisms are: those which emerged from within — at the height of the Spanish revolution in the form of the Friends of Durruti group; those from the platformist tradition that grew out of the lessons of the 1917 anarchist revolution in the Ukraine; those which came from the council communist tendency in the workers’ movement, and in particular Rosa Luxemburg; and finally those which, for want of a better term emanate from the contemporary ‘ultra-left’ and Gilles Dauvé in particular.

The Friends of Durruti’s Criticisms

The Friends of Durruti (FoD) were a group of rank-and-file CNT militants during the Spanish revolution in 1936–7. Their main criticism was that having defeated the army and taken the streets and workplaces, the CNT didn’t know where to go.

“The CNT did not know how to live up to its role. It did not want to push ahead with the revolution with all of its consequences (...) it behaved like a minority group, even though it had a majority in the streets.”⁶

The CNT simply started self-managing the workplaces and collaborating with the remnants of the state, rather than decisively smashing the state and moving towards libertarian communism. For the FoD, the CNT lacked two things: “a program, and rifles.”

Platformist Criticisms

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rosa_Luxemburg#Dialectic_of_Spontaneity_and_Organisation [In a Revolutionary Hour: What Next?, Collected Works 1.2, p.554]

⁶ Quoted in <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/agustin-guillamon-the-friends-of-durruti-group-1937-1939-0#toc10>

In many ways platformist criticisms are similar to those of the FoD; whilst supporting the structures of anarcho-syndicalist unions they stress the need for a specific libertarian communist organisation to argue for a communist program within such mass organisations. This organisation would be a single ‘general union of anarchists’ and be founded on four organisational principles; theoretical unity, tactical unity, collective responsibility and federalism.⁷

In contrast to classical anarcho-syndicalism, contemporary platformism seeks not to build mass organisations, but to insert into them and influence them in an anarchist direction. For example the position paper on trade unions by the influential platformist Workers Solidarity Movement (WSM) states that

“no matter how conservative they can become, it does not alter the fact that they are the most important mass organisations of the working class (...) activity within them is an extremely important ongoing activity.”⁸

Consequently, they advocate reforming the existing Trade Unions towards anarcho-syndicalist structures of mandated recallable delegates, rank-and-file control etc.⁹

Council Communist Criticisms

For Rosa Luxemburg, anarcho-syndicalists had an undialectical view of revolution where they could build up their organisation, the one big union, set the date for the revolutionary general strike and that would be it. There was no space for spontaneity, or for learning from struggle and adapting the forms accordingly; the anarcho-syndicalist union was taken as a given. She contrasted the anarchist general strike to the mass strike, a more spontaneous expression of class struggle not called by any one group.

Her ruminations on the mass strikes in Russia – which she claimed were “the historical liquidation of anarchism”¹⁰ – led her to formulate a ‘dialectic of spontaneity and organisation.’ For Luxemburg, organisation was born in the midst of class struggle, she held the anarcho-syndicalists put the organisation before struggle; they thought building the union was the same as building the revolutionary struggle, since it was the union that would call the revolutionary general strike.

Ultra-left Criticisms

Communist writer Gilles Dauvé has been particularly critical of anarcho-syndicalism. Whilst the Friends of Durruti and the platformists saw the failures of anarcho-syndicalism as stemming from the absence of a clear communist program, and Rosa Luxemburg and the council communists from a proscriptive disconnect from unforeseen, spontaneous developments of the class struggle, Dauvé argues the problems are far more fundamental. He writes that

⁷ The founding document of the platformist tradition is the ‘Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists’ – <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dielo-truda-workers-cause-organisational-platform-of-the-libertarian-communists>

⁸ <https://struggle.ws/wsm/positions/tradeunions.html>

⁹ For examples of this reform program see the ‘Union Democracy’ section of the WSM position paper; “We fight to change the role of the full-time officials (...) For direct elections to all committees, conference delegations and national officerships, subject to mandation and recall (...) Where revolutionaries can gain enough support to win election to national officerships in large unions, or indeed small ones, this support should not be used to merely elect a candidate. Instead it should be used to fundamentally change the structure of the union in such a way as to return power to the membership and turn the officers into administrators and resource people rather than decision makers.”

¹⁰ The Mass Strike, p15.

“You can’t destroy a society by using the organs which are there to preserve it (...) any class who wants to liberate itself must create its own organ’, H. Lagardelle wrote in 1908, without realizing that his critique could be applied as much to the unions (including a supposed revolutionary syndicalist French CGT on a fast road to bu-reaucratisation and class collaboration) as to the parties of the Second International. Revolutionary syndicalism discarded the voter and preferred the producer: it forgot that bourgeois society creates and lives off both. Communism will go beyond both.”¹¹

Furthermore he argues that

“the purpose of the old labour movement was to take over the same world and manage it in a new way: putting the idle to work, developing production, introducing workers’ democracy (in principle, at least). Only a tiny minority, ‘anarchist’ as well as ‘marxist’, held that a different society meant the destruction of the State, commodity and wage labour, although it rarely defined this as a process, rather as a programme to be put into practice after the seizure of power.”¹²

Contemporary Anarcho-Syndicalism

“Not only did the great determination and ingenuity on the part of the [Puerto Real] workers bring results, but that of the communities too. Mass assemblies both in the yards and surrounding localities involved workers, their families, neighbours and all supporters. Initiating and maintaining entire communities’ involvement in mass assemblies alone was fine achievement.”

– Solidarity Federation (1995)¹³

There are numerous examples of contemporary anarcho-syndicalist practice, from the small group organising in Germany and the Netherlands described in FAU Bremen’s ‘Notes from the class struggle’ pamphlet,¹⁴ to the McDonalds Workers Resistance network,¹⁵ to recent struggles in Spain, Australia and elsewhere. However, we will focus on two examples that go beyond the limits of the classical anarcho-syndicalism we have considered thus far, and illustrate elements of contemporary practice which are emphasised in the SF’s industrial strategy. These two examples are the struggles around the shipyards in Puerto Real, Spain in 1987, and the Workmates collective that existed amongst track maintenance workers in London in the early part of this decade.

Puerto Real

¹¹ Gilles Dauvé, A contribution to the critique of political autonomy – <https://libcom.org/article/contribution-critique-political-autonomy-gilles-dauve>

¹² Gilles Dauvé, The eclipse and re-emergence of the communist movement – <https://libcom.org/article/eclipse-and-re-emergence-communist-movement-gilles-dauve-and-francois-martin>

¹³ For a far more comprehensive account see the Solidarity Federation pamphlet ‘Anarcho-syndicalism in Puerto Real: from shipyard resistance to community control’ – <https://libcom.org/article/anarcho-syndicalism-puerto-real-shipyard-resistance-community-control>

¹⁴ Available in print from the Solidarity Federation or online here – https://files.libcom.org/files/Class_struggle_Innenteil_final.pdf

¹⁵ See here – <https://libcom.org/article/brief-history-mcdonalds-workers-resistance>

When the Spanish government announced a programme of ‘rationalisation’ at the Puerto Real shipyards, the workforce came out on strike. The CNT was at the forefront in spreading the action to the surrounding population. Not only was the government defeated, but a number of pay and condition improvements were secured. The most noteworthy development was the spread of mass assemblies both in the shipyards and the surrounding communities. These assemblies were the sovereign bodies of the struggle, controlling it from the bottom up. People decided for themselves, rejecting control by unaccountable politicians, union officials or ‘experts’ and ensuring control remained in the workplace and locality.

These bodies reflected the kind of ‘dialectic of spontaneity and organisation’ that Rosa Luxemburg declared anarchism “liquidated” a century ago for lacking. The CNT did not seek to get everyone in the shipyards and surrounding communities to join it and then declare a strike (although their levels of membership and longer-term agitation certainly contributed to their influence), but when the rationalisations were announced they sought instead to initiate mass assemblies open to all workers regardless of union membership, whilst arguing for the core anarcho-syndicalist principles of solidarity, direct action and rank-and-file control.

Workmates

Workmates began as a handful of militants working in various track maintenance and engineering jobs on the London Underground in 2002. These included track installers, track welders, crossing makers, carpenters, ultrasonic rail testers, track vent cleaning gangs, along with lorry drivers. In February 2003, a meeting attended by around 150 workers voted unanimously to move from being a loose collective of RMT members and set up a delegate council along anarcho-syndicalist lines.¹⁶ Each ‘gang’ of workers (typically between 8 and 12) elected a recallable delegate and mandated them to sit on the delegate council.

LUL used a large number of casualised agency staff, most of whom were non-unionised. These workers were also included in the Workmates collective, which was independent of the RMT and open to all workers at LUL (minus scabs and management). The initial struggle Workmates was involved with was resistance to the privatisation of LUL and concomitant attacks on working conditions this entailed. While LUL was privatised, Workmates subsequently scored several victories over working practices after mass meetings organised work-to-rules and delegates consulted with their gangs to plan further action.¹⁷

However, there were also some defeats. These, coupled with high staff turnover meant that the levels of participation and struggle were not sufficient to sustain the delegate council structure. Consequently Workmates waned back to being a residual network of militants rather than an independent union, however a legacy of canteen mass meetings whenever a dispute arises remains, and the levels of solidarity are still high, as demonstrated by the level of support for a militant recently victimised by management in the depot where workmates is centred, which helped force an embarrassing climb-down.¹⁸

¹⁶ <https://libcom.org/article/workmates-direct-action-workplace-organising-london-underground>

¹⁷ <https://libcom.org/article/workmates-direct-action-workplace-organising-london-underground>

¹⁸ See — <https://libcom.org/news/metronet-climb-down-activist-victimisation-15102008>

On Form & Content (The Primacy Of Struggle)

“Communist revolution is the creation of non-profit, non-mercantile, co-operative and fraternal social relations, which implies smashing the State apparatus and doing away with the division between firms, with money as the universal mediator (and master), and with work as a separate activity. That is the content... this content won't come out of any kind of form. Some forms are incompatible with the content. We can't reason like the end was the only thing that mattered: the end is made out of means.”

– Gilles Dauvé (2008)¹⁹

Anarcho-syndicalism is commonly associated with particular organisational forms, namely revolutionary unions, mass meetings and mandated, recallable delegate councils. But it cannot be forgotten that these forms are necessarily the expression of some content. This is much like how a pot-maker can fashion many forms from a single lump of clay, but cannot fashion anything without the clay to start with. Structure requires substance, content precedes form. However we are not philosophers interested in such niceties for their own sake, but for their practical implications. So what is this content to which anarcho-syndicalism seeks to give form?

Simply, it is class struggle. Conflict between classes is immanent to capitalism, since capital is defined by our exploitation. We understand class struggle as a process of self-organisation to collectively advance our concrete, human needs as workers. Since these needs are in conflict with the needs of capital accumulation, the rejection of inhuman conditions carries with it the seed of a future human community; libertarian communism, the revolution described by Dauvé above. With the Workmates collective, we have an example of this content – a certain level of militancy – being given an anarcho-syndicalist form; a form which subsequently dissipated as the level of militant participation ebbed with high staff turnover and several telling defeats.

So while class struggle has primacy over the particular forms it takes, which are only means to advance our concrete needs and ultimately establish a society based on those needs, we do seek to give this struggle particular forms. These forms cannot be created from scratch, but we can seek to give disparate content a particular form, in turn focussing and developing that content. This is where the pot-maker analogy breaks down, because some forms sustain and expand the struggle while others strangle and suppress it. The relationship is dialectical in that the particular form the struggle takes in turn affects the development of the struggle. Since it is the class struggle that will create libertarian communism, we must always give it primacy over the needs of particular organisational forms. This was a lesson drawn by the Friends of Durruti when they found themselves facing expulsion from the CNT for advocating revolutionary struggle against the state of which it had become a part.

Some Necessary Distinctions

“The most important thing that I would to point out, is that [in Puerto Real] we managed to create a structure whereby there was a permanent assembly taking place.

¹⁹ Gilles Dauvé, A contribution to the critique of political autonomy – <https://libcom.org/article/contribution-critique-political-autonomy-gilles-dauve>

In other words decisions within this particular conflict were made by those people who were directly involved in the conflict.”

– Pepe Gomez, CNT (1995)²⁰

Before we can proceed further, we will need to make three conceptual distinctions. The reasons for such precision will become apparent in the following sections, as well as for properly understanding the Industrial Strategy which completes this pamphlet.

Permanent/Non-Permanent Organisations

Pepe Gomez above describes the assemblies in Puerto Real as “permanent”, yet he also notes how they were an expression of a “particular conflict.” Perhaps ‘regular’ captures this meaning better in English. We would define a permanent organisation as one which endures between cycles of struggle – political parties, trade unions and anarchist propaganda groups are all permanent organisations. We would define non-permanent organisations as those which are inexorably the expression of a certain level of struggle and cannot outlive it without becoming something else entirely. The assemblies described by Pepe Gomez would fit into this category. For us therefore regular meetings do not equal permanent organisation.

Mass/Minority Organisations

We call a mass organisation one which is open to essentially all workers in whatever area it operates (we would call a popular organisation one open to all people, regardless of class). We call a minority organisation one which maintains specific, usually political criteria of membership which preclude some from joining. A trade union is an example of a mass organisation. A political group such as the Solidarity Federation is a minority organisation, since it requires agreement with specific, revolutionary aims and principles which are necessarily minority views outside of revolutionary upsurges. Some of the anti-war groups in 2002–4, at least those which organised via open public meetings as was the case in Brighton would be examples of a popular organisations.

Revolutionary/Pro-Revolutionary Organisations

The final distinction we must draw is between revolutionary and pro-revolutionary organisations. We call revolutionary organisations those which are actually capable of making a revolution. These are necessarily mass organisations since no minority can make a revolution on behalf of the class – the pitfalls of such Leninist vanguardism are well known and don’t need repeating here. We call pro-revolutionary organisations those which are in favour of revolution but which are in no position to make it themselves. Propaganda groups would be an example of this. We do find the term ‘pro-revolutionary’ less than ideal, and in fact something like ‘agitational’ might be better. However this doesn’t immediately capture the relationship of the organisation to revolution that we are trying to convey.

Organisation & Organisational Roles

“To organise is always a necessity, but the fixation on your own organisation can be perilous. Against that we believe in the diversity of groups and organisations, that arises from different situations and fulfil different needs in the flow of class struggle. Some are more temporary, while others are continuous.”

²⁰ <https://libcom.org/article/anarcho-syndicalism-puerto-real-shipyard-resistance-community-control>

– Riff Raff (1999)²¹

We can use the distinctions in the previous section to identify four ideal types of organisation. Of course many different forms of organisation are possible, but only some are of interest to anarcho-syndicalists since only some offer the potential to develop the class struggle both in the here-and-now and ultimately in the direction of social revolution and libertarian communism. Now while these are ideal types and therefore not all actually existing organisations fit neatly into one category or the other, they do identify the real tensions present in organisations that try to defy the logic inherent to their particular organisational form. We will discuss real-world examples below to help illustrate the argument.

Mass, Permanent Organisations

Mass, permanent organisations are by definition de-linked from the levels of militancy of their members and class struggle more broadly. Therefore, they are not expressions of the self-organisation of workers sought by anarcho-syndicalists, but for the representation of workers as workers. We therefore recognise that neither trade unions or so-called mass workers' parties are revolutionary organisations. In the case of trade unions, their structural role as representatives of labour power within capitalism compels them to offer disciplined workforces to the employers.

If they cannot offer the promise of industrial peace, they are in no position to negotiate. Such social partnership is inherent to the idea of mass, permanent workers representation, de-linked from class struggle. Furthermore, they divide up the class by trade and in addition to their structural limitations are bound by a host of laws just to make sure they fulfil this function, such as restrictions on secondary action and the notice needed for industrial action, all on pain of the sequestration of funds and imprisonment of officials.

If levels of militancy are low, trade unions work hand-in-hand with management to impose cuts and restructuring. If levels of struggle are higher, they will posture more militantly and operate as a limited expression of that struggle in order to appear to workers to really 'represent' their interests, calling tokenistic one-day strikes and suchlike. There are numerous recent examples.²² As and when such struggles begin to take on a self-organised character and go beyond the institutional and legal limits of the trade union form – by the development of mass meetings, wildcat action, flying pickets etc – two things can happen. The trade union will either come into conflict with the workers (as in the isolation of the Liverpool postal wildcat during the national strikes of 2007²³), or effectively cease to exist as a permanent organisation as it is superseded by the structures of mass meetings and the like, which as expressions of the level of militancy represent a non-permanent, potentially revolutionary supersession of the mass/permanent trade union form.

Consequently, we hold that not only are permanent mass organisations not revolutionary, but that in the final analysis they are counter-revolutionary institutions (note, we are not saying trade unionists are counter-revolutionary, the institutions are). The counter-revolutionary nature of trade unions does not arise from bad leadership, bureaucratisation and a lack of internal democracy, rather the leadership, bureaucratisation and lack of internal democracy arise from the logic of permanent mass organisations representing workers as workers. As revolution-

²¹ See <https://www.riff-raff.se/en/furtherreading/workmove.php>

²² A several are described by a libertarian communist and UNISON convenor here – <https://libcom.org/article/cost-living-pay-increase-struggles-interview-2008>

²³ See <https://libcom.org/article/pay-what-went-wrong-2007>

ary forms are necessarily the expression of class struggle and so necessarily non-permanent, the de-linking of form from content represents a counter-revolutionary inertia.

Of course it does not follow that we reject membership or activity within the trade unions, as their ultimately counter-revolutionary nature does not mean revolution would break out tomorrow if they suddenly ceased to be. Rather, the unions only act as a brake on struggles when they develop a degree of self-organisation in contradiction to the permanent form. Until that point, they do act as a limited expression of struggles precisely to secure their role as representatives. Consequently as workers we think it makes sense to be union members in workplaces where a trade union is recognised.

But as anarcho-syndicalists we hold no illusions in reforming them in accordance with our principles; instead arguing for, and where possible implementing, an anarcho-syndicalist strategy of mass meetings, mandated recallable delegates, delegate councils and secondary solidarity action regardless of the wishes of the union. Reforming the trade unions would be a waste of time, because the very level of self-organisation required to force such reforms would render the reforms themselves redundant, since we'd already be doing the things independently we were lobbying to be allowed to do. In workplaces where there is no recognised union, we advocate alternative structures, which will be discussed below.

Minority, Permanent Organisations

These are the kinds of organisation familiar to us today. There are two distinct pro-revolutionary roles for minority permanent organisations of interest to anarcho-syndicalists: propaganda groups and networks of militants. We see these as two distinct roles that organisations can fulfil. This could be attempted as a single organisation – as is the case with the SF's current attempts to operate a dual structure of locals and industrial networks – or separate organisations, each focusing on its own role. We will elaborate our preference in the following 'how we see it' section, for now it is sufficient to understand that within a given type of organisation there can be distinct roles. We do not find it useful to refer to any kind of minority organisation – even an industrial/workplace one – as a union as in English in particular this has the connotations of mass organisations, for which we reserve the term.

Minority, Non-Permanent Organisations

This type of organisation essentially mirrors minority/permanent ones, except that they will be created out of the needs of the class struggle at given times and places rather than being something we could have a general strategy for building. Examples would be the Friends of Durruti as a hybrid propaganda group/network of militants, and arguably workplace groups like McDonalds Workers Resistance,²⁴ the informal social networks of 'faceless resistance' described by the Swedish communist group Kämpa Tillsammans,²⁵ or some of the groups of anti-war activists that formed during the upsurge in anti-war sentiments in 2002–3. On account of their varied and non-permanent nature the only strategic approach to such organisations we can offer is to support them where they form and to try and create them in our own workplaces or localities as and when conditions permit.

Mass, Non-Permanent Organisations

²⁴ See <https://libcom.org/tags/mcdonalds-workers-resistance>

²⁵ See <https://libcom.org/article/faceless-resistance-everyday-resistance-swedish-bakery-kampa-tillsammans> and <https://libcom.org/article/hamburgers-vs-value-kampa-tillsammans>

Mass, non-permanent organisations are a product of a certain level of class struggle, and therefore they cannot simply be built piecemeal by recruitment. For us, these organisations are the only type that are potentially revolutionary, as they are the mass expression of heightened class conflict. The organisations we can build in the present are the pro-revolutionary, minority ones, which can network, propagandise and agitate to develop the class struggle and give it anarcho-syndicalist forms as it develops. We think failure to recognise the fundamental difference between mass revolutionary organisations and minority pro-revolutionary organisations can only lead to practical confusion and demoralisation. Only if we recognise the relationship of organisation to class struggle can we be clear about what is possible and practical in the here and now and also how this gets us closer to the mass, revolutionary unions we want to see (more on which in the following section ‘how we see it’).

Reprise

It must be borne in mind that these four organisational types are to a certain extent idealised ones. In reality, groups exist that are in fact combinations of them. However these ideal types represent real tensions. For instance the paradox of a mass, directly democratic revolutionary organisation in times when the majority of workers are not pro-revolutionary places real limits on the size of attempts to create revolutionary unions in the here and now. Take for example the split between the Spanish CNT and the CGT over participation in state-run class collaborationist works councils.

The departure of the Swedish SAC from the International Workers Association (IWA) for similar reasons also reflects this paradox: internal democracy in a mass organisation when the majority of workers are not pro-revolutionary means the organisation has to sacrifice either internal democracy or its revolutionary principles – either way breaking with anarcho-syndicalism – the only other alternative being implausibly successful internal education to turn all members into pro-revolutionaries. Furthermore, the very co-existence of revolutionary organisations with the state is a necessarily unstable, temporary situation of dual power, they either make a revolution, are repressed, or accommodate themselves to legal existence as a regularised trade union.

Consequently while the organisational types we have described are not definitive of all actually-existing organisations, they do demonstrate the distinct types that exist and the tensions present within organisations that try to combine them. The paradox is only resolved with increased levels of class struggle and class consciousness – hence revolutionary unions are necessarily non-permanent products of struggle, and attempts to maintain them beyond the struggle of which they are an expression will see them lapse into a counter-revolutionary role. Without militant struggle they couldn’t but become organs for the representation of workers within capitalism, not the ultimate abolition of the working class.

Our Notion Of Revolution

“A libertarian communist economy, a system without the market and where everyone has equal rights to have their needs met, has always been the aim of anarcho-syndicalists. Workers’ self-management would amount to little in a world of inequality with decisions being dictated by the market.”

– Solidarity Federation (2003)²⁶

²⁶ <https://libcom.org/article/economics-freedom-anarcho-syndicalist-alternative-capitalism>

Anarcho-syndicalists are libertarian communists. Without this communist perspective, anarcho-syndicalism would amount to little more than democratic trade unionism for a self-managed capitalism. Communists recognise that capitalism is not simply an undemocratic mode of management, but a mode of production. Making it more democratic doesn't make it any more responsive to human needs so long as money, commodity production and exchange persist. Consequently, against Rudolf Rocker's classical position quoted earlier in this pamphlet, our notion of revolution is not simply the taking over of production in order to self-manage it democratically, but a simultaneous process of communisation – restructuring social production around human need.

This entails not the liberation of the working class envisaged by Rocker, but our abolition as a class and with it the negation of all classes. It also implies not the democratisation of work but its abolition as a separate sphere of human activity. Much activity – waged or not – that is potentially rewarding in itself is reduced to repetitive, alienating work by the requirements of capital accumulation. We don't want democratically self-managed alienation, but its abolition. Furthermore – and this is of practical import to anarcho-syndicalists – whole sectors of the economy need to be abolished altogether, while those that remain need to be radically transformed in terms of the division of labour and the nature of productive activity itself.

This is significant, since while for example mass assemblies of call centre or financial services workers will likely be a part of any revolutionary upsurge, outbound call centres and finance have no place in a libertarian communist society. In parts of the UK these sectors account for nearly half of all employment. But at some point these assemblies would be deciding to dissolve themselves as part of the process of reorganising production around human needs, a process which constitutes social revolution. This once again demonstrates the limitations of the classical approach stressing the goal of self-management alone and reaffirms the need to state clearly and unequivocally that we are communists and that social revolution is a process of communisation.

How We See It

“We want a society based on workers' self-management, solidarity, mutual aid and libertarian communism. That society can only be achieved by working class organisations based on the same principles – revolutionary unions (...) Revolutionary unions are means for working people to organise and fight all the issues – both in the workplace and outside.”

– Solidarity Federation (2005)²⁷

As we have seen, an anarcho-syndicalist union isn't just a really democratic trade union, but an altogether different beast with an altogether different purpose. Permanent mass organisations such as trade unions exist as things which organise workers. By contrast, the revolutionary unions advocated by anarcho-syndicalists are an expression of a process of workers' self-organisation at its higher points. Therefore if we want to see these organisations, we have to agitate to build the class struggle itself, and for it to take these forms as and when class militancy develops sufficiently. 'Building the union' per se literally makes no sense, and represents

²⁷ <http://solfed.org.uk/solfed/solfed-constitution>

a fetishism of form that forgets that the form can only ever be an expression of content, of class struggle.

For us, a revolutionary union is necessarily non-permanent because it is an expression of a given wave of class struggle. It cannot outlive the struggle of which it is an expression without becoming something fundamentally different, something counter-revolutionary, precisely because anarcho-syndicalist unions are defined by militant participation, direct action, solidarity and rank-and-file control. The particular form such unions entail is mass assemblies open to all workers (minus scabs and managers), and mandated recallable delegates forming delegate councils to co-ordinate the struggle. Federation by region and/or industry would also be advised as the numbers of such assemblies grew.

In order to develop the class struggle in a direction where such revolutionary unions are possible, we see two distinct organisational roles to enable anarcho-syndicalists to engage in direct action in the here-and-now. These are libertarian communist propaganda groups (of which anarcho-syndicalist propaganda groups are a subset), and networks of militants (of which industrial networks are a subset, on which we will focus).

In contrast to a platformist 'general union of anarchists' or left communist 'single proletarian party' we take a more pluralist approach to propaganda groups. While we are opposed to needless duplication of effort and resources, we are also opposed to the false unity that often accompanies attempts to unite everyone into one single political organisation. If there are real political differences between groups, they should organise independently. This does not however preclude practical co-operation on concrete projects of common interest. Consequently, while we clearly believe strongly in our ideas and seek to persuade others of them, with regard to propaganda groups we advocate an approach of non-sectarian pluralism and fraternal co-operation wherever possible to spread libertarian communist ideas and develop the class struggle.

In terms of propaganda, our goal is twofold: both to win other pro-revolutionaries to our positions and tactics, and to promote anarcho-syndicalist tactics and libertarian communist ideas amongst the wider class. The most obvious means of the former is the production of pamphlets and engaging in debates with the wider pro-revolutionary milieu – if we are confident in our ideas we should not fear an open confrontation of them with others. The latter goal of spreading our ideas amongst the wider class entails activities like producing and distributing strike bulletins on picket lines or distributing propaganda at workplaces facing redundancies, as well as maintaining accessible online information and holding public meetings.

As to industrial networks, we see membership of these as less determined by ideas and more by economic position (being a militant in a particular industry). Of course a level of theoretical and tactical agreement is required – networks are not apolitical – but we do not see this as being as high as for propaganda groups. For example it would be foolish not to organise with other militants because they have a different understanding of revolution, or are yet to be convinced of its necessity, but nonetheless support direct action, mass meetings and rank-and-file control of struggles.

Consequently we believe membership of a political organisation should not be a precondition of joining an industrial network as it represents an unnecessary barrier to the establishment and growth of such networks. Therefore we see the development of such networks as a concrete project for practical co-operation with other pro-revolutionary groups and non-aligned individuals who also see the need for them. The role of these networks would be to produce industrially specific propaganda and agitate industrially for direct action, solidarity and rank-and-file con-

trol. In the immediate term this means invisible, ‘faceless resistance’, but the goal is to foster open conflict controlled by mass meetings of all workers.

This may seem to represent a separation of political and economic organisation alien to anarcho-syndicalism. We do not agree. Both organisational roles address both ‘economic’ and ‘political’ issues of interest to the class, whether wages and conditions or border controls and the availability of abortions. The only separation is one which is a material fact of capitalist society – we share an economic position with fellow workers who may well be militant without sharing all our political ideas. We simply say this should not be a barrier to common action, only that it should be recognised and organisations structured accordingly. We believe the propaganda group/industrial network roles are a means of achieving this.

Finally, we should say that the list of activities given as examples for each type of organisation is not exhaustive. There are for example times when either type could engage in forms of direct action either to support its members or to support other workers in struggle who for whatever reason cannot take certain forms of action themselves. London Coalition Against Poverty (LCAP) would also be an example of a group that engages in direct action both outside the workplace and beyond just propaganda.²⁸ The possibilities thrown up by the class struggle cannot all be known in advance, and it would be foolish to try and prescribe exactly and exhaustively what each organisation should do. Instead, we seek only to describe the kinds of organisation that can advance the class struggle and move us closer to libertarian communism.

Solidarity Federation Industrial Strategy

The Solidarity Federation seeks to create a militant opposition to the bosses and the state, controlled by the workers themselves. Its strategy can apply equally to those in the official trade unions who wish to organise independently of the union bureaucracy and those who wish to set up other types of self-organisation.

Rank & File Control

Decisions should be made collectively. This means they are made by mass meetings, not by officials in union offices. These mass meetings include all those in the workplace, regardless of union membership. It will not, however, include scabs or managers.

Anyone we elect to negotiate with management should have a mandate from the workforce that gives them clear guidance on what is and is not acceptable. Mass meetings of workers need to be able to recall all delegates.

Direct Action

Direct action at work means strikes, go-slows, working-to-rule, occupations and boycotts. We are opposed to the alternative which is ‘partnership’ with bosses. Workers can only win serious concessions from management when industrial action is used or when bosses fear it might be.

Solidarity

²⁸ We are thinking specifically of the 2001 Brighton bin men’s strike and occupation, where anarchists in conjunction with a wildcat occupation assisted by locking onto bin trucks to prevent scabs using them, while also helping flyer recruitment agencies that were recruiting scabs. See an account here – <https://libcom.org/article/2001-brighton-bin-mens-strike-and-occupation> – The London Coalition Against Poverty (LCAP) would also be an example of a group that engages in direct action both outside the workplace and beyond just propaganda.

Solidarity with other workers is the key to victory. Workers should support each others' disputes despite the anti-trade union laws. We need to approach other workers directly for their support. 'Don't Cross Picket Lines!'

Control of Funds

Strike funds need to be controlled by the workers themselves. Officials will refuse to fund unlawful solidarity action. Union bureaucrats use official backing and strike pay to turn action on and off like a tap.

Unions use a large proportion of their political funds on sponsoring parliamentary candidates. Backing the Labour Party is not in the interests of workers. We should also not fall into the trap of backing so-called 'socialist' candidates. The Parliamentary system is about working class people giving up power and control, not exercising it.

Social Change

The interests of the working class lie in the destruction of capitalist society. The whole of the wealth of society is produced by the workers. However, a portion of this is converted into profits for the shareholders and business people who own the means of production. When workers make wage demands, they are simply trying to win a bigger share of what is rightfully their own.

This means that trade union organisation around traditional bread and butter issues is not enough on its own, although it is vital. As well as a structure of mass meetings and delegates there also needs to be a specifically anarcho-syndicalist presence in any workplace organisation. This will necessarily involve only a minority of workers in the present time. The role of anarcho-syndicalist militants is not to control the workplace organisation but to put forward an anarcho-syndicalist perspective in the meetings of the workplace organisation and attempt to gain broad support for our aims and principles, through propaganda work.

Preamble

Solidarity Federation's ultimate aim is a self-managed, stateless society based on the principle of from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs. It is a society where we are no longer just used as a means to an end by bosses wanting to make money from our labour.

In the medium term and as an essential forerunner to such a society, SolFed promotes and seeks to initiate anarcho-syndicalist unions. To this end, SolFed seeks to create a militant opposition to the bosses and the state, controlled by the workers themselves. Its strategy can apply equally to those in the official trade unions who wish to organise independently of the union bureaucracy and those who wish to set up other types of self-organisation.

Details Of The Strategy

Mass meetings should be seen as an alternative structure to official union structures that are dominated by full-time bureaucrats. Decisions are made collectively in these assemblies. The work of these assemblies in different workplaces should be co-ordinated by delegate councils.

In the most militant workforces regular mass meetings will be held and this is obviously the ideal we are aiming at. This may not be possible in other workplaces where it will only be possible to organise such meetings when a dispute arises.

We need a three-pronged approach to the business of actually setting up an independent organisation at work.

1. In a workplace with a recognised TUC union, an SF member would join the union but promote an anarcho-syndicalist strategy. This would involve organising workplace assemblies to make collective decisions on workplace issues. However, workers will still be likely to hold union cards here to avoid splits in the workplace between union members and non-union members.

2. In a non-unionised workplace, independent unions, based on the principle of collective decision-making, should be set up wherever possible.

3. In a non-unionised workplace, that is difficult to organise due to a high turnover of staff or a large number of temps, we should just call workers assemblies when a dispute arises.

SF members will also undertake anarcho-syndicalist propaganda work in each scenario. The principles of our industrial strategy would apply to all three approaches.

Comments on Strategy & Struggle

Tony (Manchester Solidarity Federation, March 2009)

Unfortunately due to computer problems I have been unable to put the following critique of the Brighton pamphlet to the Manchester group as a whole. The following discussion document therefore only represents my own views. I would also wish to make it clear that, in the Manchester group, I was the biggest critic of the pamphlet. Had it gone before the group, which I would have preferred, I have no doubt would have been altered to take on board the Manchester groups views. The document would have also been edited down to a smaller size and the poor standard of English improved. This document relates only to the Brighton pamphlet, the Manchester group will present our ideas in relation to the future of networks separately in line with the conference agenda.

Lastly, Manchester did have some primarily discussion on the pamphlet and it was the view of the whole group that we did not see any point in SolFed getting involved in a prolong debate about abstract theory, at the cost of getting out and actually spreading our ideas. Rather we hope that there will be a good well informed debate on the pamphlet at conference; at the end of which we should try to reach some form of consensus and then move on.

I would wish to start by expressing my concerns about the criticisms made of “classical” anarcho-syndicalism in the section of the pamphlet “Our Notion of Revolution.” In this section a quote from Rudolf Rocker is used as evidence that “classical” anarcho-syndicalism’s aim was not to establish of a truly libertarian communist society, but rather a system based on working class self-management of the existing order. The pamphlet argues that “classical” anarcho-syndicalism wanted to introduce a system of “self-managed alienation” and would have retained both a system of monetary exchange and the division of labour. Against Rockers self-management the pamphlet argues the aim of “contemporary” anarcho-syndicalism should be

“communisation – restructuring social production around human need”

Unfortunately, the quote from Rocker is cut off in mid-sentence. The full sentences reads to:

“carry on production and distribution of the products in the interest of the community on the basis of free mutual agreement”

In the next sentence he argues

“labour cartels would take over the existing social capital in each community, determine the needs of the inhabitants of their districts and organise local consumption. Through the agency of the national federation of Labour cartels it would be possible to calculate the total requirement of the country and adjust the work of production accordingly.”

By cutting of Rocker's arguments in mid-sentence I feel that the pamphlet does not give a true sense of his ideas. In the full quote it is clear that he is arguing for the full socialization of the economy with production being reorganized to meet need. It is also clear that he was arguing for the end of monetary exchange. He does not argue that production should be reorganized based on the communities' ability to pay.

Rocker's ideas are in keeping with the situation anarcho-syndicalism faced at the time. Revolutionary syndicalism developed in societies characterized by conditions of abject poverty. It was accepted by revolutionary syndicalism that the first task of the revolution was to lift the whole population out of poverty, based on the idea of "to each according to need."

The urgent need to begin to provide food and clothing for everyone would have in itself meant the total reorganization of production and the end of monetary exchange. As Kropkin noted

"Anarchism understands... that the first concern of the revolution must be to provide food, clothing and shelter for all. "Production" must be adapted as to satisfy this primary need of society... it cannot therefore see the next coming revolution a mere exchange of monetary symbols for labour checks... or an exchange of present capitalism for state capitalism. It sees in it the first step on the road to non-government communism"

This section of the pamphlet also argues that early anarcho-syndicalism failed to comprehend that much of the work process under capitalism was unproductive and as such would not be necessary after the revolution. It is therefore argued that the failure to comprehend the nature of unproductive work "once again demonstrates the limitations of the classical approach" in examining contemporary Britain, where whole sections of the population are engaged in unproductive jobs, such as call centers. This again does not do justice to the early syndicalist movement, for example Alexander Berkman noted that in 1920 some 15 million people out of a workforce of 46 million in the United States, were employed in unproductive work, which would be "released for useful work by the revolution."

But in making this claim in relation to unproductive work the pamphlet does not credit the early revolutionary syndicalists with much imagination. For example at the beginning of the 20th century many people were still employed in domestic service. Is the argument here that the early syndicalist movement argued that after the revolution servant jobs should remain but on a self managed basis?

In any case theory flows from action it is not the other way round. Anarcho-syndicalism's aim is to prepare workers in order to ensure that they and not the Marxist party are able to construct the new society. The hope must be that in the midst of revolution, when everything seems possible, workers in places such as call centers will demand a new world, that does not involve having to cold call people in order to sell them junk.

Let us move on and examine the other concerns in relation to the pamphlet, most notably its conclusion that revolutionary unions can never be made permanent for fear of them ending up counter revolutionary. The pamphlet draws on a number of revolutionary traditions to reach this conclusion. But I would argue that these traditions are mainly from a Marxist economic determinist perspective, that runs counter to the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

Instead of looking at the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism and then setting those ideas against the problems the working class face today and then going on to update anarcho-syndicalism, what

the pamphlet does is takes as its starting point a Marxist view of anarcho-syndicalism and uses that as the basis of developing a 21st century view of anarcho-syndicalism.

The pamphlet draws on the Marxist determinist tradition that tends to see workers' militancy rising and falling in relation to the economy. And as such it places far less emphasis on the need to organize workers on an economic level. This position is reflected in the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg who argued that mass strikes would spontaneously burst out periodically as capitalism developed. She saw mass strikes as temporary periods of working class militancy that would pass when the conditions that created the mass strike passed. For Luxemburg workers' militancy would rise and fall until capitalism began to collapse from its internal contradictions, in the process radicalizing workers, who would then launch a revolutionary mass strike.

The primary concern for Luxemburg was the organization of the revolutionary political party. Organization of working class action was hardly a priority given that mass strikes were spontaneous. As far as Luxemburg was concerned the priority was to provide political leadership. Even during the revolutionary strike the role of the party was to provide political leadership and not get involved in working class organization.

She argued:

“Instead of puzzling their heads with the technical side, with the mechanism, of the mass strike, the social democrats are called upon to assume political leadership in the midst of the revolutionary period.”

Luxemburg's disregard for the organization of class action is shared by both council communism and the ultra left. They too argue that class action is spontaneous but develop the argument further by claiming that any permanent working class organization by its very nature is counter revolutionary.

This aversion to organising class action is essentially based on Marxist economic theory. Marxism sees history as being driven by economic change, the nature of the economy determines the shape of society, including the levels of conflict that take place within it. In this analysis workers' militancy rises and falls in relation to the economy. As such workers' militancy cannot be organized or planned. Class struggle erupts spontaneously out of the social relations created by capitalism. Only then is it given organizational form by the working class.

As such working class organization does not precede class conflict it follows on from it. And only then on a temporary basis, because as militancy recedes so does working class organization. Any attempt to carry forward working class organization after working class militancy has died down will only result in the organization becoming counter revolutionary.

The pamphlet in the main accepts this Marxist approach and argues that “classical” anarcho-syndicalism attempts to maintain a permanent revolutionary union which left it open to reformist tendencies. And that “classical” anarcho-syndicalist approach also failed to understand that action is spontaneous and only then is it given organizational form. As a result it attempted to build the union and then organise action, as such it put form before content, the union before class struggle. A failing that led “classical” anarcho-syndicalism to conclude that it would be able to build a revolutionary union to the point where it made up the majority of the working class and then call the revolutionary strike on a set date and time. The pamphlet having accepted these Marxist criticisms develops a “contemporary” version of anarcho-syndicalism that sees revolutionary unions as a temporary form of organization that exist only during periods of increased militancy.

But the methods of anarcho-syndicalism are not based on economic theory but rather on an anarchist view of human evolution. Anarchism argues that human society is always evolving, seeking new forms to meet the needs of the times. The driving force of this constant change is the desire for ever greater freedom, as the basis for self expression and collective development. At points in humanity's development, oppression stands in the way of the desire for freedom leading to conflict, with revolution breaking out when the oppressor can no longer contain the desire for freedom of the masses.

Under capitalism conflict takes the form of class struggle, which will only come to an end when capitalism is replaced with a libertarian communist society. But anarcho-syndicalism argues that for class conflict to be turned into action, it must be organized and for the revolution to succeed the working class must be prepared.

Anarcho-syndicalism learned the lessons of both the French Commune and the Russian Revolution. It realized that the working class might make the revolution but without preparation, through organization, the revolution could well be lost to the forces of reaction or fall under the leadership of political parties. As Alexander Berkman noted

“lack of understanding and of preparation means certain defeat, either at the hands of reaction or by the experimental theories of would be political party friends”

As way of preparing workers for revolution anarcho-syndicalism argues for direct action, both as a means of winning and as a way of developing the culture of the new world within the old. This concept of building the new world within the old is central to anarcho-syndicalism and dates back to back to the First International. As Bakunin argued the role of the international is

“the organisation of solidarity in the economic struggle of labour against capitalism. On this foundation, at first exclusively material, will rise the intellectual and moral pillars of the new society”

The aim of anarcho-syndicalism then is to organize class struggle as the means of preparing workers for the coming revolution. As Rudolf Rocker argued it is the workers themselves who must

“reconstruct the economic life of the people from the ground up... in the spirit of socialism” it was the role of the anarcho-syndicalist “to prepare the toiling masses in the city and country for this great goal and to bind them together as a militant force is the objective of modern anarcho-syndicalism, and in this its whole purpose is exhausted”

The means by which anarcho-syndicalism seeks to organize class struggle is the revolutionary union. And there should be no misunderstanding of what form the revolutionary union takes. The revolutionary union seeks to organize within the working class and as part of it. The revolutionary union does not just organize in the workplace but also at the heart of working class communal life. It seeks to become the living embodiment of mutual aid and solidarity.

The revolutionary union seeks to become a permanent revolutionary presence that organizes resistance in the form of direct action, both to improve the quality of working class life and as a means of developing the culture of resistance within the working class. The long term aim of the

revolutionary union is to weave anarcho-syndicalist ideas into the very fabric of working class culture as the way to prepare them for the future revolution.

The Brighton pamphlet rejects the idea of revolutionary unions. In rejecting the revolutionary union the pamphlet also rejects the idea of building the new world within the old and as such the whole purpose of anarcho-syndicalism, the need to prepare workers for the coming revolution. The pamphlet argues that SolFed should turn itself into an anarchist political organization that would sit outside of the working class attempting to direct it. The pamphlet's one concession to anarcho-syndicalism is the establishment of revolutionary unions during periods of working class militancy. But the form the pamphlet argues the revolutionary unions will take

is mass assemblies open to all workers (minus scabs and managers), and mandated recallable delegates forming delegate councils to coordinate struggle”

What the pamphlet describes is not a revolutionary union but the working class organizing on a democratic basis through mass assemblies. This is in line with the Marxist idea of class struggle being spontaneous and given organizational form by the working class. The pamphlet, in a nod in the direction of anarcho-syndicalism, has simply taken the Marxist idea of spontaneous working class organization and called it an anarcho-syndicalist union.

It is significant that the pamphlet states we must state clearly:

“we are communist and that social revolution is a process of communization”

One wonders what “we” the pamphlet's referring to. Is it arguing that the temporary “revolutionary union,” in their mass assemblies should state clearly they are communist? Of course not, the “we” the pamphlet is referring to is the anarchist political organization. The pamphlet argues that the political organization should become the permanent organizational revolutionary presence in society, the revolutionary union is reduced to being little more than a democratic means of organizing that springs up from time to time.

If the Marxist position is correct one wonders what has happened to all the spontaneous action by the working class. Riots do occasionally erupt and they are truly spontaneous, but the riot is a means of struggle largely confined to the pre-industrial society and to a certain extent early capitalism. It hard to think of a dispute in modern Britain that erupted spontaneously, the nearest we have had to a mass strike in Britain is the 1926 general strike and that was certainly planned. It may also appear that workers walk out spontaneously over incidents in the workplace but in reality they are invariably organised. Anarcho-syndicalism argues that spontaneity is a rare occurrence and if class conflict is to develop into class action it needs organising.

In the workplace anarcho-syndicalism argues class conflict is a permanent presence. It is the boss who rules in the workplace and it is the worker who must obey. But this class conflict rarely turns into action spontaneously. Only in workplaces where there is some permanent organizational presence are management attacks challenged. Where there is no organizational presence attacks on pay and conditions may provoke anger but that soon turns to despondency. And with each management attack, that despondence increases, to the point where a culture based on “nothing can be done” sets in. A culture made more permanent through the modern human resource techniques, which attempt to install a sense of inclusiveness based on the idea of the boss and the worker being part of the same team.

This writer knows this to be true from his own experience. For many years I worked on the railways during which time we were able to organise a militant depot. This was done at a time when overall class militancy was in decline. The point being that while we were able to organise action on a regular basis, in other depots, where workers were doing exactly the same job and facing the same attacks, organization declined, as reformism failed to cope with management militancy. The difference was that at our depot a few militants come together in the workplace and began to organise. Their militant stance attracted other workers sick of being crapped on. From there, over many years of hard work, a militant workplace organisation was developed.

This was not a case of “organisation was born in the midst of class struggle” as workers “in the middle of the fight, we learn to fight,” but rather a permanent organisational presence being developed over many years that was able to turn anger and discontent into action.

The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is to build militant workplace organization but from a clear revolutionary perspective. It fully realizes that conditions in society may vary and as such the possibility of organizing class struggle. But no matter what the conditions anarcho-syndicalism argues that militant workplace organization cannot be achieved by political grouping organizing outside of the workplace. Organisation in the workplace will have to be built by the revolutionary union that involves itself in the day-to-day struggle of workers. But the aim of anarcho-syndicalism is not to enroll every worker into the revolutionary union but rather to organize mass meeting at which the union argues for militant action.

The mass meeting is not the anarcho-syndicalist union but a democratic means of organizing. The union is made up of workers committed to the methods and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

The pamphlet argues that “classical” anarcho-syndicalism sought to plan the revolution at a set time and date. But I would argue that is a misinterpretation of anarcho-syndicalism. Anarcho-syndicalism has never argued that you can set a date for revolution a week next Monday. The idea that you can plan a revolution is total nonsense. What anarcho-syndicalism seeks is to organize class struggle in opposition to capitalism and the state. This is not represent some master plan nor is the anarcho-syndicalist union some monolithic organization that coordinates class action from the center. The revolutionary union is a decentralized organization where workers organise action to meet their immediate needs.

This will lead to periods of sustained class action, where as one strike ends another starts. This will bring the working class into direct conflict with the state and capitalism. During such periods of increased tension some incident will spark a revolutionary situation, as the forces of the state can no longer contain working class anger. The hope would be that the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism will have already permeated through large section of the working class, who would begin to take control of their workplaces and communities as the revolutionary situation develops, which would lead to the launch of the social general strike. The role of the anarcho-syndicalist union as the revolution unfolds will be to promote, organise and participate in the social general strike as it develops.

These ideas are not new but date back to the early days of revolutionary unionism. For example Alexander Berkman saw the revolutionary process as having three stages. The first two stages of the revolution takes the form of violent action by workers against authority; it was only in the third stage, the constructive or social stage of the revolution, that the general strike takes place and the building of the new society begins. A good description of how anarchosyndicalism saw revolution developing is to be found in the book written by two prominent members of the French CGT entitled “How We Shall Bring About The Revolution.”

In the book a revolutionary situation arises during a period of increased class conflict after the army opens fire on strikers. As the revolutionary process develops, the CGT is not seen as an outside organization that is somehow separate from the working class. But rather CGT members are portrayed as being caught up in the revolutionary atmosphere and are to be found at the heart of the working class, organising within it. In the book the call for the general strike grows organically from within the working. And the CGT only calls for a general strike after workers are already stopping work and taking to the streets. The book depicts the role of the CGT as providing a kind of social infrastructure, which the working class uses to make the revolution.

It can be seen then that the accusations that “classical” anarcho-syndicalism sought to set the date and time of the revolution does simply not stack up. As we noted earlier in the quote from Rocker, anarcho-syndicalism has always argued that the working class must make the revolution; the role of the revolutionary union is to aid them in their task. Which does raise the question of what is meant in the pamphlet when it states

“We call revolutionary organisations as those which are capable of making a revolution. These are necessarily mass organisations since no minority can make a revolution on behalf of the class.”

This statement confusing, as it would seem to imply that the revolutionary organization and not the working class that makes the revolution. Which is not the anarcho-syndicalist approach because it puts the revolutionary organization before the working class.

The important point to make about the pamphlet in relation to revolutions is that having dropped the idea of revolutionary unions we are left with the council communist “it will be alright on the night” approach to revolutions. Which argues that working class permanent organization is not possible because it will become reformist, but once the revolution kicks in the working class suddenly gain perfect revolutionary clarity. In reality without preparation there is every chance that the revolution will be lost or taken over by the Marxist parties as anarcho-syndicalism has always argued.

Finally, no one is arguing that conditions for anarcho-syndicalism are not tough in Britain for all sorts of reasons. But turning SolFed into a permanent political organization brings its own set of problems and will be just as hard to maintain. If the Brighton pamphlet is accepted, the danger is that as SolFed retreats into the comfort zone of being a political organization, we will increasingly come to resemble a council communist organization. With those who favor revolutionary syndicalism finding themselves increasingly marginalized.

Tom (Brighton Solidarity Federation, April 2009)

We would like to thank Tony from Manchester for his considered and comradely criticisms of our pamphlet. A draft of this response has been approved by the Brighton local, but due to time constraints for implementing the suggested changes the final version has not been approved by the group (we met Monday 27th, the IB deadline is Thursday 31st). Thus while it broadly represents the position of the local, it is written in a personal capacity by myself (Tom). Before responding to the specific points raised by Tony, we’d first like to take the opportunity to clarify the motives behind the pamphlet and the process by which it came about.

Motives & Origins Of The Pamphlet

At the weekend school last autumn, amongst many discussions we had over our organisational identity and approach were some conversations between Simon from Brighton and Andy from NELSF. Simon is a former wobbly, and had a bad experience trying to organise his workplace, which basically boiled down to declaring themselves a union before they had the strength to act like one. Andy talked about Workmates, and also his experiences setting up a federation of neighbourhood groups along anarcho-syndicalist lines, which nonetheless became in part a vehicle for reactionaries. The common theme in this discussion was that both ‘structure’ and ‘substance’ were needed – a perfect anarcho-syndicalist constitution guaranteed nothing about the political content of Andy’s community group, Si’s attempt at unionising was similarly structure without the substance to back it up, while Workmates was the (relative) success it was precisely because it had both the substance of a militant workforce and the anarcho-syndicalist structures (sovereign mass meetings, a mandated/recallable delegate council). This idea subsequently developed into the discussion of ‘form and content’ in the pamphlet.

Also around the time of the weekend school I was having a lot of problems at work (forced unpaid overtime, no breaks), and was trying to discuss with workmates to resist. However, this raised the question of how our industrial strategy applied, since mass meetings of all workers did not seem on the cards. Attempts to get people down the pub to discuss things came to nothing, and all I was able to organise was on a very informal basis (which nonetheless did eventually lead to the reestablishment of normal working hours through an informal work-to-rule). I was (and remain) a strong supporter of the industrial strategy, yet I was experiencing a disjunction between it being intellectually satisfying and my practical experiences to which it didn’t immediately relate. However another member of our local (Jack) was involved in various disputes and had managed to open union meetings to all workers, as per the strategy. So the strategy seemed to apply, but to be missing something at the lower end of militancy, for situations before the confidence to hold open mass meetings is present.

Following these two – then separate – trains of thought, and several new members joining the local we organised an internal education meeting in December where comrades prepared presentations on the CNT in the early 20th century through to the 30s, the FORA, our current industrial strategy and the various criticisms levelled at anarcho-syndicalism from different quarters. It was then decided to turn the outcome of those discussions into the pamphlet which was made available a month later, and published as an extended introduction to our industrial strategy. The pamphlet was intended as both a statement of our local’s politics, and of our approach to what are very practical questions; what is a revolutionary union? How can they be created?

How should we organise in their absence? How do these organisations relate to one another, and to other workers in struggle? Thus the pamphlet was not intended as a “prolonged debate about abstract theory”, but as an attempt to relate core anarcho-syndicalist principles to our own experiences and situations in order

“to contribute to new and more effective action, from which we can collectively bring about a better society more quickly”

in the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism as described by the Self-Ed course.

A Classical Straw Man?

Tony writes that we misrepresent Rocker’s position to make out that ‘classical’ anarcho-syndicalism was not adequately libertarian communist. It may well be that we have misrepresented Rudolf Rocker’s views and not given enough credit to those in the early 20th century

movement who were well aware that many jobs would no longer exist after the revolution. We will be sure to further investigate and remedy these points before any future circulation. However, while Rocker's theory may well have been every bit as consistently communist as we would have hoped, and while socially useless work is indeed a capitalist phenomenon rather than a 21st century one, there was seemingly a practical failure of anarcho-syndicalism precisely at its highest point, which the Friends of Durruti identified as the CNT's lack of a program (and rifles).

Now of course the FoD were also anarcho-syndicalists, and practical, rank-and-file militants at that, so clearly there was plurality within the anarcho-syndicalist movement at the time. However it seems to us that they were in the minority and the majority did suffer from a failure to push through with communisation. This is what led to our notion of classical anarcho-syndicalism, which represented both one of the high-watermarks of working class struggle and yet also found itself lacking.

Rocker may not be the best 'authority' to illustrate this. Now in the 500 words or so we spend on this topic, we certainly leave much of the richness and depth of anarcho-syndicalist history out of the picture — and perhaps the result is somewhat caricatured. However we hoped to show that almost taking a 'worst case' view of historical anarcho-syndicalism this did not invalidate anarcho-syndicalist principles and practice, for the anarcho-syndicalist spirit is alive and well. Perhaps most crucially, if we do misrepresent historical anarcho-syndicalism, this would only undermine the novelty of our arguments, but not their veracity.

Similarly in this vein, Tony argues that

“anarcho-syndicalism has never argued that you can set a date for revolution a week next Monday. The idea that you can plan a revolution is total nonsense.”

We agree that it is total nonsense, and are glad that we have such common ground. However, we do think this idea does have a historical association with anarcho-syndicalism — at least according to our own organisation's account, which we consulted in an attempt to avoid such historical controversies. In the SolFed pamphlet 'A short history of British anarcho-syndicalism' we read that

“the GNCTU also developed the earliest incarnation of the Social General Strike — the 'Grand National Holiday'. The idea was that on a set day all the workers would put on their Sunday best and cease work. This would bring the capitalist system to a halt and enable the working class to gain control. The Grand National eventually collapsed before it could attempt to put its plans into action but its ideas were carried on within the British union movement (...) So the basic ideas of anarcho-syndicalism can be seen as a definite trend within British working class thinking and by the beginning of the 20th century they were starting to gain ground.”

Here the idea of the general strike as a pre-planned holiday is clearly labelled a “basic idea of anarcho-syndicalism.” We, like Tony reject such a conception of general strikes, however it appears this is a more contemporary approach, reflecting the lessons of past practice. Again though, whether or not this history is accurate (we will seek confirmation), the most important thing is that such a notion of revolution is indeed nonsense. We make no claim to originality in saying so.

“A Marxist Economic Determinist Perspective”?

Tony writes that

“the pamphlet draws on the Marxist determinist tradition that tends to see workers’ militancy rising and falling in relation to the economy. And as such it places far less emphasis on the need to organize workers on an economic level.”

In all honesty, we are baffled by this assertion. Tony may be surprised to learn that we share much of his critique of councillism and the ultra-left, precisely for its lack of any noteworthy practice, and the spontaneist wait-and-watch approach to class struggle. As our pamphlet was an exposition of our politics and not a critique of others’, we did not go into this. As we also have little appetite for abstract theoretical discussions, we will clarify as briefly as we can. Far from adopting a spontaneist councillist/ultra-left approach, where “working class organization does not precede class conflict it follows on from it”, organisation is central to our very definition of class struggle. We write that

“we understand class struggle as a process of self-organisation to collectively advance our concrete, human needs as workers.”

To square this with our assertion of the primacy of content (struggle) over form (particular organisational forms), we need to distinguish between organisation as a process and an organisation as a thing, a form. Much like a painting is a result of the activity of painting, the thing is the result of a process. A painting cannot precede painting, and a revolutionary organisation cannot precede the process that creates it – a process of self-organisation that constitutes class struggle (concretely, this is everything from the whispered conspiracies out of the boss’ earshot through to the emails/flyers calling mass meetings and the open confrontations and direct actions that result).

We agree that true spontaneity is rare, and more often than not ‘spontaneous’ class struggle is an artefact of viewing from a safe distance. From the shop floor or the canteen meeting, the active (self-) organisation involved in, in fact constituting any such struggle is clear to see. However, certainly at present the vast majority of struggles happen completely independently of anarcho-syndicalist militants, so while not necessarily spontaneous, they are autonomous of our organisation. While we are sure this is elementary, the point is simply that organisations of pro-revolutionaries must be flexible towards developments in struggles that may have been unanticipated, and certainly were not planned by them as in the Grand National holiday. This — and not a veiled councillist agenda — is why we quote Luxemburg’s ‘dialectic of spontaneity and organisation’ with regard to the role the anarchosyndicalist organisation played in Puerto Real; organising mass assemblies, but also responsive to them.

We certainly also reject economic determinism. While clearly the state of the economy has an effect on levels of militancy – for instance the current spate of occupations seems clearly related to the recession – the relationship is not linear and mechanical, and is confounded by numerous other variables, including in principle the organisation of pro-revolutionaries such as ourselves. Furthermore, far from rejecting permanent organisation on a (political-) economic level, we advocate permanent industrial and regional networks of militant workers organised along anarcho-syndicalist lines which can seek to agitate and link-up struggles in a given sector or region. But we will say more on what we advocate below.

Anarcho-Bolshevism?

Tony claims that:

“the pamphlet argues that SolFed should turn itself into an anarchist political organization that would sit outside of the working class attempting to direct it.”

As with the charge of Marxist economic determinism, we are at a loss as to how the comrade has read our pamphlet this way! What we do say is:

“a political group such as the Solidarity Federation is a minority organisation.”

This is not a statement of aspiration, but a statement of fact; at present, we are almost entirely an anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group. We continue by saying that:

“in order to develop the class struggle in a direction where such revolutionary unions are possible, we see two distinct organisational roles to enable anarcho-syndicalists to engage in direct action in the here-and-now. These are libertarian communist propaganda groups (of which anarcho-syndicalist propaganda groups are a subset), and networks of militants (of which industrial networks are a subset, on which we will focus).”

The former is what SolFed is at present, the latter is what it could become (the EWN being a small precursor of that).

None of this requires sitting outside the working class attempting to direct it, but organising “to engage in direct action in the here-and-now.” We can perhaps be clearer in how we see it – we would very much like SolFed to be a political-economic network of militants (i.e. an anarcho-syndicalist organisation) rather than an anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group (i.e. an organisation of anarcho-syndicalists). If we wished to be members of an anarchist political organisation there are already several from which to take our pick. But like Tony, we see an overriding need for political-economic organisation and so we are members of SolFed. Are we in fact... in agreement? If so, there is a serious debate to be had as to how we leave what Tony describes as our “comfort zone of being a political organisation” and become, or at least help initiate a truly political-economic anarcho-syndicalist organisation.

What Is An Anarcho-Syndicalist Union?

Finally, a very crucial point given the centrality of it to anarcho-syndicalist politics: what is an anarcho-syndicalist union? For us, drawing on both the historical mass syndicalist unions and the contemporary example of Workmates, a union is a mass organ of struggle (whether in a limited form so as to act as a pressure-release valve/block on self-organisation as in the trade unions, or a revolutionary form as in the kind we advocate in the pamphlet). Tony has a different definition, which we will come to in due course. But first, we must quote something with which we are in 100% agreement – to the point that we will gladly incorporate it into a future incarnation of the pamphlet if he consents:

“The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is to build militant workplace organization but from a clear revolutionary perspective. It fully realizes that conditions in society may vary and as such the possibility of organizing class struggle. But no matter what the conditions anarcho-syndicalism argues that militant workplace organization cannot be achieved by political grouping organizing outside of the workplace.”

Absolutely, and this is the reason we advocate networks of militants! It is true we do also see a role for libertarian communist propaganda groups (which could be anything from the libcom.org group to feminist groups) to help increase the numbers of workers who hold a revolutionary perspective. Tony continues...

“Organisation in the workplace will have to be built by the revolutionary union that involves itself in the day-to-day struggle of workers. But the aim of anarcho-syndicalism is not to enrol every worker into the revolutionary union but rather to organize mass meetings at which the union argues for militant action. The mass meeting is not the anarcho-syndicalist union but a democratic means of organizing. The union is made up of workers committed to the methods and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.”

It is here we part company, but only over semantics. As far as we are concerned, the above quote is an eloquent and precise definition of what we mean by a network of militants. Otherwise, at what arbitrary point would the EWN cease being a ‘union in formation’ and become a union proper? Our pamphlet distinguishes between networks of militants and unions in such a way as to clarify their respective roles and suggest how one could give rise to the other. Describing them both as unions seems to obscure more than it illuminates.

While Tony’s usage of ‘union’ may draw on the contemporary practice of a *sindacato* like the CNT, the word union also has many connotations in English of an organisation that goes on strike etc, i.e. an organ of struggle, not a minority agitational group. While partly this reflects the lack of a tradition of politicised, minority unions in the UK, this confusion of roles is not absent elsewhere – we cite the CNT-CGT split as evidence of the tension between being a revolutionary organisation and a mass organisation in times when revolutionary perspectives are a minority amongst the class. The SAC is another example of a ‘real’ union, which is very different to that which Tony describes. In the case of Workmates for instance, surely the structure of the mass meetings and standing delegate council was the union, and not Andy (and maybe a handful of others) who constituted those with a “revolutionary perspective (...) committed to the methods and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism”?

Now, it does genuinely seem like we are actually in agreement as to what kind of organisations we advocate, and are arguing over their names. This is only of consequence because many of those who would ‘build a union’ such as the IWW, or many of our sympathisers outside SolFed do not have in mind the kind of organisation Tony describes. In this respect, the term used is important, and we set out precisely why we use the terms we do in the pamphlet. However, this discussion has raised a possibility we overlooked; is it possible we could resolve Tony’s definition of a union and our description of a network of militants – being in substance the same thing – by use of the term *syndicate*? This is only a suggestion, but would appear to be both etymologically pleasing, free from adverse connotations and leave us free to use the term ‘revolutionary union’ for any Workmates-esque groups, especially if they federate with one another regionally and industrially...

Our intentions for the pamphlet

The Manchester local formally requested we refrain from further circulation of the pamphlet until after conference, allowing more time for discussion. We agreed to this request and intend to honour it. To be transparent about our future intentions, pending investigation of the possible

misquotations identified by Tony and any subsequent feedback at conference – where we are eager to discuss comrades opinions of it, whether supportive or critical – we intend to publish the pamphlet as a local document. In addition to local prerogative within the federation, there is a recent precedent in support of this course of action. Manchester recently published their pamphlet on anarchism, sex and freedom which had provoked considerable internal controversy. Notwithstanding any reservations we may have about the content of their pamphlet, they were fully within their rights to publish it as a local.

We thank Tony again for his response as it is the only substantive criticism we have received since January. When we internally circulated our pamphlet, which we regard as a valuable document coming out of our concrete experiences, we expected critics to engage in a constructive and comradely way, we hoped to provoke a debate on anarcho-syndicalism as a living tradition. Instead it was met at first by deafening silence, then by oblique suggestions that we were in breach of the constitution or even that we were not anarcho-syndicalists. (Our response here should put these concerns to rest.) Thus we feel the internal culture of the federation is somewhat lacking, even stifling.

We also think that SolFed is not making best use of the knowledge and expertise of its members. For example, we are not necessarily scholars of anarcho-syndicalist history – nor should this be a requirement if SolFed is to ever become what it aims to be – but members including Tony and others have detailed knowledge of anarchosyndicalist history and the deep understanding that comes from experiences accumulated over many years. This is something we respect and we regard it as a valuable resource which we believe SolFed needs to make better use of.

If we publish, we will make clear the pamphlet is representative only of the local's views and subject to ongoing internal discussion within the national organisation. We will also make clear it is not a final and comprehensive statement, but a provisional one subject to future improvement following further discussions. However it remains an accurate statement of the politics of our local, and as the above response to Tony hopefully illustrates, is far from being a councillist manifesto, a proposal to turn SolFed into a political group outside the wider class or an abandonment of revolutionary unions (even in the sense Tony uses the term).

Neil (North London Solidarity Federation, April 2009)

Like Manchester I think this works best as an internal position paper to stimulate debate, it would need a great deal of work to be acceptable as a publication of Brighton local, because it is not based on our shared principles, and is not suitable for publication by the Federation. However, it is good to actually discuss anarcho-syndicalism, which seems to be the last thing we talk about. That may be why people can have a relatively poor understanding of what it is.

I am broadly in agreement with Tony's comments, but I think it would be useful to address the left-communist viewpoint simply because it has been so widely-adopted by anarchists. That is in part due to the kind of misunderstandings about anarcho-syndicalism described as "classical Anarcho-syndicalism" in the pamphlet. As it stands, however, the authors have not moved sufficiently away from a position of justifying anarcho-syndicalism to left-communists towards providing a critique of left-communism from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective. The latter is something which does need to be done and I congratulate Brighton for addressing the issue.

Much of the tone strikes me as wrong, for example the “internal” footnote 3 on the social general strike:

“this notion is not entirely consigned to history; the Solidarity Federation constitution states...”

I’m not sure Brighton intend to condemn their own organisation for being stuck in the past, but that is how it reads. There is evidently a greater knowledge of Marxist theorists than there is of anarcho-syndicalist history and writings, which leaves the pamphlet unbalanced even on its own terms and perhaps accounts for the views Tony addresses.

On the Puerto Real example of contemporary Anarcho-syndicalism, are we really to believe that the CNT did not try to (and succeed in) recruit(ing) workers who found assemblyism valuable? Under the terminology used, an anarcho-syndicalist union is both “permanent” and “pro-revolutionary” and seeks to recruit workers to it, rather than to networks outside it. What regulates its size and nature is the adherence to revolutionary principles and practice, in relation to the prevailing conditions; i.e. it will be small in non-revolutionary times and grow as conditions favour such organisation.

Tony is right to criticise the categories used as deterministic. Workmates was not an anarcho-syndicalist union, it used anarcho-syndicalist methods to organise workers for militancy led by RMT, and consequently did not try to recruit workers to it but to organise them. That is the distinction between it and an anarcho-syndicalist union, not a matter of categorisation. There is also a lack of understanding of what a political-economic organisation is which I think is a wider problem in SF than just what Brighton display in the pamphlet. A union is a political-economic organisation. Social democratic unions have political-economic content even though “politics” is left to a separate political organisation.

That content is different to that of an anarcho-syndicalist union, which rejects the “need” for separate political organisation and seeks to occupy that space, partly in order to deny it to those who would enslave us in our own name. Brighton offer no analysis of this political-economic content, or of how social democratic unions behave and why. For example, why was the RMT leadership more supportive of London Underground track workers when they were employed by a private consortium than when they returned to direct employment by the state if not because the former are social democrats who believe in state ownership and are less supportive of workers’ struggles against it? That is an illustration of how the social democratic political-economic content of the existing unions influences their practice even though the actual relationship of their members to management has barely changed. The latter is important because if we are trying to recruit actual workers rather than left-communist ideologues we have to relate our ideas to their experience. Class struggle will always be a more useful source of theory than texts. More of this would be necessary in order for the pamphlet to fulfil the role its authors intend for it.

An anarcho-syndicalist union is a “permanent”, “pro-revolutionary” organisation in Brighton’s terms. It is also the case that just because we advocate our methods of organisation to the wider working class regardless of membership of the anarcho-syndicalist union, it doesn’t mean that the anarcho-syndicalist union does not itself act in the same way and recruit workers through the wider organisation so that the latter become part of it. So, in a revolutionary situation it is a “mass”, “revolutionary” organisation. The categories used are artificially separated and while useful in terms of provoking thought, not much use in analysing the nature and role

of organisations in the class struggle. An anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group is not a political group, it is political-economic but without a mass membership. It does not seek any kind of political role, but to propagandise the anarcho-syndicalist union to workers so that they will build it. The anarcho-syndicalist union moves into the political space which in social democratic theory is occupied by a party, but remains political-economic in nature.

Finally, because I'm writing this very late, I do not advocate the separation of networks from SF. I have argued – to the usual resounding silence which accompanies ideas which are not seen as needing to be opposed – that it should be possible to join a network without joining a local. The problem as I see it is that we haven't distinguished between the role of an anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group and that of an anarchist federation. The latter exists to propagate anarchist ideas on a whole range of topics, the former specifically to advocate their application to the class struggle, necessarily limiting their range. One of our problems is that we have become stuck in a niche of being a specific current within anarchism, rather than being a propaganda group for its application to the class struggle. This has left us competing with the AF for members rather than working to build a union organisation, including a union centre, local industrial unions and industrial networks, through the class struggle. We need to divest ourselves of the functions of an anarchist federation and to present ourselves as applying anarchist ideas and methods to the class struggle, chiefly in the workplace but we were quite influential in the anti-Poll Tax campaign, rather than as a specific anarchist current. In short, we need to demystify our ideas and advocate them to workers so that the latter will become anarcho-syndicalists through struggle and organisation rather than through study. Anarcho-syndicalism is for workers, not just for anarcho-syndicalists.

Tom (Brighton Solidarity Federation)

This is adapted from an email written to an American comrade who inquired about 'Strategy & Struggle' in Feb 2010. It's written in a personal capacity, but gives some idea of how the discussion has moved on since April 2009.

With hindsight we didn't articulate ourselves very clearly in places, and the terminology sometimes obscured more than it revealed, plus we did Rudolf Rocker a real disservice by lumping him in with self-management of capitalism types...

Basically there's been a really good debate within SolFed over the past year, so we've held off publishing a follow-up as it looks like there might be a consensus emerging which could lead to a new pamphlet. I think the mass/minority distinction was problematic since what defines an anarcho-syndicalist union is its political-economic character, i.e. it's neither a 'union for all workers' in the IWW sense nor a specific political organisation with positions on things, theoretical unity etc.

In the words of one of our internal critics, which personally I fully agree with:

“The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is to build militant workplace organization but from a clear revolutionary perspective. It fully realizes that conditions in society may vary and as such the possibility of organizing class struggle. But no matter what the conditions anarcho-syndicalism argues that militant workplace organization cannot be achieved by political grouping organizing outside of the workplace. Organisation in the workplace will have to be built by the revolutionary union that involves itself in

the day-to-day struggle of workers. But the aim of anarcho-syndicalism is not to enroll every worker into the revolutionary union but rather to organize mass meetings at which the union argues for militant action. The mass meeting is not the anarcho-syndicalist union but a democratic means of organizing. The union is made up of workers committed to the methods and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.”

this then clarifies the relationship between the revolutionary union and mass meetings such as those seen in Puerto Real, and by extension to the ‘system of free councils’ desired by the IWA, Rocker & Maximov’s support for soviets etc. The union consists of revolutionary workers and seeks to organise mass meetings to bring all workers into the struggle. If there were lots of them simultaneously they could send delegates to regional/industrial workers councils and there’s your revolutionary counter-power to the state.

I think our confusion arose because anarcho-syndicalism grew out of ‘neutral’ syndicalism (e.g. the Charter of Amiens unions) who still saw the union as the unitary body of the class which would take over the running of society (the wobblies also fall broadly into this camp). So in Spain there were no workers’ councils, instead everyone was told to join a union. There was also SolFed literature referring to ‘One Big Union’, so we presumed this needed arguing against. This is partly what led to our somewhat counter-intuitive definition of a union as ‘mass, non-permanent’ organisation, quite similar to what Isaac Puente described in 1932:

“The union: in it combine spontaneously the workers from factories and all places of collective exploitation.”

So really what we described as ‘classical anarcho-syndicalism’ referred to pre-anarcho/neutral/simple syndicalism. What we called a revolutionary union was an assembly from which delegates could be drawn to form workers’ councils. And what we called a network of militants is effectively an anarcho-syndicalist union, although it’s probably worth separating those terms out since a union can actually organise mass meetings/conflicts whereas a network simply puts like-minded workers in touch to advocate them. As another critic wrote:

“Under the terminology used, an anarcho-syndicalist union is both “permanent” and “pro-revolutionary” and seeks to recruit workers to it, rather than to networks outside it. What regulates its size and nature is the adherence to revolutionary principles and practice, in relation to the prevailing conditions; i.e. it will be small in non-revolutionary times and grow as conditions favour such organization.”

So I think our terminology was confusing and our historical scholarship sloppy, but the essence of what we were getting at we stand by. Anarcho-syndicalism is not One Big Unionism and is defined by both a clear revolutionary perspective and organising in the economic sphere as workers. I think mass/minority is terminology more suited to platformist/councillist approaches of specific political organisation and mass movement, and thus wasn’t suited to describing anarcho-syndicalism which takes an altogether different approach.

Anarcho-Syndicalism

– Tony, Manchester Solidarity Federation

Fundamental to our belief is the idea that workers need to organise. Anarcho-syndicalism grew out of the early workers' movement which above all else demanded working class organisation and unity. We reject the idea that the conditions created by capitalism will automatically lead to workers' resistance, conditions may shape the struggle they do not guarantee it. For us the key determinant in workers' resistance is organisation, the greater the organisation the more resistance the greater the chance of success.

Our aim, no matter what the circumstances, is the organisation of workers in the face of oppression and capitalist exploitation. As such the anarcho-syndicalist union is at once both a political and economic organisation. We reject outright any attempt to divide the political from the economic struggle, for us the political is the economic and vice versa.

We unite the political and the economic because it reflects the realities under capitalism. The working class is at the one and same time oppressed and exploited. If they are ever to be truly free workers must challenge both capitalist exploitation and the power capitalism and the state has over them.

The coming together of exploitation and oppression can be clearly seen in the smallest of workplace actions. When workers organise they challenge the management's right to manage. It matters little whether this takes the form of a fight for increased wages or a fight to resist management's attempt to impose new working conditions. In fighting one they fight the other, the two cannot not be separated one flows from the other. Should the workers win a strike for increased wages their power to win better conditions improves and vice versa.

The aim of the anarcho-syndicalist union is to act as an organisational force in the daily lives of the working class. We seek to organise workplace and community resistance and constantly link that to the need to overthrow the twin evils of capitalism and the state. We seek the overthrow of capitalism to be replaced by the self managed libertarian communist society.

Though the physical organisation of resistance is central to our ideas we do not reject revolutionary theory. But for anarcho-syndicalism theory grows out of practice and as such should be seen as an aid to organising workers' struggle and not, as so often is the case, a means of dominating and controlling it. And as capitalism is dynamic with conditions constantly changing so must the methods used by workers to fight it.

It is only the anarcho-syndicalist union immersed in the day to day struggle of the worker that can constantly adapt and change tactics to meet changing conditions. And as our tactics change and develop so must our ideas. It is therefore through our involvement in the daily struggle that the anarcho-syndicalist union is able to ensure that revolutionary theory keeps pace with practical realities and relevant to the workers' movement.

As anarcho-syndicalist we oppose all forms of political parties. We reject the notion that governments act in the interest of the working class. They may bring forward minor improvements in order gain electorally but fundamental change can only come about through the power of

organised labour. We also reject the so called revolutionary parties on the grounds that like all political parties they seek power. Our aim is the democratically controlled self managed society not one in which the capitalist parties are simply replaced with a Marxist dictatorship.

As opposed to reliance on politicians we argue that the workers must take control of their own struggles. We argue for direct action both as a means by which workers can democratically control their struggle and as the most effective weapon in the fight against capitalism. As opposed to voting every few years for some useless politician; we argue that people must organise and confront capitalism and the state head on.

But for anarcho-syndicalists direct action is much more than a tactic to be employed against capitalism. Through the use of direct action we seek to build a culture of solidarity and mutual aid in direct opposition to the dominant capitalist culture based on narrow self interest and greed.

Through direct action the working class can develop the skills needed to administer the future libertarian society freeing them from the reliance on political leaders and the state. And through direct action the working class can forge the bonds of solidarity that will form the ethos that will underpin the future libertarian communist society. Through direct action in the here and now the workers can begin to build the foundations of the future libertarian society.

The anarcho-syndicalist union should not be seen as a monolithic organisation that seeks to organise every aspect of human activity. Our aim is to build a revolutionary culture within the working class that will form the basis of the future libertarian communist society. And this revolutionary culture will be as rich and diverse as humanity itself. It will comprise of countless groups and interests that will operate both in and outside of the union or both.

The role of the union is to bring this diverse group together on the basis of class in opposition to capitalism and the state. At the heart of the anarcho-syndicalist union is the local which aims to be at the centre of community and workplace struggle in the surrounding area. But the role of the local goes beyond that, it provides the physical space where a diverse range of groups such as oppressed, cultural and education groups can organise. The local acts as the social, political and economic centre for working class struggle in a given area. It is the physical embodiment of our beliefs and methods, the means by which workers become anarcho-syndicalist not just on the basis of ideas but activity.

Just as the anarcho-syndicalist union cannot and does not wish to organise all aspects of human activity nor does it seek to organise the revolution on behalf of the working class. For us revolutions come about when the anger of the oppressed can no longer be contained by the power of the oppressors, leading to an explosion of anger that drives revolutionary change. Revolutions break out, they cannot be planned, they cannot be predicted, they cannot be organised.

But revolutions if they are to succeed have to quickly move from anger to positive action. The revolution has to be defended, people have to eat, they need water and electricity, these things have to be organised. And the role of anarcho-syndicalist union is to act as an organising force within the revolution to ensure its success. The anarcho-syndicalist union seeks to organise the insurrectionary general strike within the revolutionary process as the means by which the workers take control of the streets and the workplace.

The insurrectionary general strike marks the start of the process of building the libertarian communist society. The economy and the distribution of goods and services is taken over under workers' democratic control and run on the basis of need not greed. Militias are formed to defend the revolution from the external forces of capitalism and to shut down the forces of the state. The building blocks of the new society are put in place.

The role of the anarcho-syndicalist union then is straight forward. It organises the daily struggle both as a means of making immediate gains and to train and prepare people for revolution. When revolutions break out the role of the union is to organise within it to try to ensure its success. It is the job of the working class to overthrow capitalism and bring about the free society. The aim of anarcho-syndicalism is to aid them in this task.

Anarcho-Syndicalism, Marxism & The Anarchist Movement

Anarcho-syndicalism can agree with many aspects of the Marxist critique of capitalism. Where we irretrievably fall out is the way we hope to bring about capitalism's demise. Marxism elevates socialism to a science; it then uses scientific theory to underpin its belief in the need for a political organisation. In contrast anarcho-syndicalists rejects the idea of the political organisation or party and it is over this point that Marxism and anarcho-syndicalism can never agree.

Anarcho-syndicalism unites theory and practice in the form of the union, Marxist artificially divides theory from practice by organising on the basis of ideas in the shape of the political party. Anarcho-syndicalism develops its ideas in struggle seeing theory as an aid to workers' struggle. The Marxist political organisation develops theory outside of the day to day struggle seeing it as a blueprint for revolution it then seeks to impose on the working class. Anarcho-syndicalism seeks to organise class struggle from within and as part of the working class, Marxism seeks to lead the working class from above detached from the daily struggle.

In elevating theory above practice Marxism creates a two tier labour movement. For Marxism the understanding of theory is the key determinant in winning or losing in the class struggle. And as it is the political organisation that develops and best understands theory it is only natural that they should direct and lead the workers in their struggle. This inevitably leads to political content being stripped out from the day to day class struggle and placed it in the hands of a political leadership. Which then acts on behalf of workers leading to a worker movement based on leaders and lead and a post revolutionary society based on govern and governed.

The above critique of Marxism is well understood by the anarchist movement who reject the idea of the Marxist Party. But Marxist ideas on organisation does influence some anarchist thinking leading them to favour the setting up a purely political organisation.

When this occurs not surprisingly it can lead to tensions between anarcho-syndicalism and the anarchist political organisation. And it is this that has led to disagreements between the SolFed and the AF. Though it is true to say that many in AF favour the setting up of a traditional Anarchist Federation it is also fair to say that that some see the AF more as purely political organisation.

In arguing for the anarchist political organisation many seem to draw on the council communist tradition to underpin their thinking. Certainly the AF ideas on the culture of resistance and their critiques of the unions are drawn from council communism. But it is the idea that the AF somehow acts as the memory of the working class that we should find a little disturbing as anarcho-syndicalists.

On the first reading AF concept of acting as a kind of "memory" of workers' ideas and tactics during prolonged down turns in struggle may seem pretty benign but from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective this concept is fraught with problems. For this memory the AF carries

within it is not something bequeathed to them by workers for safe keeping but is in effect the AF theories on how the working class should organise. This would not pose such a problem if the AF saw part of its role as the direct organisation of workers. Any ideas they may have developed within the political organisation would then have to be tested in the day to day struggle and adjusted accordingly.

But as a purely political organisation the AF like all political organisations runs the risk of turning into a political leadership. The political organisation does not seek to directly organise class struggle. Instead it stands outside of the class struggle and develops ideas. These ideas are then introduced into the workers' movement with the aim of shaping and directing it. This inevitably leads to a relationship based on political leadership and led which is a Marxist form of organisation.

Those in the AF who lean towards the concept of an anarchist political organisation do so because they doubt or reject the idea that a permanent workers organisation or union can sustain its revolutionary content. The normal reprise from anarcho-syndicalists against the claim that involvement in the day to day struggle may make them prone to reformism is to enquire as to what it is that prevents the political organisation from becoming reformist as many have done in the past.

But in the interest of greater understanding the onus should be on us to explain how we go about organising and negotiating within the day to day struggle in order to demonstrate why it is we reject the charge of reformism.

The first priority of the anarcho-syndicalist union is the organisation of struggle. Within the workplace the workers and management are on opposite sides. Both management and the reformist union seek to conceal the true nature of relations in the workplace under capitalism through platitudes about cooperation and team building. The anarcho-syndicalist union through workplace organising seeks to expose the real nature of class relations and create a militant workplace culture in opposition to management.

As militant workplace organisation grows the true nature of class relations become increasingly evident. Tension between workers and management grows until the point is reached where the two sides face each other as permanent enemies locked in a constant struggle for workplace power. The anarcho-syndicalist union as the organising force within the wider workforce is particularly loathed by management who see it as the source of all their problems.

From the anarcho-syndicalist perspective the more workers organise the clearer the true nature of relations within the workplace become. As such through the organisation of struggle the anarcho-syndicalist belief that the bosses and workers have nothing in common is confirmed in the reality of the workplace.

Now it is true to say that management will do all in its power to defeat the anarcho-syndicalist union and that could lead to sacking which in turn could lead to demoralisation. But it is hard to understand how through organisation of struggle, leading to ever greater tension between management and union, can lead the anarcho-syndicalist union to adopt reformism based on the belief that workers and boss are in fact on the same side and have a mutual interest.

Equally, the argument that the anarcho-syndicalist union by negotiating with capitalism risks becoming part of it does not stand the reality test. This is to equate negotiation with class collaboration. But as every demand short of revolution is a negotiation this approach would in effect brand every organisation that did not demand revolution in every situation potentially reformist.

This is nonsense. Negotiations are simply meetings between management and workers. The factor that determines the nature of negotiations is who is doing the negotiating. Our approach to negotiations is to see them as part of class struggle. We do not enter into negotiations looking for a “just” or “fair” result but rather to demand as much as possible in any given circumstance. If an action has management on the run then we do not limit ourselves to the original demand but rather we seek to press home our advantage and make as many gains as possible.

It has to be understood that strike action is economic war carried out at a distance, as such it is always hard to assess what effect a dispute is having on the other side. The only time that the two sides come together is during negotiations. One of the primary aims of negotiations therefore is to try to assess what effect the action is having on management, while attempting to conceal any weakness.

Should it become clear that the effect of the action is having a greater effect than first thought then obviously demands made should increase. The anarcho-syndicalist goes into negotiations as mandated delegate but only an idiot would not ask for more if it becomes apparent that management are on the run.

But negotiations have a further role, they can be used as part of the process of demoralising management. The anarcho-syndicalist union engages in class war and as in any war morale or alternately demoralisation plays an important role in the battle. The anarcho-syndicalist union seeks to install in management a sense of fear, hatred and bewilderment.

Strike action is a fundamental part of this process, the aim of strike action is not only to win immediate gains, they are also a means of breaking management’s morale. Successful strike action fundamentally changes the balance of power between workers and management, it changes reality. It is therefore not just about the immediate gains but extending the power the anarcho-syndicalist union has over management.

And negotiations form part of the process of increasing the hold the anarcho-syndicalist union has over management. Negotiations are not conducted in the atmosphere of an afternoon tea party at the end of which both sides express desire to return to a good working relationship. Anarcho-syndicalism is based on class hatred and the delegates have a duty to bring that class hatred to the negotiating table.

Wherever possible the delegates should brutalise and intimidate management. At the end of negotiations management should be left with a sense that they are faced with a belligerent uncontrollable bunch of revolutionary lunatics who at any time may call strike action. This will put management under constant pressure, never sure if saying no will lead to a repeat of strike action. From our perspective the best form of manager is one on the verge of a nervous breakdown and one of the aims of strike action is to bring that happy situation about.

Again it is hard to see how this form of negotiation can lead to the anarcho-syndicalist union being assimilated into capitalism. But perhaps the most pertinent question here is what those who have doubts about the anarcho-syndicalist union would put in its place?

Apart from just ignoring the workplace which unfortunately many in the anarchist movement do there are only a couple of alternatives. One is to retreat into the political organisation for fear of reformism leaving the day to day struggle in the hands of the reformist union, or rely on spontaneous action. Either way leads to the demoralisation of the working class. The reformist unions sell workers out, while waiting for spontaneity invariably means nothing happens and management are able to impose themselves at will.

Towards An Anarcho-Syndicalist Union

Over the last few years we have begun to clarify our ideas as to the nature of the anarcho-syndicalist union and how we see them bringing about revolutionary change. But we still do not have any clear vision of how we start the process of organising a union and once started how we see that process developing to the point where we can declare ourselves a union. And this yawning gap in our thinking has to be filled by the industrial strategy integrated with a strategy aimed at community organisation.

The task we face as anarcho-syndicalists in the workplace is how we can begin to organise some form of resistance. And then develop that resistance to the point where it can be turned into a permanent militant organisation capable of changing the power relations within the workplace.

If our strategy is to reflect these aims we must start at the position many people find themselves in, alone attempting to organise in the face of what can often seem like an all powerful management. We must begin to map out how isolated activists can begin to organise and how that can be developed into militant workplace organisations.

Though in many ways how we develop workplace organisation remains the same no matter what type of workplace, I feel we have to take into account the presence of reformist unions. In many public sector workplaces there is still some semblance of reformist union organisation. And it may be to our advantage to use these union structures as an aid to building militant workplace organisations. Taking on positions as stewards gives us access to the workplace making it easier to organise, it also puts us in touch with other militants who may share our aim in wanting to organise in the workplace. Both of which may be to our advantage.

However how to organise in the workplace is only one part of the equation. The point of a union is that you are never alone; you have the support and solidarity of the union organisation as a whole. And it is this culture of solidarity that we have to begin to develop within SolFed.

Workplace organisation can be intimidating at the best of times, we have to get to the position as an organisation where we can prepare and support members in this difficult process. To achieve this we have to make the organisation of struggle in the workplace more central to SolFed. We need to begin to see members not just as activists but organisers. We need to train them, give them confidence and make SolFed a collective shared resource, a store of help, advice and knowledge that members can draw upon as they attempt workplace organisation.

And as we develop the culture of solidarity it has to be reflected in our propaganda. We have to come across as a confident, militant, solid organisation able and willing to support its membership. We have to show that by joining SolFed you will get the support help and training which will enable you to take the fight to management. If we can begin to achieve this we will begin to attract people not just on the basis of our revolutionary ideas but also by our determination and commitment to workplace organisation.

But building militant workplace organisations is only half of the battle. Workplace organisations may be militant but that does not automatically make them revolutionary. We can not just limit ourselves to organising workplace meetings and hoping they will as if by magic gain a revolutionary perspective. Our aim is to organise militancy as a stepping stone to revolutionary thinking.

To achieve this aim we must not only look to organise militant action but also to develop the anarcho-syndicalist union. We should first try to recruit individual members and from there look to try and organise SolFed workplace groups. As well as raising issues and where possible

organising action, these groups would put out regular propaganda, attempt to organise meetings and generally attempt to draw people into SolFed.

In the long term the aim would be to increase the organisation to the point where workplace meetings will slowly transform from being simply a militant or primarily economic meeting to that of a meeting of revolutionary workers. In effect the workplace meeting becomes the foundation of the anarcho-syndicalist union in a given workplace.

But the organisation of the union in the individual workplace is only part of the process. The anarcho-syndicalist union does not simply comprise of workplace groups which are then federated into a national organisation. The anarcho-syndicalist union does not limit itself to the workplace. It seeks to bring together workers involved in both the workplace and community struggle and unite them in one common struggle.

It does that from the very first stages of the of the union's development. The individual worker may join SolFed through the workplace but in joining the SF he or she will become part of a local group and an industrial network. These organisational structures become the means of interlocking different aspects of the struggle. But equally important they immerse new members in all areas of class struggle and so educate them to the full extent of anarcho-syndicalist ideas and methods.

Here then we reach the crucial point. The anarcho-syndicalist union develops through the structures we already have in place within SolFed. As such SolFed is the embryonic anarcho-syndicalist union.

Our aim is to develop the existing structures within SolFed to the point where we have enough members and resources to carry out the basic functions of a union. And we can take a lesson from other sections of the IWA. The CNT functions as a union with just a few thousand members and the FAU is moving towards being a union with far less.

Right up to the middle of the 20th century there were attempts to form revolutionary workplace and community organisations. After the war those attempts were partly undermined by the CP put more importantly by a booming economy linked to social democracy. That stable booming economy is rapidly becoming a distant memory and as a result social democracy can no longer deliver gains and is rapidly losing its hold over workers.

We are now presented with the most favourable condition for establishing an anarcho-syndicalist union in 70 years. If we can develop our industrial and community strategies and put them into practice, there is no reason why SolFed cannot quickly grow to the point where we can establish for the first time an anarcho-syndicalist union in Britain.

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