

# **Syndicalism & Revolution**

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## Syndicalism & Revolution

The working class is a subjugated and exploited group within capitalism. As class struggle anti-authoritarians, both Workers Solidarity Movement and Workers Solidarity Alliance believe that the working class has the potential to emancipate itself from class oppression, and in doing so it creates a new social structure without a division into classes. Despite Alain MacSimoin's rejection of syndicalism, there are in fact broad areas of agreement between the WSA and the WSM.

In exploring this I'll look, first, at how I understand class, and, then, how I understand the path by which the working class can emancipate itself.

### Two Classes or Three?

A class is a group differentiated by power relations in social production. There can be different structures in society that can provide power that is the basis of a class.

First, there is ownership of land, buildings, and other means of production by a minority capitalist class. The rest of us are thus forced to sell our time to the owners in order to live. Marx held that ownership is the only basis of class division. From this he inferred that capitalism has two main classes, workers and capitalists.

The WSM adheres to this two-class theory:

"Classes are defined by their relationship to the means of production; their relationship to the factories, machinery, natural resources, etc. with which the wealth of society is created. Although there are groups such as the self-employed and the small farmers, the main classes are the workers and the bosses. It is the labour of the working class that creates the wealth. The bosses, through their ownership and control of the means of production, have legal ownership of this wealth and decide how it is to be distributed."

But this is an inaccurate picture of advanced capitalism. Ownership is indeed the basis of the vastly powerful capitalist class. And the smaller assets of the small business class is the basis of what power they have. But modern capitalism created huge corporate hierarchies to control the labor process, and also required a huge expansion in the state, with similar hierarchies running various government operations. In the process, capitalism created a third main class, which I call the *techno-managerial class*. This class includes managers, and top experts who advise managers and owners, such as finance officers, lawyers, architects, doctors, engineers and so on. These are the people who make up the chain-of-command hierarchies in the corporations and the state. The bosses who working people deal with day to day are mostly the techno-managerial class.

The members of this class may have some small capital holdings but mostly they live by their work. The basis of their prospects in society are things like university educations, credentials, connections, accumulated expertise. The power of this class resides in a relative monopolization of expertise and the levers of decision-making. This class was created through the way capitalist development changed the labor process and the division of labor. Redesigning jobs and work processes, to remove conceptualization and autonomy from the workers and putting control into the hands of a managerial hierarchy, enables firms to enhance their control over what workers do on the job, minimize training costs, and reduce the wages they must pay for scarce skills.

The techno-managerial class participates to some extent in the exploitation of the working class but also has conflicts with the owners — the recent cases of bosses looting corporations like Enron are an example. There is a conflict of interest between managers and owners, and periodic struggle between them.

An important feature of the techno-managerial class is that it has the potential to become a ruling class. This is the historical meaning of the various Marxist-Leninist revolutions. Those revolutions eliminated the capitalist class, created economies based on public ownership, but, nonetheless, the working class continued to be subjugated and exploited. Each of the Marxist-Leninist revolutions consolidated a techno-managerial ruling class.

The potential for a new ruling class of this type to emerge was hinted in a prescient remark of Bakunin. Bakunin warned that Marx's proposal for a party of "scientific socialism" taking power through a state

"would be the rule of scientific intellect, the most autocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant and the most contemptuous of all regimes. This will be a new class, a new hierarchy of sham savants, and the world will be divided into a dominant minority in the name of science, and an immense ignorant minority."<sup>1</sup>

Despite Bakunin's insight, traditional anarchism never developed a theory of the techno-managerial class. This led anarchists to misdescribe the Soviet Union as "state capitalist."

Workers Solidarity Movement says: "Since the early 1920's anarchists have recognised that the Russian economy is capitalist because it maintains the separation of producers from their means of production and undervalues their labour to extract surplus value for a ruling class as in all Capitalist countries."

The "separation of the workers from their means of production" refers only to the ownership relation. Thus they fail to recognize that monopolization of the levers of decision-making and expertise can also be a distinct basis of class power.

And further: "Absence of private property in the Soviet Union is often put forward as evidence that Stalinist countries are not Capitalist but some new 'Post-Capitalist' property form." Note that they assume here that it is the property ownership relation that determines the class nature of the system. If we want to avoid the consolidation of a techno-managerial ruling class in a future revolution, we need a theory of what gives this class power and a program for dissolving the power of this class.<sup>2</sup>

The nature of any new social formation that emerges from major social conflicts, will be determined by the character of the main social forces at work in that process.

The only way that we can ensure that a society that is self-managing emerges as the result of such a social process is if the main movements that are working for change have a self-managing character and practice, so that people have developed the egalitarian and democratic practices and habits required for society itself to be self-managed.

The way in which people organize themselves for change is important in shaping what the outcome will be down the road.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, p. 93

<sup>2</sup> I believe that participatory economics offers a program for dissolving the power of the techno-managerial class. See my article "Participatory Economics and the Self-emancipation of the Working Class". This is my own view; WSA does not necessarily endorse participatory economics.

How do we ensure that social forces in a revolutionary process do not contain within themselves the seeds of a new techno-managerial class emerging, as has happened in the various "Communist" revolutions?

To avoid this outcome we need mass organizations that avoid corporate-style hierarchies, or practices that concentrate the expertise, knowledge, and decision-making in a few. Traits like articulateness, self-confidence, effectiveness as a speaker can be developed through practice, but some people come to social movements with these advantages due to superior education or other advantages. Movements need to develop practices and organizations that can nurture self-education, develop the skills and knowledge of ordinary people who become active in the movement, so that they acquire the ability to be more effective in charting their own course.

## **What Syndicalism Is**

Syndicalism is a strategy for the emancipation of the working class from class oppression; that is, it is a revolutionary strategy. It sees the class struggle as the process out of which a movement is developed that can free humanity from the oppressive structures of capitalism. Syndicalists hold that, in the words of Flora Tristan, "the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves."

We hold that this struggle provides a motivation for workers to organize together and engage in collective action against the bosses; it provides a field of action in which workers can use their "force of numbers" to increase their social power. This field of struggle also provides a school of life, in which workers learn about the nature of the system that oppresses them.

The basic idea of syndicalism is that by developing mass organizations that are self-managed by their participants, particularly organizations rooted in the struggle at the point of production, the working class develops the self-activity, self-confidence, unity, and self-organization that would enable it to emancipate itself from subjugation to an exploiting class. The self-management of the movement itself foreshadows and prefigures self-management of production by the workforce, and the direct self-governance of the society by the people. To create a society in which the mass of the population are directly empowered, directly in control, this process of self-management must first emerge and become entrenched in practices of self-management of struggles within capitalism, to break habits of deference or resignation to forms of hierarchical control.

Traditionally syndicalism was defined in terms of the development of movements in the workplaces, movements for workers control, organizations for the self-management of the struggle with the bosses. But the strategy of developing self-managed mass organizations of struggle can also be applied to other struggles that arise in working class communities, such as struggles over housing, or struggles of public transit riders.

## **Uneven Consciousness**

Although we believe that the working class can develop the capacity to emancipate itself from class oppression, the working class alive today has not, at the present moment, developed this capacity. Why not?

Some anarchists seem to imagine the destruction of the system of oppression as a spontaneous rebellion, something that could happen right now. The assumption is that the working class right

now has the capacity to toss off its subjugation, as a spontaneous act. The problem with such a view is that it cannot explain why this revolution has not already happened.

Social systems of oppression reproduce themselves over time by the social structures, like class position or patriarchy, having an impact in the psyches and habits and expectations and behaviors of everyone. That is why a revolution that can overcome oppression, and not just replicate a new form of oppression, requires a more or less lengthy process of change in the working class itself, a change in people.

To have the capacity to take over the running of the society, the working class needs to develop the self-confidence, leadership skills, self-organization, cohesion, and the vision and values that provide both the power and the aspiration to challenge the bosses for control of the society. As the working class develops in this way, it poses its own "counter-hegemony" (in the words of Antonio Gramsci) to the prevailing culture, politics, and institutions of the capitalist social order.

How far do workers understand the system that oppresses them? What is their sense of power to make changes? How far do they aspire to make changes? These things all vary between individuals, and within the class as a whole — over time, and between different places. "Consciousness" is uneven, and capable of development, in both individuals and the class as a whole.

People learn about the structure of power that dominates them by fighting it. When people become committed to struggle, they acquire the motivation to learn more and acquire the skills needed to make their struggle more effective. If people don't see people willing to stand up for others, if they don't see much opposition to the bosses, they will not tend to think in terms of collective action as a way to deal with the society around them. They will have a sense that "you're on your own."

The development of larger-scale movements begins to give the people involved more power, and this then alters the perceptions of ordinary folks because now they see that there is perhaps the power to change things. And the degree of change that people begin to see as possible will be shaped by their perception of the willingness of others to fight, and to support each other.

The WSM says that the working class is not revolutionary because of "ideas" that "tie the working class to capitalism." Obviously there is an element of truth to this. But lack of exposure to "ideas" propagated by anarchist activists (and other critics of the prevailing capitalist system) is not a complete explanation for why the working class is not revolutionary. If working people have a sense of inefficacy, that "you can't fight city hall," they will be skeptical about our claims that they have the power to vastly change society. In the absence of a sense of their own power, workers will view your anarchist ideas as "nice but unrealistic," not something to take seriously and act on. In other words, you must also explain why working people are often uninterested in finding out more about even the revolutionary ideas they do run into.

Many ordinary workers in the U.S. today tend to be highly skeptical about their ability to change things. A fatalistic attitude of "You can't fight city hall" is widespread. This doesn't happen because of lack of discontent. Harsh life prospects and deteriorating wage and other conditions, worse job prospects, over the past three decades in the U.S. has generated a lot of discontent and anger. The skepticism and fatalism derive from a lack of recent experience with successful collective action and the absence of forms of organization that working people feel are "theirs."<sup>3</sup>

The hierarchical structure of the unions contributes to this. The national unions and large amalgamated locals in the U.S. tend to be dominated by "professionals of representation," a hierar-

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Croteau's recent book *Politics and the Class Divide* provides a good look at this through the eyes of workers

chy of paid officials and staff, who control bargaining with employers, the handling of grievances, and tend to have a social service relationship to the rank and file. Local unions that pursue a more independent, militant stance against employers are likely to run up against roadblocks of officials to effective action. To take an example, a campaign of self-organization by 600 immigrant baggage screeners at San Francisco International Airport was moving towards a strike to fight the Bush gang's threat to replace them with U.S. citizens. The strike would have shut down the airport. This move was short-circuited by an official of the SEIU, on the grounds that the union might be sued for an illegal strike. The 600 screeners then lost their jobs without a fight. In other cases, when locals are deemed too militant, national unions of the AFL-CIO use their power to impose a dictatorship called a *trusteeship* — tossing out their elected officers and seizing control of the local with appointees of the bureaucrats.

To have an organization that is "theirs," that can be a vehicle of a self-organized fight, of militant collective action, workers need to develop industrial organizations that they directly control. This is why the proposal for self-managed unionism is central to the program of the Workers Solidarity Alliance. Organizations directly controlled by workers provides them the opportunity to gain confidence by controlling something themselves, and encourages the development of collective action. These things are indispensable to changes in working class consciousness in the U.S.

Some anarchists and syndicalists call for the formation of highly ideological unions that are committed to a 100% anti-capitalist program. An historical example of a large union that was built on this basis was the Argentine Regional Workers Federation (FORA), which viewed itself as fully committed to an anarchist-communist program. It saw no need for separate political and union organizations. This is sometimes called the theory of unitary organization, and in South America it is sometimes called *forismo*.

It is true that many of these syndicalists do not see any point to forming separate political organizations of revolutionary activists, apart from the unions. But MacSimoin is mistaken in thinking that all syndicalists historically, or at present, hold this view. The WSA has always rejected the theory of unitary organization. The WSA does not view itself as a union or proto-union but as a political organization of anti-authoritarian activists.

To take an historical example, the Turin Libertarian Group was a political group, a group of anarcho-syndicalist activists, in the Turin labor movement at the end of World War I. They worked with Gramsci and some of the other Socialist Party activists in developing the Turin shop stewards council movement in the factories. This was a grassroots rank and file movement, opposed to the social-democratic bureaucracy of the FIOM — the main Italian metalworkers union. It was a movement to unite the workers across union and ideological divisions, and with overtly revolutionary aims, of workers control of production. When the rank and file council movement seized control of the large FIOM local in Turin, and restructured it under rank-and-file control, the ranks elected a member of the Turin Libertarian Group, Pietro Ferrero, as the secretary of the newly revamped union. They did so in part due to Ferrero's commitment to rank-and-file self-management.<sup>4</sup>

In this case the Turin anarcho-syndicalists did not try to separate themselves into a small, ideologically anarchist union, but worked in a larger rank and file opposition movement to re-

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at a large mail facility where he works.

<sup>4</sup> See my article "The Italian Factory Occupations of 1920".

structure the official union. They also maintained their political organization to give voice to their own perspectives.

The strategy of forming small, ideological "revolutionary unions" with a 100% revolutionary, anti-capitalist program really begs the question: How do workers come to agree with a revolutionary direction for the class?<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, what is the strategy for the workers who still exist in the AFL-CIO unions? A strategy for the development of working class struggle is incomplete if it doesn't have anything to say about the large numbers of workers who are organized in the hierarchical AFL-CIO unions.

A process of self-development within the class must take place. The level of collective action is important to changing consciousness. As people see more people willing to take action in solidarity with each other, and see examples of actions they could envision themselves doing, this will encourage them to think in terms of collective action as a way to improve their situation.

The development of the power of the class directly shapes the understanding among working people of just how far they can go in challenging the present system. Practices of solidarity, of widening links between workers, are thus another key factor that shapes class consciousness.

Because this is a process of development, it means we cannot expect that people will start from a 100% revolutionary understanding at the outset. This is why we do not agree with the idea of forming small ideological unions committed to a 100% revolutionary program at the outset.

There may be some activists who have a developed vision of a 100% alternative to capitalism who are present but many will not share this vision. In time, radicalization of the labor movement may generate a commitment to a revolutionary, anti-capitalist perspective in large numbers of people. Self-managed unionism — mass organizations controlled by rank-and-file participants — is a transitional program for the class in the sense that organization of this kind provides workers with a venue where they control the struggle; they can feel that it is "theirs". They can thus develop self-confidence, learn to run something democratically themselves, and learn about the nature of the capitalist power structure they are fighting. There is thus a possibility (not a certainty) of deepening their radical critique of the system around them.

In some cases it may be possible for workers in AFL-CIO unions to revamp them into self-managing local unions. In other cases they may find it necessary to rebel, and break away from the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, to create organizations they directly control. For workers in workplaces where AFL-CIO unions are not entrenched, there is the possibility of developing new, self-managing unions that are independent of the AFL-CIO. At some point we could envision a number of radical, self-managing unions coming together to form a new, self-managing labor federation.

In the U.S. unionism has only made significant advances during periods of major upheaval, with widespread strikes and new forms of action and new forms of organization emerging. In such a period, when workers are seeking ways to organize a more effective fight against the bosses, there is an opening for self-managed forms of organization to become more widespread.<sup>6</sup>

However, the WSM refuses to countenance breakaways from the hierarchical unions. "Break-away unions offer no alternative in the long run as the problems that led to their formation will

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<sup>5</sup> In the U.S. Anarcho-Syndicalist Review is a syndicalist group who advocate a program of forming "revolutionary unions," with a 100% anti-capitalist vision, in the U.S. right now. WSA's disagreement with that strategy is part of the long-standing disagreement between WSA and the Anarcho-Syndicalist Review group.

<sup>6</sup> Declining wages, breaking of unions and lengthening hours all have contributed to an increased level of discontent in the working class in the U.S. today. A number of labor activists think conditions are ripe for a new explo-



develop in the new union,<sup>7</sup> they say. It is certainly true that the forces that lead to bureaucratization of the unions can and do work on new unions that workers form. It is not certain that such forces will always win out since this depends upon the larger trajectory of society. As we see it, it is a mistake to infer that workers should not be working to develop self-managed mass organizations that are directly controlled by the rank and file. Breaking out of the AFL-CIO national unions is a tactic that can allow workers to do this. It isn't clear to us what alternative the WSM offers for creating mass workplace organizations that would enable the rank and file to control their struggle with the bosses.

For the working class to emancipate itself from class oppression, it must develop its own mass organizations through which it can chart a course of social change and create the new social order in which self-management prevails. Self-managed unionism is the transitional program that the WSA puts forward, towards this aim.

Self-management of the struggle is not the whole of the story, however. The degree of solidarity between different groups of workers, success at navigating the shoals of racism, and success at maintaining independence of the companies, the government and the politicians are additional factors that affect the development of the class into a more effective oppositional force. Racism is a structural feature of American society. It isn't just a set of "ideas" but exists in a set of social practices, engrained in the culture. Struggles against racism are necessary to fight it.

Capitalism is a complex system of oppressions, along lines of race and gender as well as class, and struggles develop along a series of fault lines. Struggles of working people can emerge not only at work but in other areas of their lives, such as struggles of tenants against landlords, or of public transit riders against the government transit agencies. The syndicalist concept can be expanded to apply in other areas besides the workplace; that is, the basic idea is the formation of mass organizations of struggle that are self-managed by their participants, prefiguring the self-management of society.

As groups of workers seek alliances to strengthen their struggle, we can expect workers coming together into formations that transcend a particular sector, community or area of struggle. This coming together is needed to address problems that affect the working class as a whole, to develop consensus around a class-wide program, and to develop solidarity.

What is not clear in the WSM documents is how they propose that the class develop the means to control its own struggles and the mass organizations it will need to fundamentally challenge the capitalist system and build an alternative social order in which it is empowered. The WSM talks about workers forming industrial networks in industry. This is good but what are these networks to do?

Workers en masse need to have vehicles of struggle, to advance their collective interests. If workers are to develop a movement to revolutionize society in the direction of self-management, they need to develop mass organizations that are themselves self-managing. Does the WSM agree with this?

## **Political Organization**

Because the mass organizations of working people, in the workplaces and in the communities, are not likely to have a 100% revolutionary, anti-capitalist commitment at the present time, we

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sion of labor rebellion. See *New Upsurge?* by Dan Clausen.

<sup>7</sup> See the WSM position paper on trade unions.

believe it is necessary to have a separate organization of the anti-authoritarian activists who do have a vision for how the working class can create a self-managed society. In other words, the uneven consciousness in the class means that those who do see the need and possibility of replacing capitalism with a self-managed society are a minority.

We agree with the WSM that it is necessary for anti-authoritarian activists to organize themselves, in order to "win the arguments about ideas" within the working class, to make our alternative vision more visible, and enhance our influence in social movements. As we've said:

"An organization of anti-authoritarian activists can provide a comprehensive anti-capitalist vision which we are not as likely to get from mass organizations like unions, which tend to focus on immediate struggles and typically bring together people with a variety of viewpoints."<sup>8</sup>

The fact that few workers have any faith in a future that goes beyond the capitalism that they see around them undermines resistance to the present system. A credible vision of a self-managed society, a society beyond the various forms of oppression that now exist, and of a strategy for getting there, is important to inspiring commitment and action. The capacity to envision a future beyond what exists today, to articulate this to other people, and to point out a real-life path to make this a reality — this is one of the most valuable of leadership skills. This is the sort of "leadership" that a revolutionary minority could offer.

There is no reason why a democratic, disciplined organization of anti-authoritarian activists cannot be advocates of a syndicalist strategy for revolution. MacSimoin is wrong in thinking that there is a contradiction between syndicalism and revolutionary political organization.

The Leninists believe that the minority who hold revolutionary, anti-capitalist views — the "vanguard" — should organize itself to take power within movements, to impose itself as the management hierarchy of the movement for social change. Its aim is to put itself in the position of using the mass movement to seize state power in a period of social crisis. It then aims to use state power to implement its program top-down through the state hierarchy. This conception implies a relationship between the "vanguard party" and the mass of working people that is, in essence, a techno-managerial class power relationship. It is no accident that the Marxist-Leninist revolutions consolidated a techno-managerial mode of production.

In our view, the role of the anti-authoritarian activist minority is to help organize self-managed mass organizations, and nurture initiative and development of leadership skills among rank-and-file workers. The idea is not to monopolize movement expertise and decision-making, to accrue our own power over the movement, but to work against hierarchical trends in movements.

The long-run aim is not for the revolutionary minority to "take power" on behalf of the class but for the mass of the populace to take power themselves, through institutions of mass self-management that they control. As the class moves towards revolution, and develops itself into a counter-hegemonic force, the difference between "vanguard" and mass should tend to dissolve, as more of the rank and file develop the capacity and will to be an active factor in the process.

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<sup>8</sup> Frequently Asked Questions about Workers Solidarity Alliance.

## Political Power

When the working class, through its various mass organizations, moves to consolidate its control over the society, and to reconfigure the economic system and the rules of society, it cannot complete this process without creating a grassroots structure through which the society as a whole directly governs itself. The society requires institutions for setting and enforcing the basic rules, adjudicating disputes, and defeating any armed challenge.

Any structure through which society sets and enforces the basic rules, and governs itself, is what I call a *polity*.

The state is a form of polity but it is not the only possible form of polity. The state is organized as a chain-of-command hierarchy analogous to private corporations. The state has at its disposal hierarchically controlled bodies of armed people to enforce its rules. This hierarchical structure separates the state from effective control by the mass of the population. This separation is needed for the state to perform its role in defending and promoting the interests of the dominant classes. The state's performance of this role explains why the state has been continually re-created through many changes in class society.

A society based on economic and social self-management requires an appropriate sort of polity to protect it. Such a polity would have to be based on direct, participatory democracy. For the working class to reconfigure the society, and gain direct empowerment for the mass of the population, political power must be seized.

Thus I think it clear that a successful workers revolution requires that the mass of the population dismantle the existing state, and create new institutions of direct self-governance. Otherwise, how could the mass of the population control the society and protect the revolution?

It's true that Marxists talk of "taking power." But the Marxist concept usually means the hoisting of political party leaders into control of a state. Just because we reject that proposal this should not blind us to the alternative of the mass of the population gaining political power through their own grassroots institutions.

Syndicalist strategy, says MacSimoin,

"is apolitical, in the sense that they argue that all that is essential to make the revolution is for workers to seize the factories and the land. After that it believes that the state and all the other institutions of the ruling class will come toppling down. They do not accept that the working class must take political power."

I don't think syndicalism is committed to being against political organization or against the taking of political power by the mass of the people in a revolutionary process.

Historian Richard Hyman offers a somewhat different characterization of traditional syndicalism as an emphasis on

"spontaneous self-activity, local autonomy and independence from parties. Such independence did not, as was the case with 'non-political' unionism in many countries, imply a rejection of political objectives. Rather, revolutionary syndicalism implied a confidence in the insurrectionary potential of direct industrial action, a hostility to statist conceptions of socialism, and a suspicion that the stratagems and compromises of politicians would betray the revolutionary elan of militant trade unionists."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Hyman, *Understanding European Trade Unionism*, p. 23.

Opposition to political parties, an electoral strategy, and of contesting for control of the state, is not the same thing as saying that no polity, no structure of society-wide governance, is needed to replace the state. However, it's true that "apoliticism" was interpreted by some people in the way that MacSimoin suggests (see below). I am not saying that we should simply ape traditional syndicalism; we should learn from mistakes of the past. However, this presupposes we have an accurate picture of what that past was.

Where we can agree with the WSM is that a confusion about power contributed to the defeat of the Spanish revolution. I see this as rooted in traditional anarchism. Anarchists have not always been consistent in recognizing that emancipation from oppression requires a structure of political power. Anarchists have sometimes put forward the idea that there could be a society without any society-wide institutions of self-rule or self-governance.<sup>10</sup>

## Defeat in Spain

Since MacSimoin relies on the Spanish case, let us take a closer look. In July of 1936 the workers of the syndicalist CNT union federation defeated the Spanish army in the streets of Barcelona (with significant help from the police). In the weeks following that victory they built their own self-managing union army and seized the means of production. They were thus in a position to consolidate the revolution by overthrowing the regional government in Catalonia.

After the end of the street-fighting in Barcelona, on July 21st, Mariano Vazquez, the regional secretary of the CNT, called a union conference to decide what to do. Apparently, Vazquez already favored accepting the offer of the province's president, Luis Companys, to set up an "Anti-fascist Militia Central Committee," to coordinate all the militias fighting the Spanish army. Such an action would accept the continued existence of the government.

Revolutionary anarchists in the CNT were often in the practice of avoiding election to administrative positions. Their attitude was that they had constructed a union where the mass assemblies were the main decision-making body; why should it be important who holds the administrative posts? But this is a mistake because, in a critical situation, the administration can skew decision-making. This is what happened in this case.

Because the well-known anarchist activists didn't want the post of regional secretary, it was given to Mariano Vazquez, after he was recommended by Federica Montseny.

Montseny was a writer; her father, Juan Montseny, had founded a large publishing cooperative, *Ediciones Revista Blanca*, which employed both Federica and another participant at the key July CNT meeting, Sinesio Garcia (who wrote under the pseudonym Abad Diego de Santillan).

Stuart Christie suggests that Vazquez invited his cronies in the Montseny circle, so these free-floating intellectuals were over-represented in the meeting that would decide how to respond to the offer from Companys. In his memoirs Juan Garcia Oliver refers to Montseny and her circle as "anti-syndicalist anarchists."<sup>11</sup>

At that meeting, some syndicalists within the CNT proposed to "push ahead with the social revolution, in a set of circumstances that had never seemed so promising." This group, which included Juan Garcia Oliver and the delegation from Bajo Llobregat — a blue-collar industrial area south of Barcelona — proposed to replace the regional government with a regional Defense Council, answerable to all the unions of the region, to defend the new social order and run a unified

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Michael Taylor, *Community, Anarchy, and Liberty*.

<sup>11</sup> Stuart Christie, *We, the Anarchists*, p. 104

labor militia. Clearly, they were proposing to create the beginnings of a new polity, controlled by the working class. They believed that an opening had been created for carrying forward the CNT's libertarian communist program.

That program had been adopted by the CNT just two months before, at its Zaragoza Congress. It described the basic building blocks of a self-managed society as consisting of assemblies of workers in workplaces — workers councils — and assemblies in the neighborhoods and federations of these throughout cities and over regions and over the country as a whole. The community assemblies would be the mechanism for consumer input and industries would be self-managed by industrial federations. Grassroots congresses at the regional and national level would set the basic rules.

A framework that provides for the making of society-wide rules, imposes a particular economic structure, and provides an armed militia to defend that social order is clearly a polity. To create this political and economic structure would mean that the mass of the people would be taking power in society.

In those debates in the CNT in Barcelona in July of 1936, Federica Montseny and her circle argued against replacing the government with a defense council on the grounds that this would be an "anarchist dictatorship," and, unfortunately, they won that debate.

The "anti-powerism" of the Montseny circle is rooted in the confusions of traditional anarchism. The CNT enrolled a majority of the workers of Catalonia and a Defense Council would have also given representation to the other unions. So how is this a "dictatorship"?

No doubt it would be necessary to "dictate" to the bosses what their fate would be. That's what a proletarian revolution does. The working class cannot emancipate itself from oppression if it doesn't take over the running of the society - and that means "taking power."

This was not the only argument that influenced the CNT decision to not overthrow the government. Abad Diego de Santillan argued that they should leave a semblance of the official government in place so as to trick the Popular Front government into channeling some of Spain's gold reserves to Catalonia to support their militia columns. De Santillan appealed to fear and timidity, referring to potential intervention by the British fleet off the coast. In reality, De Santillan's stance was naive. The leaders in Madrid were well aware that the anarchists were the power behind the throne and refused the request for gold.

By failing to create a grassroots structure to unite the working class apart from the state in the heavily industrial region of Catalonia where they had the most power, the anarchists made their capitulation to the Republican state inevitable.

The mass membership of the CNT union federation would insist on unity with the socialist unions in a life and death struggle against the fascist army. Was that going to be a unity of leaders through the Republican state as the Popular Front parties advocated, or worker unity through new grassroots institutions of self-governance? By failing to replace the government with new institutions of worker political power in Catalonia, the anarchists would find themselves with no way to counter the tremendous pressure to go along with the Popular Front strategy.

The debate over "taking power" or collaborating with the Popular Front government was hashed out again at a regional assembly of the anarcho-syndicalist unions of Catalonia at the end of August, 1936. Here again, Juan Garcia Oliver pressed for abolishing the regional government, replacing it with a workers council in which political parties would not be represented, only the mass union organizations. The choice for the unions was posed starkly, Collaborate with the government or take power, replacing the government? A CNT historian, reporting on this

debate, noted: "in fact, there was no question of a reversion to the old apolitical tradition," to the *acracista* (anti-power) ideas, which had been "completely overwhelmed and overtaken by events, but which certain folk doggedly championed..."<sup>12</sup>

How would the defense council proposal have differed from the Bolshevik seizure of state power in Russia in October, 1917? In the Russian case, political party leaders ran a government cabinet that was not directly accountable to the mass workplace organizations. They had at their disposal an army and political police (Cheka) that were run in a top-down way, accountable to the leadership at the top. They appointed their own managers to run various industries.

On the other hand, the Defense Council proposal in Spain would have created a body that was supposed to be accountable to the mass workers organizations and delegate assemblies of these. Its armed force was a self-managing workers militia, run by elected committees and assemblies, created by and for the unions. The industries had been seized by the unions and were being self-managed by organizations the workers themselves had created. And, in any event, it was not proposed that the Defense Council would manage the economy.

Nonetheless, at the August union meeting the decision to not overthrow the government which had been made in July was re-affirmed by the CNT. At a national CNT conference during the summer of 1936, while the CNT of Catalonia was pursuing its course of government collaboration, the national CNT approved the idea of replacing the regional governments in Spain with regional Defense Councils, and proposed replacing the Popular Front government with a National Defense Council, made up of CNT and UGT representatives. In order to be consistent with anti-authoritarian principles, the Defense Council would have had to be directly accountable to some sort of grassroots congress of local delegates. At the time, Largo Caballero, head of the UGT, vetoed this proposal. However, the CNT did build one regional Defense Council, in the rural region of Aragon.

But failing to set up a regional workers council in Catalonia, where the revolution was strongest, greatly weakened the CNT's bargaining position. If they had overthrown the government in Catalonia, this would have put tremendous pressure on the socialist UGT union to go along with a similar strategy for the whole of Spain. As it is, Caballero nearly decided to implement the CNT-UGT National Defense Council idea in February, 1937, to head off Stalinist power grabs.

Later on in the Civil War, the Friends of Durruti group revived the call for a National Defense Council. The WSM presents this Friends of Durruti proposal as if it were a deviation from all that had gone before, a "learning from mistakes of the past," whereas in fact the Friends were calling for a return to original syndicalist principles and aims. They were reviving the perspective that Juan Garcia-Oliver and the CNT of Bajo Llobregat had articulated in July of 1936.

MacSimoin is of course right that we should learn from mistakes of the past. Traditional anarchism and syndicalism are not fully adequate guides; they had limits that we need to transcend. The confused idea that the taking of power by the mass organizations of the working class of Catalonia would have been a "dictatorship" is an example of such a mistake.

But what is worthy of being retained from syndicalism is the core insight that the working class needs to develop its own self-managing mass organizations to develop its own power within this society, to have a means to challenge the bosses for the control of the society. To create a society in which the mass of the population are directly empowered, directly in control, this process

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in A. Skirda, *Facing the Enemy*, p. 157.

of self-management must first emerge and become entrenched in practices of self-management of struggles within capitalism. A society without classes can only be constructed through the direct work of working people themselves, and this presupposes that they have developed their own self-managing movements.

## **Conclusion**

We agree with the WSM that it is necessary for anti-authoritarian activists to organize themselves to "win the debates within the working class." The WSA is itself a political activist organization. We disagree with certain syndicalists who think unions are sufficient for social change. On the other hand, I think that by over-emphasizing "ideas," the WSM under-estimates the importance of collective action, widening solidarity, and self-organization in the development of working class consciousness.

Although we would agree with the WSM in rejecting "apoliticism" as MacSimoin defines it, we believe that syndicalism need not be "apolitical" in that sense.

Second, I agree with the WSM that the failure of the CNT to overthrow the government of Catalonia when they had the opportunity was a major error that contributed to the defeat of the revolution. However, I do not believe that this failure was inherent to syndicalism. It is more accurate to say this came from the confusions of traditional anarchism about political power.

I think that the failure of the CNT of Catalonia to overthrow the government was partly due to the influence of certain intellectual "anti-power" anarchists as well as inadequate preparation - why had they not foreseen the need to form regional Defense Councils to unite the unions at their Zaragoza Congress just two months earlier? There were syndicalists present in the Spanish movement who understood the importance of taking power.

Third, although union bureaucracy is a roadblock to the development of class consciousness insofar as it gets in the way of collective action, syndicalism is not committed to saying this is the only factor. Another factor is the sectoralism of the American labor movement — the tendency for each union to consider narrowly the conditions in its own workplaces and not look to a broader alliance and program to deal with social issues that affect the working class in general. Yet another factor is racism. The absence of a visible anti-capitalist political culture — alternative "ideas" — is part of the explanation as well.

Fourth, although I agree with the WSM that ideas that "tie workers to capitalism" are certainly an important part of the problem, I'd ask the question, Why do workers have ideas that "tie them to capitalism"? MacSimoin doesn't offer an adequate explanation of this fact. I suggest that the sense of power that workers have at a given point in time partly explains the salience that radical ideas will have for them. And this sense of power depends upon what is actually going on around them, including the level of solidarity and collective action, and the existence of organizations that workers can feel are "theirs."

## **Reply by Alan MacSimoin**

I guess I should start by pointing out that this article was written a decade ago, which is why the examples quoted go no further than 1994. More importantly, I agree with Tom about there being broad areas of agreement between our two positions. We share a common goal; our differences are friendly ones about how best to achieve that goal.

## **A Third Class?**

Are there two or three main classes? If there is a techno-managerial class (as opposed to a managerial section of the working class), what are their specific class interests? And, more to the point, what implications would this have for our daily practice in our unions, communities, and political organisations?

After all, the looting of Enron is but the latest in a long list of swindles which capitalism has seen since its inception. Conflict within capitalism and between capitalists is nothing new. Indeed, they need the state to act as a sort of executive committee determining what is in the best interests of the boss class.

Left to individual bosses, it would be a return to completely unrestricted "robber baron" capitalism as each boss sought to further enrich him or herself at the expense of their fellows, and without regard for maintaining economic and political stability.

In the case of the Stalinist regimes (Russia, China, North Korea, etc.) the capitalist class was too weak to complete the struggle against feudalism and modernise the economy, so we saw "modernisers" use the state apparatus to do the job. In those countries a state capitalist economy was created.

In some of the countries which gained their independence in the years after World War Two (such as many African ones) we saw the same process. However, there it did not culminate in state capitalism, rather it didn't go much beyond creating a minimal infrastructure for the development of "normal" capitalist exploitation and the growth of a native boss class.

To see these economies as being based on public ownership is not really accurate, unless we also hold that state ownership is the same as public ownership (which would mean that the state could be a structure capable of representing the interests of the vast majority).

But Tom, I'm pretty sure, just means that individual ownership was not the basis of the Stalinist economies. He's right, but can capitalists not collectively — through the state — own and control? In Ireland today they still do it in the case of electricity supply, post, trains, the national airline, water supply, etc.

## **Why Has the Revolution Not Happened Yet?**

Tom points out that the Workers Solidarity Movement says that our class has not moved forward to revolution because of the ideas that tie our class to capitalism. However, he misunderstands our position when he goes on to say that the lack of exposure to anarchist ideas is not a complete explanation. He is dead right.

Ideas can only become real when people feel the confidence to put them into action. That's why the WSM puts so much emphasis on getting people into struggle for winnable goals (no matter how minor many of those victories may be today). I think we are at one on the importance of experiences which help working people feel able to act for themselves rather than trusting in some outside force to do things for them.

## **Creating Our Own Mass Organisations**

Yes, I agree with Tom that we need our own self-managed mass organisations. That is why WSM members have been to the fore in attempting to create rank and file networks within our unions (e.g. SIPTU Fightback, Teachers Action Group, etc.), and have posed this as the way for-



ward rather than merely trying to get "better" or "more honest" bureaucrats into positions of power.

In some countries the culture, laws and traditions make it possible to build radical opposition unions. That is not realistic in Ireland at present. Apart from anything else, the law in our country does not protect unregistered unions from having their members sued by employers for loss of income resulting from industrial action.

A good example is what happened when almost half of Ireland's train drivers resigned from the two unions which had traditionally represented them and set up their own union, the Irish Locomotive Drivers Association (ILDA). After taking strike action when the company refused to recognize them, they were threatened with being individually sued for the company's loss of earnings.

It would have been great if widespread solidarity action had forced the state to back down. Sadly, the confidence was not there. Other rail workers came out, as did some bus drivers. But it was nowhere near enough. It was only through another union offering them membership (and thus the protection of a negotiation licence) that ILDA survived.

For us, there is also the question of either building a tiny "revolutionary" union or remaining alongside the vast majority of workers who are in the traditional unions. Our option is to be where our workmates are, in order to influence them by being able to participate and speak in the same meetings as them.

This does not mean that we are committed to staying in our existing union for all time, merely that we don't think that splitting the tiny minority of revolutionaries and militants away is a good idea. In any situation of trying to build a new organization we want to be in with a real chance of bringing significant numbers. Otherwise it could mean the self-isolation of the militant minority.

As to organising the unorganised, there can be more possibilities. Indeed, one of our members is in the Independent Workers Union. This a new radical union, mainly based in Cork city, which has been organizing home helps, security guards and others. It, however, can offer members legal immunities as the "licensed" Cork Operative Butchers Society formed the IWU. Whether the IWU can win recognition in enough jobs to deliver real gains and then attract more members remains to be seen, but we are supportive of its efforts.

We also think that any union, because it seeks to organise all workers regardless of their politics, can only go so far in the absence of widespread revolutionary feeling. Historically many workers have joined syndicalist unions, not because they were anarchists, but because the syndicalist union was the most militant and got the best results. Because of this tendencies always appeared that were reformist.

So, maybe the bigger point in this debate is whether trade unions can become revolutionary organisations themselves or whether trade union struggle can provide a means for advancing confidence and consciousness.

We don't think that trade unions will become revolutionary organisations; they were never set up to be that. However from within trade union struggle will arise the embryo of the workers' councils of the future. A new form of organisation suited to new conditions will arise from the old forms of organisation which developed to seek a better deal within capitalism rather than to overthrow it.

The early beginnings of this are seen wherever workers create their own rank & file organisation (without mediation or "all-knowing" leaders) to pursue their class interests.

As Tom says, "A society without classes can only be constructed through the direct work of working people themselves, and this presupposes they have developed their own self-managing organisations". We are in complete agreement about this, our difference is simply about what we think is the best way to achieve it and therefore which strategy we will put our effort into promoting.

## **Rejoinder by Tom Wetzel**

### **The Techno-managerial Class**

Alan asks, "What are the specific class interests" of the techno-managerial class?

The techno-managerial class differs from the capitalist class in that their power and life prospects are not based on ownership but on their relative monopolization of expertise and levers of decision-making in the economy. They can't pass on their class position to their kids through inheritance of property. Rather, they can reproduce their class position for their offspring through such stratagems as ensuring a good school system in their exclusive residential areas, access to university educations, plus providing connections when their children seek jobs.

Their class interest lies in ensuring the continuation of a hierarchical system based on the relative monopolization of expertise and decision-making. This is why the techno-managerial class tends to have a meritocratic ideology, which says that those with more knowledge and credentials "merit" more income and power.

The techno-managerial class was only embryonic in 19th century capitalism. That early capitalism tended to make use of the technology of craft production. This technology existed in the heads of artisans, handed down through craft tradition. In some industries this survived into the 20th century. To take an example, my grandmother was a milliner. Although she worked at times in garment factories in downtown Los Angeles in the '30s and '40s, she had all the skills required in the hat-making industry. She could design hats, she could figure out how to organize the work, she was familiar with all the tools of the milliner's craft, and she also did the physical work of making the hats. She was a complete artisan.

Prior to the 20th century, artisanal methods of production had existed for thousands of years and were the pre-capitalist basis of industry that had survived under early capitalism.

With the rise of the big corporation at the end of the 19th century came a systematic effort by corporations to re-organize work and re-define jobs. The new management approach came to be called "Taylorism" after one of its main theorists, Frederick Taylor. The idea was to analyze the jobs of skilled workers into component tasks so as to isolate tasks that required much less skill. These tasks then could become a separate job, done repetitively by someone hired at lower pay.

Machines such as conveyors and automated tools could be used to design the jobs so that the physical equipment controlled the pace and motions of workers. The purpose of this re-design of work was ostensibly to lower wage costs, and enhance productivity, and this is how management justified it to the shareholders. But even more important was that it shifted the balance of power on the shop floor to the advantage of management and to the disadvantage of workers. Control of the organization and methods of work had been one of the bargaining strengths of 19th century craft workers.

Breaking this control enhanced management's ability to squeeze more production out of workers and lower wage costs, but also entrenched management's position. A class interest of

the techno-managerial class is power. As David Noble has shown in his history of the machine tool industry<sup>(1)</sup>, managers and engineers will tend to prefer those new technologies that offer the prospect of shifting power to their advantage. Efficiency or enhancing productivity is not sufficient by itself to explain actual technical choices that are made in industry.

The re-organization of work also meant a shift in the control of technical change in industry. Management dispossessed workers of the control over production technology and placed it in the hands of engineers with science-based university educations, working as adjuncts of management.

This change did not happen without struggle. The beginnings of this process in the early 20th century coincided with a huge labor rebellion in the USA, and the emergence of unions like the IWW with an explicit theme of worker control of production.

Alan refers to "the boss class" but there is no single boss class since the power over workers in advanced capitalism lies in both the capitalist and techno-managerial classes. Moreover, talk of a "boss class" obscures the fact that there have been a great variety of systems of domination of the immediate producers by "bosses" in history. But the basis of the class power of various boss classes has been different. Feudal land barons, Roman slave-owners, government administrators, corporate middle-managers and capitalists are all "bosses" but the basis of their class power is different. Talk of a "boss class" obscures these differences.

An example of a struggle of the techno-managerial class with the capitalists is the formation of Employee Stock Ownership Plans (ESOPs). Very often these are created as management-entrenchment devices; that is, they give the salaried managers more independence from a capitalist ownership group.

The Mondragon cooperatives serve a similar function in the Basque country. As Sharryn Kasmir shows<sup>(2)</sup>, the Mondragon coops are dominated by their managers and professional cadres. The only real input a worker has over how the coops are run is to show up and vote at annual meetings. But if a person works 40 hours a week cleaning floors or machining parts in a stove factory, how are they going to acquire the skills and knowledge to challenge the plans and financial analyses presented by the professional cadre at the annual meetings? The Mondragon coops have a rule that disallows workers from hiring outside consultants to help them evaluate management plans. This rule is designed to entrench the power of the techno-managerial cadre.

The Mondragon coops are not really a worker empowerment strategy but a nationalist investment strategy by the Basque techno-managerial class. Cooperative ownership prevents a private capitalist owner from disinvesting and moving the plants to another country.

Recognizing the existence of the techno-managerial class is necessary for developing a critique of the top-down hierarchy in advanced capitalist industry, and shows the importance of developing a strategy for eliminating that hierarchy, and thus dissolving the power of the techno-managerial class. The working class will remain a subjugated and exploited class as long as techno-managerial class power persists.

## The State

The state-owned economies in the so-called "Communist" countries are also a techno-managerial mode of production. That the techno-managerial class can be a ruling class is a

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<sup>(1)</sup> David Noble, *The Forces of Production: A Social History of Industrial Automation*

<sup>(2)</sup> Sharryn Kasmir, *The Myth of Mondragon: Cooperatives, Politics, and Working-Class Life in a Basque Town*

key historical lesson of these systems. I think it is not quite accurate to refer to these economic systems as "Stalinist." Stalinism was an authoritarian *political* system. But even if the centrally planned Soviet economy had a democratic parliamentary system on top of it, it still would have been a system with a techno-managerial ruling class, and a subjugated and exploited working class.

The large economic entities owned by the state in capitalist countries are not controlled directly by the capitalists — water systems, the postal service, government-owned electric companies, air pollution control districts, sewer districts, transit authorities, and so on. These organizations are controlled directly by cadres of the techno-managerial class, and they are a reason why a fraction of that class supports social-democratic strategies. Very often these entities are created to cover market failures, and they provide a market for some capitalist entities, such as huge construction conglomerates and equipment manufacturers.

Alan says the capitalists own these entities "collectively through the state." I believe this is mistaken. Rather, it is joint-stock companies — private corporations — that are owned collectively by capitalists. The control of the capitalists over the state is more complex. Although the capitalists are the dominant influence over the state, it also serves the interests of the techno-managerial class.

Moreover, this idea of the state as a vehicle of collective private ownership cannot distinguish state ownership from privatization of government powers such as "common interest" housing developments (such as gated communities) and "business improvement districts" (BIDs). Common interest housing enables an affluent minority (usually members of the techno-managerial and business classes) to control their own private services (such as security, trash pickup and so on), thus undermining support for genuine public services that also serve working class communities. BIDs are entities in business districts controlled typically by the private property owners, and which provide things like private security and street cleaning. This enables the dominant business class elements in these areas to more directly control these state-like functions. The WSM's theory of the state as "collective private property" of a "boss class" can't differentiate these private governments from the actual state.

A social function of the state is to nurture and protect the existing economic structure. Nonetheless, the WSA does not agree that the state is merely an "executive committee" of the ruling class, contrary to *The Communist Manifesto*. The state must have a certain degree of autonomy from the capitalists in order to maintain its legitimacy. It must be able to maintain a facade of "representing the whole society." The state cannot carry out its function of preserving a system dominated by the top classes if it cannot successfully govern.

In response to popular pressure, the government sometimes does things that are contrary to the interests of the capitalist class. The huge expansion of the welfare state in Europe and the USA after World War II was a response to the vast upheaval caused by capitalism in the preceding decades — the Russian and Spanish revolutions, the near revolution in Italy after World War I, the worst depression in the history of world capitalism in the '30s, the general strikes and factory occupations and other mass worker struggles in the USA in the '30s and '40s, and the mass slaughter of two inter-imperialist world wars. So long as the system was making huge profits in the '50s and '60s the ruling class was willing to put up with this concession. But with the profits crisis of the early '70s leading capitalist circles began financing right-wing think tanks and politicians who could mount a concerted counter-attack. This movement originated from the

corporate sector, outside the state. Its political victory led to the creation of the present world-wide neo-liberal regime, with its emphasis on privatization and market expansion.

There is in fact an ongoing struggle over the state; that is, a struggle over what the state will do. Movements can and do make demands on the state, just as unions make demands on private employers. Government provides some benefits that augment the consumption of workers — the so-called "social wage". This includes such things as affordable housing subsidies, rent control, unemployment benefits, health insurance, and public transit fare subsidies. There is an ongoing class struggle over how large the social wage will be.

Who controls the government can sometimes have a real impact on the lives of working people. This being the case, working people can have real reasons for voting for one politician rather than another, or voting yea or nay on ballot measures. Voting sometimes provides an avenue for influencing what the government does that is not available to us in the case of the private corporations. This is especially relevant in cases where there are social movements with reform demands. This is why I'm not an abstentionist. The IWW's "Big Bill" Haywood supported voting for the Socialist Party, in an era when it worked as a mass labor party in some towns in the U.S., on the grounds that it would be better to have in local government office people somewhat more sympathetic to the labor movement. But he didn't look to a strategy of elections to gain a transition to a post-capitalist future — for that he supported a syndicalist strategy of mass organization-building and eventual direct worker takeover of industry.

Voting is sometimes an acceptable *tactic* to gain certain concessions or for self-defense. But what changes the society is the activation and direct involvement of masses of people. We disagree with the socialists and Marxists in that we do not support a *strategy* of empowering the working class by trying to build up a labor-based political party to capture the state. This is because, as we see it, the state is inherently an institution for the maintenance of a class system. There is no possible road to human liberation through the state. On this point the WSA and the Workers Solidarity Movement are in agreement.

However, we need to be clear as to *why* a strategy of capturing the state cannot emancipate the working class. The Marxist strategy is based on the idea of a political faction becoming managers of the mass movement (expressed, for example, in the idea of unions being "transmission belts" for the party) and using their control of the movement to catapult the leadership of a political party into control of the state. The assumption is that they will then implement their program through the state's chain of command. But this presupposes a power relationship between the party (and especially its leadership) and the mass of working people that is analogous to that of the techno-managerial class to workers in production. Techno-managerial class domination is thus built into the Marxist strategy.

## **Implications for Practice**

Alan asks, "What implications does the theory of the techno-managerial class have "for our daily practice in our unions, communities, and political organizations?"

The basis of the power of the techno-managerial class is a relative monopolization of expertise and levers of decision-making. This means that, if we don't want a techno-managerial ruling class to consolidate itself in a period of revolutionary change, it is necessary to work against the monopolization of expertise and levers of decision-making into the hands of a few in the movements that emerge as the forces for change.

For example, a way that a bureaucracy has often become entrenched in unions is through certain activists gaining over time a relative monopolization of negotiating skills, of knowledge about contracts, of connections to lawyers and politicians, and so on. Through long practice of being the people who monopolize these roles the rank and file comes to be dependent on them.

We should work to avoid having movements where there is a relative monopolization of expertise and decision-making power in a minority. To do this we need to develop tactics, programs and structures that continually work to democratize knowledge, to place limits on how long people can occupy certain positions, and to enable more of the rank and file members of organizations to play an active role. "Leadership skills" include such things as public speaking, writing articles that articulate a point of view, negotiating on behalf of a group, coming up with new ideas, carrying out the work of an organization. We should want leadership skills, in this sense, to be widely present within the working class. To play an active role in controlling their own movements, people need to have a means of gaining knowledge and experience through which they develop skills. Study groups, public speaker training and other kinds of training sessions, term-limits for officers — these are a few of the tactics that can be used.

We also must conceive of a different relationship between revolutionary activists and the mass of our fellow workers than that espoused by Leninists. The aim should be to nurture the development of the capacity of the working class itself to self-manage its own movements, to self-manage the struggle, not to gain a management control over the movement. The emphasis on developing self-managing *mass* organizations is directly a consequence of this point of view.

## Unions and Councils

Alan says: "We don't think the trade unions will become revolutionary organizations; they were never set up to be that. However from within trade union struggle will arise the embryo of the worker's councils of the future. A new form of organization suited to new conditions will arise from the old forms of organization which developed to seek a better deal within capitalism rather than to overthrow it."

This is a perspective that is often called *councilism*. Councilism and syndicalism have a different terminology, which can lead to debates being merely about words. To make sure the debate is about substance, not words, we need to be clear about our terminology.

Syndicalists use the word *union* broadly to encompass any mass organization which workers form in struggle against bosses at the point of production. By a *mass* organization I mean an organization open to any worker who is willing to fight the bosses. Any organization rooted in the workplace that is the workers "in union" with each other counts as a unionist body, even if it doesn't call itself a "union." Unionism is a diverse and contradictory phenomenon, encompassing a spectrum from top-down organizations that function as virtual "company unions" to self-managed organizations with a radical character.

I understand the phrase "workers council" a bit differently than Alan. I would define a *workers council* as a mass democratic institution of worker power, such as self-management of industry. In other words, organizations only function as workers councils once workers have achieved actual power to run workplaces. The collectives that the Spanish anarcho-syndicalists formed to run industries in the revolution in 1936 were an example of workers councils.

If in a high point of class struggle, workers form organizations of a more directly self-managed character than the bureaucratic trade unions — the kind of organization that Alan would call a

”workers council” — this would be simply an organization of the sort that WSA would call a *self-managed union*, if it is an organization of struggle in a context where the power of the bosses to manage industry has not yet been removed.

It’s useful to have an historical example that we can use to make the issue clearer. So, consider the shop council movement in Turin, Italy after World War I. The shop councils were built independently of the unions, through assemblies at work and election of rank and file delegates. The councils were formed partly because the main metal workers union, FIOM, had become bureaucratic and out of touch with the rank and file, but also because there were multiple unions that divided the workforce on lines of craft and ideology, and the councils were a cross-union solidarity movement. The shop council movement was the work of socialists and anarcho-syndicalists.

Antonio Gramsci argued that the shop councils were fundamentally different than the trade unions. The trade union has a bureaucratic character as a result of its role in negotiating the sale of labor power:

”[As it develops,] the union concentrates and generalizes its scope so that the power and discipline of the movement are focused in a central office. This office detaches itself from the masses it regiments, removing itself from the fickle eddy of moods and currents that are typical of the great tumultuous masses. The union thus acquires the ability to sign agreements and take on responsibilities, obliging the entrepreneur to accept a certain legality in his relations with the workers. This legality is conditional on the trust the entrepreneur has in the solvency of the union and its ability to ensure that the working masses respect their contractual obligations.”<sup>(3)</sup>

Gramsci contrasts the external, bureaucratic control of the trade union with the shop councils which have a revolutionary character precisely because of the absence of this bureaucratic control:

”The factory council is the negation of industrial legality. It tends at every moment to destroy it...By its revolutionary spontaneity, the factory council tends to unleash the class war at any moment; by its bureaucratic form, the trade union tends to prevent the class war ever being unleashed.”

The bureaucratic trade union discourages the development of self-confidence and the capacity for making their own decisions in the rank and file. The trade union cadre will tend to disfavor mass mobilization and militant struggle because of the risks to the union as an institution and because it doesn’t emphasize the activity that gives the bureaucrats their position — negotiating contracts, lobbying politicians, and so on.

But collective action and development of skills and capacity for self-management in the rank and file are needed for fundamental social change.

However, when we look at the actual activity of the Turin shop councils, we find that much of their work is the organization of the struggle with the employers over the ”terms and conditions” of labor within capitalism. For example, the council delegates were called upon to ”exercise surveillance” over the enforcement of the existing labor contracts and ”resolve disputes that may

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<sup>(3)</sup> David Forgacs, ed., *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*, p. 93; for more on the Turin shop council movement, see Tom Wetzel, ”The Italian Factory Occupations of 1920”.

arise between the workforce and management.”<sup>(4)</sup> Gramsci once referred to the Turin shop council movement as a form of ”industrial unionism” which is a use of the word ”union” in the broad sense.

Moreover, the shop council movement gained control of the FIOM local in Turin, democratizing it. An anarcho-syndicalist, Pietro Ferrero, was elected secretary of the union because of his commitment to rank and file self-management of the union.

In other words, the shop council movement was a shopfloor unionist force precisely because it expressed the desire of the workforce for a more effective organization in the struggles within the current capitalist system as well as expressing their aspirations for complete control.

The main body of Italian syndicalists were in the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) at that time. The USI were enthusiastic supporters of the Turin shop council movement which they described as a form of ”revolutionary industrial unionism.” Most of the shop councils organized in Italy in that period outside Turin were organized by the USI.

Moreover, if it is the non-bureaucratic, mass autonomous character of the Turin shop councils that gave them a revolutionary potential, as Gramsci had argued, then USI activists could have argued that Gramsci must concede that the ”unions” advocated by the anarcho-syndicalists have a revolutionary potential also since they had the same character and structure as the Turin shop councils.

Says Alan,

”We don’t think trade unions will become revolutionary organisations; they were never set up to be that. However from within trade union struggle will arise the embryo of the worker’s councils of the future. A new form of organisation suited to the new conditions will arise from the old form of organisation which developed to seek a better deal within capitalism rather than to overthrow it. The early beginnings of this are seen wherever workers create their own rank & file organisation without mediation of ”all-knowing” leaders...”

When Alan says ”unions will [not] become revolutionary organizations,” he leaves out the fact that his ”workers councils,” if they emerge as organizations of struggle within capitalism, *are* unions, as syndicalists understand the term ”union,” and this implies the WSM does believe there can be revolutionary unions.

Perhaps the difference between the syndicalist and councilist viewpoint is a judgment about how far in advance of a revolutionary transformation these self-managed mass organizations are likely to emerge. WSM seems to think they are not possible now whereas the WSA believes they are possible now. Given that the CNT in Spain had the character that would define them as ”workers councils” in the WSM’s terminology, it would seem workers councils can exist for decades prior to an actual revolution. We would argue that the development of self-managed mass organizations — organizations that workers can feel are ”theirs” — is necessary for the development of class consciousness towards radical social change. Such organizations are necessary to develop the practices and habits of direct worker solidarity, of running organizations through direct democracy. Such practices develop confidence in the rank and file that they can run things.

Says Alan:

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<sup>(4)</sup> Lynn Williams, *Proletarian Order*, p. 123 ff.



”This does not mean that we are committed to staying in our existing union for all time, merely that we don’t think that splitting the tiny minority of revolutionaries and militants away is a good idea. In any situation of trying to build a new organization we want to be in with a real chance of bringing significant numbers. Otherwise it could mean the self-isolation of the militant minority.”

In essence, then, the WSM agrees that the bureaucratic unions need to be replaced by a more genuinely self-managing mass worker organization, *at some point in time*. We can agree perhaps that it is impossible for us to predict when this is likely to happen. Perhaps WSA and the WSM can agree that this depends upon when the bulk of the rank and file in the unions are prepared to go this route. WSA agrees with the WSM in rejecting the idea of breaking off a tiny minority of anarchists or anti-authoritarian revolutionaries into a highly ideological ”revolutionary union.” This is the basis of the WSA’s long-standing disagreement with *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*. We agree that this would tend to isolate the militant minority from the mass struggles of the class.

The rank and file networks that the WSM supports are not just caucuses aiming to ”get ”better” or ”more honest” bureaucrats into positions of power,” says Alan. WSA agrees with this perspective and has advocated the formation of such networks and autonomous shop groups.

But what are such groups to do? Should they try to reform local unions so that they are more genuinely self-managing? Should they be a means of organizing actions independent of the union such as wildcat strikes? Since the national unions of the AFL-CIO and the large, amalgamated locals tend to be bureaucratic professional cadre organizations that workers do not effectively control, I doubt they could be a means to reviving the labor movement in U.S. Workers no longer feel that these are ”their” organizations.

Yet, workers will seek organizations to defend their interests. According to recent polls, a majority of young workers in the U.S. now support unionism. Historically the labor movement in the U.S. has made leaps forward only during periods of widespread labor rebellion, such as the period from 1898 to World War I, or the ’30s and ’40s. During such periods new organizations arise partly because of the limitations of the bureaucratic organizations left over from earlier periods of labor struggle. During each of those labor rebellions the number of workers in unions in the U.S. quadrupled.

Such periods of labor rebellion provide an opportunity to develop new industrial organizations with a grassroots, self-managing character. An example is the Independent Union of All Workers<sup>(5)</sup>, which emerged out of a sitdown strike at the Hormel meatpacking plant in Austin, Minnesota in 1933. This union spread as a rank-and-file solidarity movement in smaller cities of the midwest. In each town a branch was formed that was a ”one big union” of workers of various industries. The large numbers in the larger industrial plants were used to support more vulnerable workers, such as retail clerks in downtown stores. The union was formed by revolutionaries — such as Wobbly butcher Frank Ellis — but did not have an overtly revolutionary ideology.

I believe that the present period in the U.S. offers a potential for new self-managed industrial organizations to emerge.

A problem here that I addressed in my first installment is that the development of support for more far-reaching aims depends upon workers seeing around them the heightened level of solidarity and thus class power to make more far-reaching changes in society. This presupposes

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<sup>(5)</sup> Peter Rachleff, ”Organizing Wall-to-Wall: The Independent Union of All Workers, 1933-37”, in Staughton Lynd,

that the development of movements and organizations through which this broader solidarity and more direct rank-and-file control can take shape. There needs to be self-managed mass organization as a means to the working class changing itself, developing into a class with the capacity and aspirations for more far-reaching changes. This is why I think of self-managed mass organization as transitional to a more far-reaching challenge to capitalism, because it provides a means for popular self-confidence and habits of direct involvement and direct democracy to develop.

In addition to lack of self-management of unions by the rank and file, another problem is that the U.S. labor movement tends to act as just a collection of unrelated contract-bargaining entities. The working class in the U.S. is a vast and heterogeneous set of population groups. Its unity and consciousness of itself as a potential agency for change requires what we might call *unifying moments*, events where larger social issues and larger mutual support are in play. For example, the general strike of 1934 in San Francisco was such a moment because working people did visibly take action in unison. The failure of the AFL-CIO union leadership to mobilize mass actions diminishes class consciousness.

### **A People's Alliance?**

There is a tendency for the left historically to reduce class politics to the politics of the labor movement — to some extent we have done that in this discussion. But I think it is a mistake. Syndicalism historically was a strategy for revolution based on the development of self-managed mass worker organizations at the point of production, prefiguring and laying the basis for the transition to a post-capitalist future based on workers self-management. But I think that class politics also embraces struggles outside the workplace in working class communities, that is, communities where the life prospects of the population are shaped by their status as subordinated wage-workers. This can include things like rent strikes, squatting in buildings, struggles for affordable housing and child care, organizing among public transit riders, struggles against race discrimination or for pay equity for women. Class struggle is broader than the workplace. But the syndicalist strategy of developing self-managed mass organizations that empowers the rank-and-file participants can be applied in such struggles.

Marxists propose that the sectoral struggles of groups of workers and of the various oppressed groups are to find their unity in the class party that aims at state power. Since we disagree with this, we need to provide an alternative — a grassroots way for the working class to unify itself in practice. Perhaps an alternative is to envision an alliance of movements or mass organizations. A coming together of various strands of struggle can enable each sector or community to understand the concerns of other groups while forging a unity of common purpose. A possible model for this type of formation might be the Resistencia Popular in Brazil — a grassroots alliance of neighborhood committees, independent unions like the scavengers associations, and opposition groups in unions of the CUT (union federation aligned with the Workers Party).

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ed., *"We Are All Leaders"*

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Tom Wetzel & Alan MacSimóin  
Syndicalism & Revolution  
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<workersolidarity.org> (1), <workersolidarity.org> (2), <workersolidarity.org> (3)  
A debate on Alan MacSimóin, "Syndicalism: Its Strengths & Weaknesses" (originally published  
in *Red & Black Revolution* #1, October 1994, and re-published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* #8,  
Fall/Winter 2003).

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