

# Libertarian Syndicalism with Tom Wetzel

Tom Wetzel & The Final Straw Radio

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**The Final Straw Radio:** So, I'm speaking with Tom Wetzel, author of the recent AK Press book, *Overcoming Capitalism: Strategy for the Working Class in the 21st Century*. Would you care to introduce yourself further?

**Tom Wetzel:** Okay, I'm Tom Wetzel, and I'm here in the East Bay where I live. I've been active here, locally, for over 30 years here in various things, labor and housing issues, and environmental questions.

**TFSR:** So I just got done reading *Overcoming Capitalism*, and there's a lot in there. I wonder if you could tell listeners a bit about your political position, kind of how you came to that position, how you developed and what groups you're organized with?

**TW:** Sure. Well, I wrote this book to provide an up-to-date, defense and explanation of what revolutionary syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism is essentially, and as a strategy for getting us out of capitalism, to overcome the oppression, exploitation of the capitalist regime. We can talk about the elements of this strategy, but I've been basically interested in these ideas since the mid '70s. I've both done a lot of reading about the history of anarcho-syndicalism, as well as the history of the American labor movement. And had interviews of many, many individual militants or activists in the labor movement, which has helped to shape my understanding of how this kind of politics works.

**TFSR:** So you've talked about revolutionary syndicalism — anarcho-syndicalism is another term — throughout the book you use the term “libertarian syndicalism” but you do mention also anarcho-syndicalism. I wonder if you could unpack the idea behind anarcho-syndicalism, maybe a real brief overview of it, and any groups that you're affiliated with, or have organized with that fall under that banner?

**TW:** Sure. Well, I'm a member of Workers' Solidarity Alliance, which was formed in the '80s to advocate this viewpoint. But anarcho-syndicalism, or revolutionary syndicalism, is a revolutionary strategy based on the idea of building up grassroots worker controlled union organization — I call them self-managed — union organizations meaning that workers themselves have control over the organization so that they can prevent the union becoming controlled by some outside bureaucracy of paid officials and staff.

The idea is to build up this kind of a movement on a very grand scale, build interconnections between different worker groups, and also different sectors of the working class. The working class is very diverse and has many different kinds of oppressions and problems and issues. And

so, to get a movement which is powerful enough to challenge the extremely powerful capitalists for control of society, you need to essentially build links of solidarity, build a coalition of social movement forces, grassroots forces that can come together and become a united force for change.

It's primarily based upon this immediate struggle with the employer, which is because that's the primary place where the working class has leverage in society, through things like strikes and other kinds of direct action. These give people a sense of power and therefore tends to change consciousness over time as solidarity and strength of the working class grows, then the consciousness of "Hey, maybe we can change society" within the working class itself. And so that kind of process is what revolutionary syndicalism is designed to further. To build, to advance the struggle so that you have this kind of horizontal federated unity, a greater degree of unity being built up, of working class social movements.

**TFSR:** So different theorists over time have used different definitions for what working class means, or whatever the revolutionary agents might be. For Mao, it was the peasants and the industrial workers. For Marx and for Lenin, ostensibly, it was for the proletariat, the industrial working classes in the cities. There's, I think, some really valid critiques of putting it on these specific components of society saying "these are the people that have the agency to make change, these are the people, them or their representatives, are the ones who will propose the changes that should occur". And I like the approach that you take towards what you mean by working class when using that language. Can you talk a bit about who were the working classes?

**TW:** Okay, sure. The thing about the working class is that, within capitalism, we don't have our own means to live. It's not like under feudalism, we're workers, the immediate producers, have access to land, which we don't have access to. So, because we don't have our own access to our own livelihood, we're forced to go out and seek jobs from employers. That's kind of the first element of the working class condition.

Then the second part of it is that we not only are forced to seek these jobs, we're forced to submit to the autocratic managerial regimes that the capital is set up to control our labor. So, the workers are denied control over the labor process, control over how our own capacities are put to use. It's that subordination to management power, which is another feature of the working class condition.

The working class do not have control over other workers. We don't manage other working class people. There is, of course, a separate class of managers and high end professionals that the capitalists hire to control us: the managers; the HR experts; the industrial engineers that design job flows and stuff like that; corporate lawyers and so forth. The working class day-to-day has a kind of antagonistic relationship to that class. I call that class the "bureaucratic control class", because their role is to control the firm's, control the State, control workers, control the labor process. And we are subordinate to them.

That's a very large part of society, between 60 to 75% of the population satisfy this definition. And the industrial working class, which is to say that workers in basic industry, certainly are a component. They're like a core component, they may be 1/4 of the total workforce. They have a significant amount of leverage because of their position. So, the historical emphasis upon them makes a certain sense, and was a feature of both Marxist and syndicalist views, historically. But the working class in general was much larger than that because it includes people in the service sector, in health care, in retail. And as I say, that it's a very large and very diverse population.

**TFSR:** But it sounded like in parts of the book, you were also arguing that there's room in that definition for also people whose job is not paid in a wage, such as — what Federici and other

feminists in the 1970s were pointing to — people that do social reproduction of the working class because of their relationship, not owning the means of production and being reliant on the decisions of the managerial class. People that don't actually hold jobs can also be included in that working class definition, right?

**TW:** Sure, because classes are families. And so one of the features of capitalism in the 19th century was that for a family or working class family to survive, they had to send members out into the labor [force], out to get jobs. But at the same time capitalism has always shifted the costs of reproduction, of cooking and cleaning houses and taking care of the family. Taking care of all the members of the family historically was shifted on to the unpaid labor of women. This is the basis of the gendered division of labor within capitalism, historically. Even though most women ended up being recruited into the wage labor force so that capital could expand, the number of people they exploit and the number people to use, still gender inequality is a persistent feature inherited from that way in which capitalism cannibalizes social reproduction work.

So, certainly, because it's families that are classes, not just the individual worker. Yeah, it does include a lot of people who are not currently working. There's the dependents of workers, there's people who've retired from working class jobs, they're all still part of the working class population.

**TFSR:** Or people who might be considered a part of the lumpenproletariat, people who are currently between jobs, who are reliant either on public services, or just being shuttled from place to place by cops.

**TW:** Yeah, the vulnerability to not be able to find a job is part of the working class condition. People go through periods of their lives where they may not be able to find a job. They may be thrown out on the street here, even people who are working, or living out of their cars. That's part of the vulnerability which is inherent to the working class condition. You end up with a sizable part of the working class ends up being unable to find work and in various kinds of difficult situations.

**TFSR:** Throughout the book you use the term “libertarian”, and a lot of people when they hear the term — like friends of mine, when I was like “I'm reading this book, and here's the term they're using” friends were irked at the use of the word libertarian, because there's so normalized to the right-wing application of it. Can you talk a little bit about your decision to use that term? And I know that there's elements of the DSA in the United States, the Democratic Socialists of America, there's a Libertarian Socialist caucus — it's not, it's not only you using it — but if you could kind of talk about that a little bit I'd appreciate it.

**TW:** Sure. Part of the reason that I decided to use, say, for example, “libertarian syndicalism”, is [that] I'm trying to revive the left wing use of the word libertarian, which was this original meaning. Cause after all, a primary and fundamental aspect of our politics is the fight for freedom, for the freedom of the working class and the oppressed in general. And a politics which has a primary focus on liberty or freedom can reasonably be called libertarian.

Now, there is a fundamental difference in how freedom is understood by us — that is, by left-wing libertarian socialist — versus the so-called right-wing libertarian. In that they have a very narrow conception of freedom that is just absence of coercion or physical restraints. The old 19th century liberal conception of freedom. Whereas libertarian socialists, anarcho-syndicalist, cooperativists, have a different conception of freedom, where it's positive freedom we're talking about. We're talking about people being able to control their own lives. It would be things like

people controlling the places where they work, people controlling the communities where they live. This is also called “self-management”, control over the decisions that affect you.

And the thing about capitalism is it suppresses self-management. So, in the case of going back to my definition of the working class, we were talking about how workers in workplaces don’t have control over the work, they’re subordinate to this autocratic, managerial regime. That is a systematic denial of self management. It’s a denial of people having a certain kinds of essential form of freedom. I think that we are fighting for positive freedom, you’re fighting for rebuilding society on the basis of all institutions have to be based on self-management, people controlling the decisions that affect them. That’s kind of a generic definition of what libertarian socialism is all about in its various forms, and that’s why I think it’s perfectly appropriate to use the word “libertarian” here. Because you’re talking about a politics of freedom, right? A politics of liberty. So that’s why I have selected to emphasize that, right?

**TFSR:** It’s the kind of stubbornness I find beautiful. “You can’t have that word!” [laughing]

**TW:** [chuckles] Right, we’re gonna take it back!

**TFSR:** So it’s pretty common in our society for people to argue — they take on the assumptions, inculcation of the values of capitalism, the arguments that we get. And one of those things that we argue — alongside that there needs to be a bureaucratic control of people in the workplace — is that redistributive universal basic income type projects, let alone full so socialism, just aren’t economically feasible if you take out all the corners that capitalism cuts out: cost shifting; or motivations of market competition, whether it be among workers competing for a job, or corporations competing for market share of production.

So, I wonder, it’s kind of a vague and kind of big question, but if people talk about like, “well, there isn’t enough pie to go around, we need these measures to increase efficiency. And we also need to reward the people that are good at creating that efficiency through their competition. “How do you sell someone on the idea that actually no, socialism is possible and capitalism is what makes affordable good quality of life unavailable for everyone?”

**TW:** Right. Well, first of all, just in terms of what we can afford: currently the 1%, the capitalist elite, sucked down 40% of all the national income in the United States. So we’re proposing to get rid of that, right? And to remove their role in society. So that means that all of that value that is created, ultimately, by the working class, we then have available to us to use in the ways that we want it to be used.

Capitalism, moreover, is not actually an efficient system, it’s actually horribly, horribly inefficient for a number of reasons. First of all, it creates huge amounts of bureaucratic bloat. To control labor, they put a huge amount of resources out of production, into building up these huge bureaucratic hierarchies. For example: in 1900 only 3% of the workforce were managers, but over the past century, because of their building up of these systems to control labor, today it’s 15% of the workforce are managers. And a lot of that is a kind of police sort of role of controlling workers.

This huge bureaucratic bloat, which also includes the State, is one of the areas where capitalism is hugely inefficient. And another area where they’re usually inefficient is the persistent cost shifting of the pollution and so forth, you know, and the failure to provide adequate systems of caring work: health care and education and childcare. These are all the inefficiencies of the system. So, capitalism is certainly not in any way an efficient system, contrary to the hype that the defenders have it pulled out.

**TFSR:** One thing I really did appreciate early on in the book is that you address sexism and racism in the workplace and in society, and didn't just explain them away as byproducts of capitalist exploitation. This is a thing that certain leftist have done over the last century and a half, saying that the primacy of looking at issues and under capitalism is one of class and that these other things are secondary, and then once working class institutions, or parties or whatever, get into power all those things will be resolved. This is obviously important because coworkers come in all sorts of ways and unequal treatment in the workplace is not only wrong, but it also undermines solidarity and collective trust and strength.

I think also that this focus in the book dovetails nicely with your points about the idea of community syndicalism, and the aim of solidarity among all strata where the state and capital dominate, by fostering social strength: by creating or strengthening existing solidarity among individuals in their neighborhoods, in their workplaces, in their faith communities, wherever that happens to be.

Can you talk a little bit more about your idea of community syndicalism, class composition and sites of struggle?

**TW:** Sure. I think that community syndicalism has sort of a limited role to play, I think that the primary force that the working class has for change, is in fact the struggle in the workplace, is against the employers. Just because of leverage, you know, you have a strike, that's a production halting strike, you're shutting down the flow of profits, or you're shutting down a government agency. But in the course of doing that kind of thing, workers, particularly if you look at periods of heightened struggle, like in the '30s or in the World War I era, the appeal to other people in the working class community, other sectors of workers, other communities, forms of association in the community, is always very important in terms of building out, defending, for example, people who are on strike.

As in the highest level of conflict here is things like a general strike, where workers appeal essentially to the support of the entire community, so that these community connections are ultimately a form of working class power. Because if you're going to have workers who are on a particular struggle, a particular strike, if they can gain a greater degree of support for their struggle, other workers going on strike to support them or whatever, then that increases their power. The solidarity is itself a form of power. And that's where the community connections of workers is important.

Community syndicalism is the idea of building community organizations in working class communities to engage in struggles in sites of conflict outside the workplace. And there are, this does happen. We've seen fare strikes on transit systems, or rent strikes, for example, among tenants. What I would say is that that's possible, it's important that it happens, but the level of leverage in the community is lower than it is in the workplace. Because the leverage is from basically shutting down capitalist profits. Shutting down operations.

Now with rent strikes, you can see that it happens, right? You're shutting down, the profit flows to the landlord. It's just that landlords are just one particular sector of capital. And it can be difficult to build these kinds of purely community-based struggles to get enough power. This is why I say I think that the primary focus for developing working class power to make changes in society is going to have to be through rebuilding the ability of the working class to have production halting strikes, strikes that actually shut things down.

One of the things that's going to require is, for example, building worker organizations that have the ability to violate the law and get away with it. One of the problems we have, since the

Second World War, is the legal system in the United States (and other countries I think too) has built up a kind of legal cage where the most effective kinds of actions that workers can do are now illegal, like secondary boycotts for example. What's going to have to happen is that workers will have to figure out how they can build an organization and build strikes, and just be able to get away with violating those anti-labor laws. And that's another area where I think the connections to other groups in the community is important, because it's probably going to be the case that general community support for worker struggles is going to be part of how workers are able to roll over the law, these unjust anti-labor laws.

**TFSR:** Jumping ahead a little bit, since you're talking about legality and the restrictions post-New Deal... Your book takes time to look through solutions that are offered by the left and the center, and why you see them as false solutions to the ecological and economic woes that we suffered under. The empowerment of a bureaucratic managerial class under Leninism, and the related democratic centralism of mainstream labor unions in the USA, or the New Green Deal attempt to save capitalist production, these are examples that I can think of from the book.

There was a recent federal intervention to stop rail workers from striking for basic conditions such as time off and raises to stagnating wages, or threats to understaffing and job loss through automation. It was aided by not only the US's, quote, "most pro-labor president, Joe Biden" as he claimed, but also by most of the supposedly lefty squad of the Democratic Party. It says a lot about the limitations of both attempting to vote Democrat for labor concerns, as well as the shortcoming of limiting movement tactics to those circumscribed by the government.

So, you wrote about weaknesses in the modern labor movement, including: limiting itself to National Labor Relations Board decisions; fighting for recognition; stepped mediation that stalls forward momentum in workplace struggles; and no strike clauses just to name a few. But I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what the rail strike teaches us, and the limitations of bureaucratic union structures? I know that wasn't a limitation of union structures, that was an existent law that-that implicated stops of rail workers basically, but what sort of lessons can we take away from-from that?

**TW:** Well, the Railway Labor Act is probably the most egregious of all the laws that limit worker freedom to strike. It was passed back in the 20s and was modeled on Mussolini's fascist labor codes. It's basically a piece of fascist law that makes it very difficult for railway workers to legally strike. There was in 1970 – 1970 was the last time when Congress imposed a solution like that – but that time railroad workers engaged in a wildcat strike. Hundreds of thousands of railroad workers engaged in wildcat strike that year.

Now, I talked to some members of Railroad Workers United about this and they said, "Well, you know, that was a different era". And they have a point, because during that period there were large numbers of wildcat strikes going on. There was the national wildcat strike that same year among postal workers, and that was an illegal strike. Also among over-the-road truck drivers, there were hundreds of strikes per year in that period. Therefore, it gave a certain confidence to the railroad workers that they could get away with violating the law in that case.

This comes back to this point I made about workers having to figure out, to build the ability to roll over the laws. In this case the railway workers didn't feel that they could get away with doing that, that's why it hasn't happened. There hasn't there hasn't been a wildcat strike of the railroad workers this time. But I think what's required here is to be able to build a larger social movement of workers engaging in strikes, and building org union organizations they control. This is going to be a fairly protracted process where new organizations have created that are not

like the AFL-CIO unions in that they are more directly self-managed by workers, that are not as subject to a top down paid bureaucracy at the top.

There's been some little movements in this direction lately, for example Amazon Labor Union. The organizing committee there explicitly set out to build it as an independent union, a grassroots independent union. That's part of their strength, I think going about it that way, because then it's rooted in the internal culture of the workplace, of the workers themselves. So there just needs to be much more of that kind of thing and these kinds of organizations maybe linking up to each other and a higher level of strike action taking place.

Now, if there was that kind of background, social ferment going on that would have made it more feasible from the point of view of the individual railroad worker. It would have made it more feasible, more likely, that they would have then considered the idea of engaging in a wildcat strike, to try to break an essentially, fascist railway labor act.

**TFSR:** Yeah, I feel like some of the stuff that I read off of Labor Notes were saying that the votes even came down were such a small proportion of the unions affected voted against the strike, because they didn't think that it was going to pass. They had the-the expectation that they were going to be shut down anyway, and so there was sort of a chill over their independent activity.

**TW:** Yeah, they didn't have a large enough majority that's voting "no". It is true, however, that the two largest groups, the engineers / drivers union and the conductor's union, those two unions did vote "no". That's the largest part of the railway workforce, but they didn't vote overwhelmingly "no". It's maybe 55% or something like that. That probably reflects their own judgment about this point that I made that, well, could they get away with striking against-against this law? It's a question of what the larger social ferment and social conditions are, you know? If there was a much larger level of strikes going on right now, they might have made a different decision. They might have had a much larger "no" vote on it.

**TFSR:** As you meant you mentioned the independent unionization at Amazon warehouses. There's also been, when I think back to the last six or seven years, a lot of wildcat strikes among teachers in various cities, pushes to improve conditions by health care workers and meat workers as the pandemic plods on. The Starbucks franchise, as well as the SEIU (Service Employees International Union) Change To Win-affiliated union of Southern Service Workers. Service workers, fast food workers, are industries that, up until the last decade, big unions wouldn't even touch and considered them to be unorganized bubble.

To my understanding, the United Mine Workers Association, local at the Warrior Met Coal mine outside of Bessemer, Alabama, is in their 21st month of a strike for pay and benefit restoration since cuts in 2016. These are just a couple of the things that come to mind when I'm thinking about where labor is at in terms of where I'm seeing or heard about strike activity. And again, I'm not a labor beat person, this is not something that I'm effectively paying a lot of attention to. But where do you see the US labor movement today, and do you see any intervention initiatives pointing at a libertarian syndicalist direction like IWW efforts or the WSA or other groupings?

**TW:** I think that the example that I gave with Amazon is probably the biggest, independent grassroots movement lately. There have been a lot of smaller types of independent efforts, like Burgerville in Portland, for example. That's a fast food chain. The level of lack of organization at present means there's a huge room for growth, because only 6% of workers in the private sector belong to unions. This includes even basic industries like manufacturing. So, in my hometown of Los Angeles, which has a half a million manufacturing workers, only 6% of them are unions.

There's just a huge amount of potential growth. There are many industries where the rate of unionization is fairly low, so there's just a huge potential for growth to take place.

If you consider the conditions, the rather nasty way in which employers in this country treat workers, [like] stagnant wages for many years, I think there is a tremendous amount of potential for building new grassroots organizations. There are certain industries where there is a fairly high level of unionization like railroad industry, public utility, power industry, and some others, there's the potential for building parallel worker organization. So, in the case of the railroad industry, there is a parallel organization, which promoted the idea of strike that was the railroad workers union. I think that the development of organizations like that, the development of new independent unions, these are the kinds of things I would look for, to see a change in the basic level of power that the working class has to change things.

As you were saying, part of the reason why I say that new independent unions are necessary is because a different kind of relationship to the employers is required where you don't have things like no-strike clauses and management rights clauses, and stepped grievance procedures. These are all tactics since the Second World War that management has used to prevent disruption, prevent the struggle within the workplaces to take place. If someone has a grievance it gets kicked out of the workplace, to pay officials to deal with it, things like that. And so what you want to see here is a greater level of direct conflict with management in the workplaces, direct solidarity of workers themselves. The union is that kind of a movement in the workplaces, where workers are mobilizing and engaging in struggles. The idea is that with such a low level of unionization now, there's really a very large room for growth in that kind of thing happening.

**TFSR:** So again, we've been sort of talking about where we're at right now. How do we get to another place? In terms of the vision that you provide in this book for workers management of the workplace shifting from where it is to workers taking control, maybe picking delegates to communicate with other workplaces, with the opportunity to recall them at an instance if they misrepresent the viewpoints or decisions of the actual workers.

There's a lot of skeptics to a decentralized, democratized economy that raises questions about the ability of regular people to decide on technical issues of industry: extraction, pollution — minimizing or getting rid of pollution — distribution of resources, topics like this. These big economy-wide things. Maybe they'd say something like, quote, "If you think that they would do damage — the people that have are specialized in this, they've gone to the colleges, or they've been running this business for a while — imagine all the chaos of mass meetings of uneducated workers deciding. And how long it would take and how ill informed the decisions would be".

Can you say a bit about making decisions that affect our lives, the knowledge that we have as working people, and as communities, and our experiences under what we've been sold as being democracy and how that kind of paints our view of democracy in some cases?

**TW:** Well, in all the industries I've worked in, the manager is entirely dependent upon the knowledge and skills of the workers to actually get the work done. Because of the fact that people are doing the jobs, learn and have various kinds of skills, I think that workers self management of production is not at all a unfeasible idea. Managers often are not really there because of expertise and knowledge, that tends to exist in the workforce. If there are individuals who have expertise, like engineers, they, of course, can act as advisors, if we're talking about a system of taking over control of production. Like in a very tumultuous period, a very wide scale social struggle, where workers actually are taking over control of companies as has happened at various times, like in Argentina in 2001, or in Chile in the early 70s, or in Spain in the 1930s. If you look at those actual



experiences, workers were in fact quite able to successfully self manage the workplaces. And in cases, as far as expertise is concerned, it was the professional workers that they brought in as, or that were there, that acted as advisors, that workers are able to make the decisions with technical advice. So you know, that's not an unfeasible thing at all.

In the Spanish revolution in the '30s the worker organizations, and syndicalist unions took over about 80% of the economy in Spain's industrialized northeast. They took over industries like the railroads, the electric power industry, they actually built new hydropower plants in the Pyrenees Mountains.

They did huge amounts of changes and improvements in industry, that's how they got a good transit system in Barcelona. They changed the whole structure. For example, there had been a fare system where you had to pay zones and so the people living in working class suburbs had to pay more money to get into the city; they got rid of that and changed it to a flat fare system. The transit system actually was making a profit under their management, worker management, which they then donated the profits to the war effort against the fascists, but I think there's enough examples of workers controlling production to show that it is a very feasible proposal.

For one thing in many of these cases, what happens is that it increases morale and increases productivity, because people are excited to be able to have control and are not simply worried about the next stab in the back from management. And also the people learn from doing new tasks, that managers previously did, they will learn from the doing of those tasks and will certainly self educate themselves on that.

You can also look more long term to changes in the educational system to provide the working class population with a more integrated, sort of vocational-and-engineering-oriented kind of education, so that people have the skills necessary. If we go back to the 19th century, for example, the capitalists back then depended totally upon the workers already having the technology to run the workplace in their heads. You know, they depended upon skilled labor, skilled trades. Skills being very general in that period. What has happened since then is that capitalists have tried to deskill and shift responsibilities for decisions more and more to the management bureaucracy. But the fact that historically workers were actually the people who had the technology and understood it is something that can be revived.

**TFSR:** Yeah, I think you quoted Bill Haywood, who was one of the founders of the IWW, as saying that "the owners or the managers brain is under the workers cap."

**TW:** That was the 19th century situation, definitely. That has been changed only because of Taylorism. Taylorism was designed to move all planning away from the workplace, from workers and concentrating it in management. So capitalism has consciously pursued a strategy which essentially built up this vast bureaucratic glove so they can control things. It's all about control, rather than about the feasibility of workers managing production.

**TFSR:** And simultaneously, when the job is worth actually existing, the people that are doing them. Like I know that I have been alienated in so many workplaces where I could have had a perfectly enjoyable interaction with someone or solve the problem, but instead the sector of my attention is focused down to this miniscule little thing. And it's alienating to spend eight hours being managed and puppeteered around instead of actually getting to use my brain.

**TW:** Right.

**TFSR:** In this vision of decision making that you describe in libertarian syndicalism it sounds like there are a lot of meetings. At times, I get overwhelmed imagining the frenetic activity that I've experienced at moments of social rupture being extended out to... You know, when every-

thing seems possible, when suddenly there's a million things to do, and it's just kind of like limited by your imagination and sleep cycle. But imagining that being extended to every day, forever, makes me suddenly almost thankful for the bureaucratic banality of today's world. In the vision that you're promoting here, how do you see the work/decision making/rest/sleep balance possibly working out?

The IWW, since the early 20th century, has at times promoted the idea of greatly decreasing the amount of the length of the workweek by spreading around work. For instance, increasing the amount of time that workers have to enjoy themselves, to explore their imaginations, to increase their relationships with each other, whatever they want to do. But in this-in this libertarian syndicalist world would work and meetings be more fulfilling? Resolving some of those pressures in our lives, like you said, the idea of going to a meeting as a worker and actually being able to have something to say and making a decision about what affects eight hours, or however many hours of your life, could actually make it a bit more fulfilling than it feels right now. I wonder if you have something to say about that?

**TW:** Well, workers can't control the industries in places where they work without meetings. And even-even today, under capitalism, there are plenty of meetings. So I used to have to go to weekly meetings where my manager would tell us what the story was going to be for that week. So, I mean, if you have an assembly once a week, once every two weeks, or once a month or whatever, I don't see that as being taking up a huge amount of time. There are a limited number of things you would need to decide collectively, in terms of policies of the direction of the organization, or if there's a problem that arises.

There also needs to be a public form of direct democracy of neighborhood assemblies. Because you can't have a socialized economy that's socially accountable to the population without the population, in general having meetings to decide what they want, right? What do we want to do? What kind of public goods and services do we want to have? People have to engage in a kind of participatory planning, for their city, their region or neighborhood, for the kinds of things they want to have.

These don't have to be meetings every day [chuckles], they're not going to be that frequent. But every so often, whether it's once a month, or whatever, there does need to be actual participation, a vehicle, a venue for people to be able to express exactly what they want, to be able to exercise control over their neighborhood, their city, their society. There can't be democratic social control of a society without meetings [laughs]. You know? But they don't have to totally take over one slide.

I provided some technical ideas about how meetings can be minimized in a socialized economy through the use, for example, of a non-market price system that— So, like, for example within capitalism, how are the plans that different households and businesses and governments coordinate? Well, they're coordinated through the market, the price system, right? So in a socialized economy, you can have a price system that isn't a market price system. It's a result of planning that nonetheless plays also a role of some coordination, where people in a particular production facility, like a bus factory or something, they are making their plans, they assume they're going to be certain prices for various inputs, or certain kinds of demands for their products.

Well if the prices change, that's a reason for them to go and change their plans, right? They don't have to engage in massive amounts of engagement with people throughout society, negotiations or something. It's just the price system tells them signals for what other people have decided, and then that helps them in making their own plan.

I think it is feasible to I think it is content feasible to have a self managed society, where you have centers of decision making and planning that are localized. You have neighborhoods, you have maybe a citywide congress of delegates from the neighbor, you have workplace assemblies, every so often in industry has a convention. You have these kinds of meetings, that I don't think are going to necessarily fully take over someone's life. I think a limited amount of time is all that will be required.

**TFSR:** And I guess kind of related to the idea of these different assemblies, in the US, there are many populations in the working class, groups such as Indigenous folks, women, Black folks, queer folks, differently-abled folks, and others whose liberation has bumped against movement hegemony at different times. Meaning that movements have not made space for the specific concerns that those communities or people with those experience feel. Oftentimes, people create caucuses or other groupings, where they get to come together and share experiences, and sometimes promote those ideas as a group with shared experiences.

Are caucuses and councils something that you're thinking of in relation to community syndicalism? I guess this is more like, if there's a neighborhood council, is the room also for people who are Bengali immigrants who are living in this neighborhood, to come together to talk about common things that they have a concern about that maybe isn't impacted by in the rest of the community?

I'd be curious, corollary to this, about your impressions of what you're aware of the council structures implemented in the Autonomous Administration in North East Syria (AANES), aka Rojava. Ostensibly, it's a council driven project with a focus on empowering neighborhoods and challenging gendered, ethnic and religious hegemonies, and it's identified as libertarian socialist and its aim. So yeah, I'd be curious to see if you see inspirations or challenges in what's been happening over there in the last decade of what you're aware of.

**TW:** Well, one of the most interesting features of that particular experiment is the fact they have distinct women's assemblies and they require for all the mixed meetings and organizations, they have dual co chairs, so a woman and a man. They even have a women's militia, because they've had problems with gender violence, honor killings and things like this. Their way of dealing with it is through these women's assemblies, women's councils, they elect delegates to the city wide councils. So they have their own system for protecting women, as a group who have been subjected to their own just take form of oppression. I think that in a society where women feel that they do have significant issues, obviously in that particular part of Syria, they do, then I think that, yes, women's caucuses, women's assemblies would be one way to deal with that.

There could be other kinds of assemblies, as well. In Syria they had separate community assemblies for the various minority groups, they have religious minority groups like Armenians, Syriac Christians, and Yazidis and so forth. They have their own community assemblies, they were encouraged to do that, and then they would send delegates to sort of the regional, wider community wide delegate congress's, delegate councils. That kind of thing certainly is one way of dealing with that.

You're going to need things like environmental caucuses, because the issue of — although the libertarian social structure provides the means to controlling, preventing emissions into the ecological commons, you'll need to have so-called militant minority in environmentalism press the issue to make sure this is actually effectively carried out. You can imagine this, and then wherever there are particular sectors or groups, within the society you have specific forms of

oppression, specific issues, them having their own organizations that are active and pressing their concerns, is going to be a likely thing to happen, and should be something that's supported.

**TFSR:** That makes me think of, if you ever read the sci-fi novel, *The Fifth Sacred Thing* by Starhawk. This book I became aware of during the anti-globe or the alter-globe period, and the idea of Spokes-councils showing up — at least to help facilitate protests occurring whenever there was a large conference of capitalist or militarist organizations. You would have different affinity groups or local groups sending in delegates and in the vision that she employs in that book of what a post revolutionary San Francisco Bay Area was. Kind of some *Ecotopia* flavor there, but kind of pulling from a couple of different directions, there were representatives of the sea, the air, the land — and this is coming from a Pagan perspective — asked to come and speak as to how the decisions that were being discussed by the rest of the communities in the area, were going to be impacting the interests of who they were the delegate of the air, the bay right there, whatever. Anyway [laughs], I like how people play, in scifi, with these kinds of ideas and come up with possible resolutions to it.

Just to kind of go off on the direction — because you're talking about what dealing with the ecological impacts of a continued industrial economy would look like — in the book you talk about neighborhood councils, specifically addressing the impacts of the possibility of a factory being there or operating. You also talk about — the latter part of the book has so, so many ideas in it that I've can't even touch on them here — the idea of an ecologically sustainable approach towards fixing costs of an item or a finished product would be impacted by a measurement of the ecological costs of the production of it. Of the elements of it, as well, as you know, at some point, the fuel that would keep a vehicle going or what have you.

You can you can fill this in better than what I'm saying from memory right now [chuckles], but say you've got a bus factory and the buses require some element, like cadmium or something like that, for the battery, that the extraction of this is detrimental to the humans and non-humans that live in the area where it's extracted from. This is actually considered into the cost of production of the device, and it impacts the output price and availability of it. In the current capitalist economy that we have, this just gets shifted off to the population that lives there in a very laissez faire manner, if you will. It's not considered a part of buying the device. Can you talk about workers control, neighborhood control and decreasing pollution?

**TW:** Yeah, well, the basic structural change that would be needed would be that the ecological commons, any form of emissions, or extraction of resources in an area has to be controlled by the population there. See, right now, this is not the case. The state basically aggregates to itself the right to regulate. And so they let the capitalists do cost shifting things, because the masses are not allowed to prevent them from doing that. The basic change then, is you have your popular power through your neighborhood assemblies, through city wide — or regional — congresses of delegates representing them. That level of organization has control over emissions into the ecological commons, the use of the ecological commons. Therefore they would have, presumably, their own staff of scientists telling them about: what are the emissions here? What is the effects on your health of these kinds of emissions? And they can then ban an emission. They can say "Well, you can't use that. You can't pollute us that way".

Or they could say, if there's no other way to produce this particular product, like buses or something, without certain kinds of pollution given the current technology, they can say, "Well, all right, we want a reduction. We want you to reduce it by say 25% or 50%, over the course of the next year or two years". So what happens in that situation then is that there's a supply and

demand situation, the supply and demand of permissions to pollute. The permission to pollute is controlled by the masses through their neighborhood organizations, right? They can deny that permission. The production organization is the demand, they want to have the permission to pollute because their current technology doesn't allow them to produce without it.

So in that situation, where you have a supply and demand situation, prices will fall out. If you say "Well, okay, we want 50% reduction" what happens is that you then, from that, can fall out a price of that pollutant. You have a price of the pollutant. At that point they get their permission to pollute but they have to pay a cost, a fee. And that fee represents essentially the polluter pays principle and the community is basically being reimbursed for the pollution. Whereas right now, the community is not reimbursed for pollution that the capitalists generate. Moreover, it gives that particular production organization, a strong incentive to try to find a different way of producing that product so they don't have to use that pollutant, or they can reduce the amount of that pollutant that is being produced. Under capitalism there is no motivation. If the capitalists can use nature as a free sink, and don't have to pay anything.

Say you have a coal fired power plant that generates emissions that damage people's respiratory systems, they don't get paid anything. It also damages the whole world through contributing to global warming, they don't pay anything for that. Under the change situation that I described, either the pollutant is being banned, or if production organizations are allowed to pollute, they have to pay for that privilege. And then they are then motivated to seek out technological changes, to reduce or eliminate that pollution.

That means then that you have a tendency, a new kind of dynamic in the economy where there's going to be a tendency over time to make the production system more ecologically efficient by reducing the pollutants per unit output. Or reducing the extraction of certain natural resources because they are required to pay for that. This is a basic change in the structure. You don't have a capitalist using nature as a free sink anymore.

**TFSR:** How does that differ from cap and trade?

Currently, it does kind of work where polluting— I mean, maybe not with the refinery that's in the middle of the East Bay. That's an example of it, it blows off a bunch of chemicals every few years and a huge cloud that poisons mostly working class populations of color. And so there's a point there about the leverage that those populations have to make the electoral change in our democracy. But if you've got low population, rural area where a thing we get extracted from, and therefore they have less of a voice in terms of numbers to affect the sort of production, or something that goes into the commons, as you said, like air pollution, or water pollution that eventually gets distributed so widely, that it's not just the neighborhood that we're the the factory is.

**TW:** Okay, the problem with the present institutions that do regulation, whether it be cap and trade — or in the Bay Area we have Air Quality Districts that can produce fines and so forth — is that they have no way to impose an accurate price, the production organizations, that actually represents the real damage. What they do is they may have a fine or something, but they always put these low enough that it does not end profitability on the part of the capitalist firms. The capitalist firms have enough power in controlling the state that the prices will always be set low enough to not really solve the problem and to not affect their profitability.

This is why the fossil fuel industry, the oil companies now are backing carbon taxes. The reason they're doing that is they know they have enough clout to make sure that those taxes are low enough that they could still make a profit, it won't really affect anything. Well, in other

words, it will be ineffective. And that's because of the state being controlled by the capitalists and not being controlled by the population. So, the difference here is that what I'm saying, what I'm proposing, is that the actual population themselves, through their own direct participatory organization, have the power to ban those pollutants. Or if they want to just say, "Okay, well reduce by at least by 50%", or something like that. And then you get an actual price, that's a more accurate price, because it tells us how much of how important it is to them.

Because they're going to have their expert advisors telling them that "Well, this is going to do this kind of damage to your health". So they're going to know what the real impact of that pollutant is, and then they're going to be motivated to make whatever kind of demand reflects that. Whether it's to get rid of it, reduce it by 50%, or whatever. You're more likely then, if the masses themselves directly control access to the ecological commons, they can enact an accurate price, or they can ban the pollutants altogether. This is simply not something which the present regime's capable of doing.

**TFSR:** Okay, so then it would be just the wider society saying that the sacrifice that this small, rural area where something is being extracted from is... If there's not a big vote coming out of that area?

**TW:** Well, they would themselves have the power to prevent that extraction, it's damaging to them. Because the idea is that every population group and its particular regions, people area controls the ecological commons in that area. Okay, so that like here in the Bay Area, you have refineries, for example? Or do you have to say you have some other kinds of production organizations that generate fluids? Well, that's relevant to the population here, because this is where those pollutants are going to have an effect.

Similarly, if, you know, there's some extractivist operation that's going to affect and do damage, and shouldn't people in that rural area. So like, for example, like under fracking, you have these gas fields that are built, typically what they do a typical gas field will generate as much, they're very leaky, and that will generate as much volatile organic compounds as a big oil refinery. And that will be hugely destructive to help them with their animals, you know, like they have a goat herd or something, well, they won't be able to drink the milk anymore, because it'll be poisoned by the emissions from that gas field, you know. So the idea is that within that population in that area, we'll be able to prevent that they will have the political power to say no, you can't do that. Here, he can be able to ban it, you know, if there isn't some way to reduce it or restrict it in some way.

**TFSR:** So I have-I have two more questions on here. There was the one about the market socialism idea-

**TW:** Okay, market socialism has a number of problems to it, looking at it from a libertarian socialist point of view. First of all, if we imagine how there could be a social force of social power, to actually get rid of the capitalists who are extremely powerful [laughs], we got the most powerful ruling class in history. It's going to have to be organized on a very vast basis. The transition will have to occur out of a period when there's been highly disruptive, massive levels of strikes and other kinds of actions going on. The only way you're going to get that kind of a massive movement of that scale is to increase the levels of cohesion and support for each other's struggles.

That means that the level of consciousness about like the why particular segments of the society, particular minorities in society, have certain issues. It becomes more broader, okay? If you have this massive working class space movement that's built on solidarity, why would they

want to, after seizing control of the workplaces, chop them up into separate companies to put each other in competition? You built a movement based on solidarity, now you undermine it by forcing this company to compete with this company, driving them out of business or reducing their wages. Market Socialism seems to be incompatible with the kind of force that will be necessary to create a socialized economy. That's just one argument.

Another argument is that if you think about the way a market system works, it's also a labor market. You're coming out of capitalism, you have these various groups of people that have worked as managers or engineers, or whatever, and they happen to have certain areas of expertise. The cooperatives, because they have to compete with each other and they're concerned with their survival, people who have a lot of expertise or marketing knowledge, or whatever, are going to have a lot of leverage in terms of negotiation for being hired. And they're going to be able to say, "Well, okay, I want to have this kind of power. I want to have this kind of level of pay". You'll likely end up with a system where, like in the corporations today, we have this hierarchy and you have these high-end professionals and managers, and they end up getting a lot more money than the rest of the workers. And they have a lot of control, power over the running of that operation.

If you look at, for example, the Mondragon Cooperatives in Spain, they're not actually run by the workers. There is an annual assembly, but the plans are made up by the top professionals and managers, and they're just given to the workers to say "agree or not". The workers themselves are not actually permitted under the rules, to go out and hire their own consultants, to give them an evaluation of those plans. What happens then is that the managers and professionals end up becoming a dominant class, a class that is in control over the working class. You haven't really gotten out of the class system with a system of market socialism.

Also, the problem of ecological damage is due to the way the market system operates, because firms are able to use nature as a free sink. There isn't that equivalent of social control over the economy or economic planning that I was talking about, which would be able to produce accurate prices of pollutants and force production organizations to change their production. You'd have companies free to engage in pollutants. Market Socialists might say, "We'll have State regulation", but we know what that does. That always ends up with the problem of regulatory capture, where the powerful industrial groups have enough clout that they can get the state regulation constrained enough so they can still make profits, they can still engage in ecologically damaging activities.

Then, if it's a market system that's got the State, you've got the whole problem of the state is itself a bureaucratic top down structure. That's also a power base for the bureaucratic control class also. The state in itself has a sort of class oppression built into it. You can see this in the way that public sector workers are subordinate to managers in the public sector. If you have to have a state to regulate this market economy, you still have a class divided society. You haven't fully moved to a liberation of the working class from subordination to some dominating class.

Those are some of my counter arguments against Market Socialism, why we need to have some kind of democratically planned coordinate economy. Planned economy doesn't have to be like a centralized, top-down central planning regime, like existed in the Soviet Union or, you know, for that matter, big corporations. Corporations like Walmart, they have their own central planning machine that's all controlled from the top down.

The kind of planning that I'm talking about is the more distributed planning where there's lots of planning going on locally, neighborhood assemblies, communities, and worker organizations, workplace planning, and so forth. Then these are all adjusted to each other, basically. I think some

kind of planning system like that is necessary to overcome the destructive characteristics of the market.

**TFSR:** Yeah, cool. I really appreciate that. I really appreciate this conversation. And there's a million other questions I could ask you, and [laughs] I'll hold back somehow. But I suggest that people check out the book. Where can people find other writings of yours or be in touch with you? Do you have a public email? Or do you have any social media? Or do you publish to any blogs in particular?

**TW:** I have a blog called [OvercomingCapitalism.info](http://OvercomingCapitalism.info). Some of my essays are on the [IdeasAndAction.info](http://IdeasAndAction.info) website. ideas and Action is the webzine of the Worker Solidarity Alliance and I published a lot of essays there. They're there. That's probably the main source, I think, where some of my writings are.

**TFSR:** Is Worker Solidarity, is WSA currently organizing? Or mostly, like a discussion group in the US, or are there any unions that are affiliated with it?

**TW:** No, it's a very small political group and we've kind of been trying to rebuild it. Here in East Bay we have a group, and we're probably going to be starting up a new magazine soon. Right now mainly the ideas & action magazine is our main, sort of publicly visible, voice. There'll be another one here that we're going to start up, another newsletter here in the Bay Area, very soon.

**TFSR:** Cool. Well Tom, thank you for all this work, and thanks for taking the time to talk to me. I really appreciate it.

**TW:** Thank you.



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