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Syndicalism and self-emancipation

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Eric Kerl’s article on contemporary anarchism offers an overview of various libertarian left political views. But Kerl only briefly touches on syndicalism. To have a sensible debate I think it would be helpful to have an actual description of the politics from those who advocate it. What follows is written from the point of view of Workers Solidarity Alliance, which describes itself as “a social anarchist organization rooted in the syndicalist tradition.”

Workers directly managing the industries, in our view, is necessary for the liberation of the working class from class oppression. For us, the development of a mass workers’ movement where the organizations and struggles are “self-managed” by the workers themselves “prefigures” a society self-managed by the working class.

“The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves” is a principle that syndicalists share with Marx. This means the class needs mass organizations it controls in order to secure its liberation.

Thus we advocate for the development of a labor movement that is controlled by its members, looks out for the interests of the working class as a whole, extends a hand across borders to coordinate struggles with workers in other countries, opposes racism and sexism, rejects “partnership” with the employers, remains independent of the political parties and professional politicians, rejects the imperialist policy of the American federal state, and works to develop an alliance with other social movements.

In the course of the twentieth century, libertarian socialists came to extend the concept of “self-managed” mass organization to struggles outside the workplace, and to social movements that address the various forms of oppression. It’s hard to see how a socialism based on self-management of industry and society could come about if self-management practices do not become entrenched in the working class–based mass movements that are the means of social transformation.

Platformism and especifismo, which Kerl discusses, are contributions to a social anarchist approach known as “dual organizationalism,” which WSA also advocates. This means we see a role for both mass organizations and political organizations. Through a political organization, activists can share experiences and pool resources, develop programs of popular education, train activists and organizers, and encourage militancy and rank-and-file self-management in mass organizations.

But we see the mass movements, not a “party,” as the means to liberation and working-class power.

“Self-emancipation” requires that the working class gain power in society. A self-managing society needs a governance structure through which the people make and enforce the basic rules of the society and defend their social order. Thus we think there would be a central role for regional and national congresses of delegates elected by the base assemblies. To ensure accountability to the base and direct participation by the rank and file, we favor a rule that

allows controversial decisions of congresses to be forced back to the base assemblies for debate and decision.

How does this differ from a state? As Engels explains in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, the state is an apparatus that is separated off from effective popular control, and rules over society. This is necessary if the state is to fulfill its function of guarding and promoting the interests of the dominating classes. Thus, the direct rule of the masses through assemblies—and congresses that are directly accountable to the base, and enforced by a popular militia under direct popular control, is not a state, in our view.

As we see it, the WSA's libertarian socialism is at odds with Leninism because the latter advocates a partyist strategy, that is, the capture of state power by a party that then implements its program top-down through the hierarchies of the state. In the Russian Revolution, for example, Lenin opposed workers' self-management. "The key problem," writes Marxist sociologist Sam Farber in *Before Stalinism*, "was that Lenin and the mainstream of the Bolshevik Party...paid little if any attention to the need for a transformation and democratization of the daily life of the working class on the shop floor and community.... For Lenin the central problem and concern continued to be the revolutionary transformation of the central state." Libertarian socialists in the Russian Revolution had advocated for a national congress of factory committees to create a bottom-up form of economic planning.

But this was rejected by the Bolsheviks who created a central planning body at the end of 1917, appointed top-down.

Kerl claims that the anarcho-syndicalists in the Spanish revolution "rejected power." However, as CNT historian Jose Peirats wrote, the anarcho-syndicalist press always maintained that "all social power must be in the hands of the proletariat."

The CNT was a mass movement in which there were several different anarchist tendencies. In September 1936, the radical wing

persuaded the CNT to propose to the UGT union federation a joint taking of power by the labor organizations. They proposed to replace the Republican state with national and regional defense councils, elected by worker congresses. The defense councils would run a unified revolutionary people's militia. This program was carried out in the region of Aragon, where the CNT village unions invoked a regional congress and elected a regional defense council. But the UGT blocked this program at the national level, due to opposition from the two main Marxist parties.

In a previous article in the ISR ("Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War," Issue 24, July–August 2002) Geoff Bailey wrote: "Some workers' organizations understood the need to take power. The Friends of Durruti argued for...the overthrow of the government and the formation of a revolutionary junta." This "revolutionary junta" is the national defense council proposed by the CNT in September 1936. This was a proposal for the mass organizations, not a political party, to "take power."

Of course, more could be said on all the points that I've touched upon here.