

## Unit 23: Roots of modern anarcho-syndicalism: morality, culture & tactics

### This Unit aims to

- Follow on from Unit 22, tracing the origins, motivations and ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.
- Summarise the character of anarcho-syndicalism.
- Illustrate when and how anarcho-syndicalism developed and incorporated cohesive ideas, principles and tactics.

## Introduction

As discussed in Unit 22, the libertarian socialists within and around the First International (Unit 3) developed a crucial contribution to socialism; the idea of what freedom means to libertarians. Against the authoritarianism of the Marxists, they posed the thesis that freedom must infuse every aspect of socialised thinking, or socialism will fail. Since compulsion and authority were recognised as being at the root of the problem, the libertarian socialists saw freedom from these as critical. For this reason, the stark choice was exposed; authority, that would stifle activity and initiative, or freedom, the great liberating force that would inspire people and drive the movement forward towards the new socialist society. The following quote from one anarcho-syndicalist writer illustrates the importance of freedom to libertarian socialism:

*“Power operates only destructively, bent always on forcing every manifestation of life into the straightjacket of law. Its intellectual form of expression is dead dogma, its physical form, brute force. And this unintelligence of its objectives sets its stamp on its supporters also rendering them stupid and brutal, even when they are originally endowed with the best of talents. One who is constantly striving to force everything into the mechanical order at last becomes a machine himself and loses all human feeling. Only freedom can inspire and bring about social change and intellectual transformations. Dreary compulsion has at its command only lifeless drill, which smothers any vital initiative at its birth and can bring forth only subjects, not free men. Freedom is the very essence of life, the impelling force in all intellectual and social developments, the creator of every new outlook for the future of mankind. The liberation of man from economic exploitation and from intellectual and political oppression... is the first prerequisite for the evolution of a higher social culture and a new humanity.”*

An example of the importance of this notion of freedom at the time is found in the Marxists' attitudes towards the peasantry. They determined that the peasantry were condemned by the laws of history to be reactionary, only seeking to own and cultivate their own small patch of land. Hence, they decided, the new workers' state would have to forcibly collectivise the land. The libertarian socialists bitterly disagreed with all this, arguing that irrespective of whether they were 'reactionary' or not, collectivisation could only work if it was voluntary

- free. They were confident in both the peasants and their ideas. In other words, they predicted that when the benefits of collectivisation were demonstrated in practice, the peasantry as a whole would move towards collectivisation freely and voluntarily.

The merits of the two ideas, which we could call 'freedom through authority' and 'freedom through experience' were duly tested in practice. In Russia, where the Marxists seized power, the land was forcibly collectivised, leading to a reign of terror being unleashed on the peasantry as they resisted the process. The net result was mass-oppression, famine and a disastrous split between the industrial working class and the peasantry. In Spain, the anarcho-syndicalists collectivised their land voluntarily. In many areas, this meant initially that some land was collectively owned, and some remained in private, peasant hands. However, the voluntary collectives invariably experienced vast increases in harvests. So much so that, even during the three-year civil war, food shortages were prevented, despite international blockades preventing food imports and war ravaging agricultural lands around strategic areas. Moreover, as the benefits of collectivisation were demonstrated, more and more of the peasantry did indeed join the collectives as anticipated.

The notion of freedom (see also Unit 22) is fundamental to the libertarian movement, because it is the only means of sustaining a future society that is worth fighting for. Even back in the time of the First International, the libertarian socialist recognised the potential for any society to become oppressive. At risk of stating the obvious, just because anarchism holds that humanity was created in society and is therefore dependent on it does not mean society is intrinsically good. Society can be both good and bad depending on what form it takes. Hence, the early libertarians saw that society could potentially be far more oppressive than the state. After all, the state's authority is from outside society, so when it imposes oppressive laws they can easily be recognised as such, and rebellion duly organised. However, repression from within society is far harder to locate and overcome, since much of our individuality is merely a reflection of society. If people within society raise their children to believe that women are inferior, then the struggle against such oppression is more difficult than that against the external state law. In such cases, it is not just the oppressor who internalises these ideas of society who must be addressed; the oppressed woman must overcome what has been

instilled from birth, to gain the confidence to resist the oppression around her. This is not the direct oppression of the state or the economy, or the bosses, but that of her 'nearest and dearest'.

Freedom was and is therefore a constant watchword that governs all considerations of struggle for a future society. Oppression, wherever it occurs, is opposed by freedom. There is no 'final' position of 'absolute freedom', just as there is no end to the constant threat of oppression in any society. The future, post-capitalist society will not be some final utopia. The continual development of ever-greater freedom (for freedom breeds the possibility of more freedom) provides the driving force towards future humanity, and this is an endless process. Freedom is therefore the new morality - and provides the new ethic that will underpin the future society.

The main political device which will allow freedom to flourish is direct democracy, that is, a society within which everyone has the right to contribute directly to how society functions, on equal terms. The only way in which this 'bottom up' rather than 'top down' society can work is by individual units, people, households, streets, hamlets, etc., coming together to organise those parts of society which require organisation, or put another way:

*"The task must be the freeing of labour from all the fetters which economic exploitation has fastened on it, of freeing society from all the institutions and procedure of political power, and of opening the way to an alliance of free groups of men and women based on co-operative labour and planned administration of things in the interest of the community in a society."*

# Managing things, not people

So, how might a future direct democratic society work, and what would it look like? The 19th Century libertarian socialists developed a sophisticated vision of this, which, perhaps surprisingly, remains largely relevant today. Their starting point was that it would not look like a monolithic decision making structure, encompassing the whole of human life. It would not be some all-embracing state-like system where decisions about all aspects of human life are made by some centralised administration.

In short, for both libertarian socialism and modern anarcho-syndicalism, the goal is the management of things, not people. Things are the products and services we make/provide because we decide we need them. Things are made/provided by industry or if you like, work. Both these terms are used in their widest sense, including, for example, all food production, building, child and health care, education, as well as the products we more normally associate with industry and work. All the things we need will need to be managed, leaving people to manage themselves.

Without government of any kind, how would things be produced and who would decide how much, at what quality, and so on, each particular product or service is produced? In short, government would be replaced by 'industrial' organisation. People will come together freely within the production process to plan, make and otherwise ensure their needs are met. What goes on in the self-managed co-operative workplace must be determined by those within it.

Outside the workplace and production process the government institutions would no longer exist. At present, the state only meddles in non-productive affairs in order to control our motivations and desires, which curbs our freedom. In a future society, outside the production process, people would naturally and freely come together on the basis of their common interests to pursue their own desires and needs. These groups will be self-organised, voluntary and entirely self-regulated.

The organisation of society will therefore be limited exclusively to the needs of production and consumption. All political institutions will have disappeared. After all if everyone has access to all decision-making there would be no need for political parties. Society and the life of those within it would therefore have two components – self-managed, federated production/provision for needs, and the rest, made up of a patchwork of interlocking self-interest groups, all self-

regulating, overlapping and interacting as their interests coincide.

This vision is basically that of the early libertarian socialists who's primary aim was to end exploitation and oppression by bringing the production process under democratic control, as the first stage in creating a society based on freedom. Direct democratic control of production, or 'workers' control', being the key. The working class themselves would take over the means of production.

The starting point for the democratically controlled economy must be the immediate workplace and local community - the micro level. The place where people live is the place where decisions about basic local needs such as health, housing, transport, education, environment, food, can best be made, by the people making decisions about themselves for themselves. Again, this was realised by the early libertarian socialists, and it provided another stark difference with the Marxists and other state socialists, for whom the future economy would begin and end at the top, through centralised planning.

Though the idea of 'bottom up' or 'grass roots' organisation was not new, even in the 19th Century, it has obviously been misused, abused and subverted by capitalism and the state. Team-working type initiatives in the modern workplace are an example of the pretence at 'bottom up organisation without any of the reality. Direct democracy can only work in the absence of ultimate authority. There is no point in saying 'you can do what you like, and organise yourselves, as long as...'

This is not to say that consumers would not play a role in determining what is produced in a direct democratic production system. Firstly, the point should be made that the producers/consumers split is largely a red herring as far as a direct democratic society is concerned –everyone both produces and consumes, so the split is rather arbitrary. Secondly, while direct democratic workplaces must be subject to no authority, this does prevent people in the immediate locality from coming together as producers and consumers of places for learning, houses, transport, etc., and hammering out their immediate needs. The people present who participate in particular workplaces would naturally then take these needs back to their workplaces and input them into the direct democratic process there. That is not to say that there will not be conflict, on the contrary, there is often conflict between different producers and consumers,

just as there are conflicts between people. For instance, it may suit the transport consumer to have trains starting on their local line early in the morning, but this may not suit the interests of the rail workers involved who may prefer a lie-in. Despite any amount of temptation, no force can be used to get rail workers out of bed. In other words, each economic activity must thus come under direct control of the people themselves.

As economic activities and interests overlap, so would the democratic process. Thus, transport would be organised in the immediate locality, then, through the industrial federation, to city, to regionally, to globally. Likewise, transport would interact with other economic sectors, so regional and global level economic bodies would be needed to co-ordinate the needs and desires of the federations. In a modern industrial society with complex and varied needs, there would be considerable need for such co-ordinating bodies. However, to stress the point, there is no danger that these could become powerful, over-numerous or burdensome. They would naturally be formed as needed, directed from below by the federations involved, and disbanded as they were no longer needed. Their role would be simply to carry out co-ordination tasks to assist the efficient integration of the economy.

So, in localities, people would meet as consumers and producers to discuss needs. They would then elect delegates to express their wishes and needs to the city, and then regional, and then global federations. These delegates would be directly accountable - they would be participating on behalf of their local federation and could be recalled and replaced by their federation at any time. They would also get no special privileges for being delegates, and they would be changed regularly as a matter of course. The job of delegate would be viewed as a part time duty to be taken on voluntarily from time to time by those who wished to, as a service to their local federation.

At every level in the future society, there would be conflicts and decisions to sort out all the time, typically of the nature of 'should more resources be directed to goods A rather than B', 'should we look for people who are prepared to get up in the morning to run the early trains', etc. The people most affected would hammer out all differences of opinion democratically. At the centre of all decisions over what and when to provide services, produce goods, etc., would

be the issue of what is needed most - what can we best spend our labours on for the good of our society?

Direct democratic decision making structures also rely on good information, so that people can make good judgements, and to prevent endless argument based on a difference of information rather than actual values/opinion. Access to information relies on technology, as well as the ability to understand it, so free access to both information and education is crucial. It is in capitalism's interest to hide and complicate reality, so information is invariably and intentionally poor, whereas in a society based on direct democracy, the natural interest would be to seek the best quality of information, so that discussion on real values and opinions could take place, rather than endless negotiation about who knows what.

Another obvious difference with capitalism is that the production process would be geared to meet people's needs, not for individual profits. Rather than simply a series of isolated, individual workplaces, the production process would become a vast living organism based on democratic decision making, which would constantly be evaluating and updating people's needs and how best to meet them. Within each workplace, people would have access to all the information about current needs, and accordingly, they would decide what to produce and how best to produce it. Thus, the necessity that the immediate workplace is co-ordinated by the workers themselves would be maintained.

# Syndicalism

The libertarian socialists clearly had a well-developed vision of a future society. However, they had not yet had the experience of participating in a mass movement towards this aim. In the immediate aftermath of the split in the First International, it was the ideas of Marx that began to gain ground. It was not until the turn of the century that libertarian socialist ideas re-emerged as the mass movement of syndicalism.

The ideas of libertarian socialism were clearly in opposition to Marx, because they grew from the experiences of the workers themselves. While the appeal of Marxism is discussed in Unit 22, there were also other factors in its rise, not least the violent repression that swept Europe after the crushing of the Paris commune in 1871. This was particularly concentrated in countries where libertarian socialism was strong, such as Spain, Italy, France, Switzerland and Belgium. At the same time, there were some apparent signs of 'success' in the state socialism idea. This was especially so in Germany, where the state socialist SPD inspired by Marx and Engels had some electoral success, and established a mass membership. Out of this, it sponsored the growth of socialist parties across Europe.

Unlike the Marxist parties, the syndicalist movement of the turn of the century was characterised not by some all-embracing 'theory of syndicalism', but by a broad-based range of federated organisations, sharing the same basic aims and principles. From the beginning, syndicalism was (and so anarcho-syndicalism is) a movement of struggle - not a theory that seeks to constrain all of humanity's past and future into an all-embracing formula. In each country/region, the syndicalist movement developed differently, according to the prevailing conditions there, rather than according to a central, abstract theory, to be developed and superimposed on every situation.

Since capitalist conditions were similar, and the movements were influenced by similar ideas, the emerging syndicalist movement was bound to have similar basic characteristics that were common across national borders. Where local or national conditions and experiences differed, there were also differences between them, reflecting the responses by workers in each country. The first of the clearly defined revolutionary syndicalist movements occurred in France, where much of the impetus came from the failure of parliamentary politics and, in particular, socialist parties. There was no real trade union movement and the economy was more

decentralised than in many other capitalist countries. This led to the syndicalist movement and its organisations emerging spontaneously. In Britain and the USA there was a strong existing union movement. The failure of these unions and the increasing centralisation of the national economies was a driving force behind these syndicalist movements. In Spain, the ideas of the libertarian socialists had formed the basis of the emerging workers' resistance, and this led inevitably to a strong anarchist influence in the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist movement from its earliest conception.

Though many differences existed between the various syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist organisations, all shared the same origins, based on opposition to capitalism, parliamentarianism and state control. All rejected the idea that the state could be used to bring about a socialist society. There were differences in relationships with political parties, as reflected in local experiences, so that some movements expressed their total opposition to political parties immediately, while others took a neutral position at first, until they realised through their own experience the futility and danger of this stance.

All syndicalist organisations argued for the establishment of workers' organisations based on the economic struggle. All would function according to the principle of solidarity. For the syndicalists, these economic organisations were seen as forming the basis of a new society under which the workers themselves rather than the state would run the self-managed, worker-controlled economy.

## Morality, culture, tactics

In rejecting capitalism, the early syndicalist movement totally rejected the morality that underpinned capitalism and the society based on that morality. The new society would be based on a new socialist morality. This would not simply emerge miraculously from the ashes of some future socialist revolution, but would begin in the here and now, within the shell of the capitalist system.

In building the new society in the shell of the old, they sought to create a new socialist culture within the working class, based around the main organisation of the working class - the union movement. This culture was to be built totally independently of the existing capitalist order. It was to be based on the principle of solidarity, the idea that only through co-operation in society can human beings be liberated and free. Most importantly, this new culture was to be the very negation of that of the capitalists', based as it is on pure self-interest and the pursuit of profit.

In order that the new society could evolve, a means of struggle was needed that was also independent of the existing capitalist system and the existing social order. The solution to this was direct action – as both a means of struggle now, and the means by which capitalism would be eventually overcome without the need for a state. Hence, direct action went beyond a mere method of self-managed struggle, it was the means by which capitalism could be replaced without the need for outside interference.

We should be clear about what those in the emerging international syndicalist movement meant by direct action. It did not simply imply that the struggle stays under working class control, although this is an essential ingredient of it. Nor should it be seen as merely a more effective form of struggle than parliamentary action, though it undoubtedly is. The crux of direct action was recognised as the means by which people become conscious of their oppression and how to counter it. Through self-organisation for direct action, people would gain confidence in themselves, and through common struggle, they would become aware of their common oppression. Through direct action would come the confidence required for self-education, to understand and codify their oppression, and develop alternative strategies and systems to overcome it. Through this, in turn, would come new forms of social relations based on solidarity, the ethical underpinning of the new society. Direct action is far more than just a street tactic.

Every direct action is a step forward in developing an alternative culture. Every direct action therefore allows those involved to reduce their dependence upon capitalism and turn their attention to the evolving culture of resistance, the start of the future society. Direct action is the vehicle that forms the basis of change, and also the confidence and ability to create further change towards liberation. Through every direct action, people demonstrate to themselves that they are not merely dispensable wage slaves, working class cannon fodder or beasts of burden with little intellect. They gain confidence in their abilities; gain a sense of their own worth, and in so doing become more acutely aware of their own oppression and the need for an alternative to capitalism.

Self-confidence as a primary ingredient in struggle and change cannot be overstated. People celebrate confidence while capitalism kills it. All oppressive societies must develop a belief system that underpins the oppression within society, since they cannot rule by violence alone. At the heart of the belief system is usually the idea that there is no alternative to the current order, that the oppressed have no alternative to their oppression, and that things could/would be worse otherwise. Without the ruling elite, society would collapse into chaos. This simple confidence trick cannot be maintained if masses of people have confidence in themselves and their humanity. No confident direct activist will believe that running society must be left to their “leaders and betters”.

In attempting to build a new society within the old, the early syndicalists were trying to install confidence in their fellow working class. Through self-organisation and self-education, they sought to illuminate for people their own potential and the possibility of a new society based on that potential. Their vision was that, if this process got started, it would build itself and, in so doing, ensure the emergence of a new, confident, self-reliant working class culture that would grow to the point that it would shatter the existing capitalist ideology. This shattering point would be reached through a number of revolutions, culminating in a lasting and complete direct action - the general strike –through which capitalism would be finally brought to its knees and overthrown.

In direct action, then, the syndicalists were laying down the basic tenet of anarcho-syndicalism; that the task of freeing the workers can only be achieved by the workers themselves. Only

through common struggle based on self-organisation could workers bring about their own liberation. This is the very opposite of the Marxist idea that a transitional period of state control would be needed in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, because the workers would be incapable of taking control of society themselves.

## Work, creativity, leisure

The early anarcho-syndicalists were also able to develop a sophisticated vision of what a future society would be like and what its potential holds. It was not just a means of ending poverty nor simply about creating economic equality. These were simply the critical prerequisites for the real purpose of the future, free society, a time when each and every individual could develop themselves to their true potential. It is also interesting that, despite the obviously alienating working conditions at the time, the libertarian socialists did not see work per se as the problem, but the system which created the working conditions. They did not therefore see production in the future society as primarily a necessary chore of utopia. Self-management of production would transform the production process so that it not only ensured that all society's needs were met, but also became part of the means of personal liberation. People would be able to enjoy most work, because they were in control of their actions, they did work freely, and they could be creative in the way they undertook it. In fact, 'work' as such would be transformed beyond recognition.

This demonstrates the extent of the vision. Today, though many working conditions are better, most jobs are drudgery, and it is still difficult to envisage such a transformation of work. At the crux of the matter, under both capitalism and state controlled industry, we have little control over what we do. Driven by external authority and need for a source of income, we are often alienated from what we produce. In such cases, we are a mere tool under the control of capitalism and state. The idea of work as a means for individual creation and expression is remote.

For anarcho-syndicalists, work should be, as far as possible, a

means of free expression. The opportunity for this is maximised by work being organised and controlled directly by those doing it. For this reason, the means of production becomes more than just a way to provide for the needs to ensure physical survival; it is itself a vehicle for individual development. This may sound like a glorification of work or a rallying call for a new work ethic, but it is not. Much work can be transformed or done away with - the only work that will take place will be that which is deemed worthwhile to meet identified needs. Equally, not all of this may have the potential to be particularly creative or stimulating. So-called monotonous or unpleasant work may exist, although even this will be transformed by being under direct workers' control. Where necessary, such monotonous work would need to be shared out in society equally, by co-operative negotiation at the local level. The over-riding effect will be that the work process will not only become the means of life, but a principal way of expressing life.

Another area where the early anarcho-syndicalists developed a sophisticated vision was in the relationship between work and leisure. With capitalism and waged labour, people are forced to sell large parts of their lives. As a result, they tend to 'write off' work time and 'treasure' leisure time, treating them very differently from each other. One problem is that work is often so bad that it affects part or all of the remaining leisure time. Another problem is that the artificial distinction between work and leisure, forced upon us by capitalism, is often neither healthy nor conducive to enjoyment or life quality, on either side of the distinction. Aware of this unhealthy division, the developing anarcho-syndicalist vision sought to counter it by breaking down the distinction between work and leisure in the future society, by seeing the productive process not as primarily a burden, but a means of expression and enjoyment. Today, we could harness and develop modern technology further to provide truly flexible and mixed productive and leisure time, while improving the creativeness within production. This could provide the basis of a modern vision of an integrated, balanced and fulfilling life of work and leisure.

Meanwhile, the capitalist reality of work is a place where workers are often forced to undertake tasks, which pose immediate or long-term threats to their health, well-being and life. Moreover, there is worse than economic exploitation; there is also capitalist domination, where workers are not only used to produce profits for

## Social economic politics

their masters (sic), but are forced to do so in a threatening atmosphere. With this type of situation increasingly common across the global economy, the need for a lasting alternative and means of obtaining it grows daily.

The vision of the early anarcho-syndicalists was therefore considerable and, perhaps surprisingly, much of it remains at least as relevant today as then. Undoubtedly, their view of workplace struggle went far beyond merely a means of securing improvements in pay and conditions. The workplace was an area of class struggle where the workers would continuously extend their power, gaining ever-greater control over the working process, until the point at which capitalism could be overcome. It was also a means by which a new culture based on solidarity could be developed, practised and strengthened, until it replaced the dominant capitalist culture based on barbaric, narrow-minded selfishness.

Such was the level of wider support for the syndicalist tactics of direct action leading to the general strike, that state socialist parties incorporated the general strike idea into their own strategy as a vote winner. It sat rather uncomfortably with their state control stance, but they nevertheless argued that the general strike would be used to achieve state power, or to force the ruling elite out of power, should they refuse to accept the socialist victory in a general election. As such, the general strike became a means for securing or underpinning the political party's bid for state power - a rather sad thought.

Faced with a rapidly expanding syndicalist movement, the state socialists attempted to argue that the syndicalists' refusal to form political parties reflected their unwillingness to participate in wider political debate. They attempted to portray the emergent anarcho-syndicalism as a form of militant trade unionism. The goal of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism was claimed to be beyond the intellectual capabilities of an organisation made up and controlled by working people. Without the aid of political parties led by middle class intellectuals, they would be incapable of achieving revolutionary consciousness (to paraphrase one notable Marxist leader).

These attacks said more about the prejudices of the socialist leaders themselves than the ideas of syndicalism. The socialist party said the unions should concentrate on day-to-day demands, while the important struggle of changing society should be left to the political parties. They said this for their own good reason - they either believed it, in which case they were sadly mistaken, or they said it because to say otherwise would undermine 'their' party's reason for being. Not surprisingly, they were alarmed by the rise of a movement that had no apparent need for the party, and whose unions fought directly in the workplace as part of the wider struggle against capitalism. They were particularly worried by the idea that social, political and economic liberation could only be achieved by workers themselves by making use of their only real power - their economic power, and that parties were irrelevant or worse in this process.

Another aspect of the syndicalist unions was the sheer breadth of the political and social issues they were prepared to get involved in. Included amongst these were campaigns for immediate political rights, for free speech, against militarism and fascism, and supporting the right to free assembly. As part of these campaigns, they argued that such rights could only be gained and maintained by workers self-organisation. They saw political and economic struggles as part of the same, and insisted that every attack should be resisted directly by the workers themselves, whether it be on freedom of speech or levels of pay. As they pointed out, political rights do not originate in legislative bodies passed down to society by benign states, governments and leaders anxious to reduce their own control over society. The people themselves force them out of the leadership. Should the movements, which fought for these rights or fail, such rights, would quickly be withdrawn. This prediction has unfortunately many modern realities,

## Planned spontaneity

not least of which being the fact that the right to strike in Britain has now all but been undermined to the point of being worthless, as union power has declined.

The modern workplace is far more than just a place where capitalists exploit workers for profit. It is the place where management exercise control over workers as both their means of exploitation, and of staying in control of society as a whole. Disputes at work and within the wider society are more often than not about control and staying in control. Thus strikes over minor issues, which result in bitter confrontations, invariably extend beyond the immediate economic issues, to the issue of control and the managers' right to manage. The economic struggle cannot therefore be divorced from the wider political power struggle; they are part and parcel of the same. The early anarcho-syndicalists recognised that this was a major contributory factor in the upsurge in their movement. In rejecting political parties, they specifically did not reject the idea of struggling for political rights. The many fights for the freedom to speak organise and meet, and the campaigns against militarism and fascism are testimony to this. They saw such struggle as part of the same struggle against capitalism and the state, so, as with the economic struggle, it could only be conducted by the workers themselves through direct action, to the point that capitalism could no longer contain it.

Although the early syndicalists were able to lay down some of the foundation ideas and principles of what was to become anarcho-syndicalism, their movement was clearly flawed in important ways. Many of the problems stemmed from their view of the events and developments that would lead to 'revolution'.

Such was the faith of the syndicalists in the economic power of working class solidarity that the movement became very mechanistic. The basic idea was that it would continue to grow, involving larger and larger sections of the working class, until it became unstoppable. The general strike was the point where the workers would withdraw all forms of co-operation, both economic and social, leading to the final collapse of capitalism, heralding the free society. In this respect, their view of the general strike was similar to Benbow's Grand National holiday idea (Unit 2), where, once organised, workers would only have to all stop work for an extended holiday to bring about the collapse of capitalism.

For many syndicalists, the revolution was seen as an orderly process, with a relatively quick, simple and straightforward transfer of power from capitalism to socialism, and so an identifiable switch point from the old world to the new. This view persisted amongst various groups throughout the 20th Century.

One problem with such a mechanistic view is that it virtually ruled out any element of spontaneity. This contrasts widely with the views of the libertarian socialists within the First International, who had placed great value on spontaneous events and action as a creative force. Although the syndicalists had inherited the libertarian socialist view of the unions as the cells of the new society, organising towards the revolution within capitalism, they had generally lost their idea of the revolution as being primarily a spontaneous act that could not be planned out in advance. Further, they no longer stressed the idea that during the revolution, freed from the yoke of capitalism, workers would establish their own new forms and structures that would form the basis of the future society.

The libertarian socialists had never seen spontaneity as enough. As they pointed out, if it was, the desperate state of poverty and oppression would have meant that revolution would have occurred long ago. The idea of the unions was to raise the awareness, consciousness, confidence and solidarity of workers. The social and political role of the unions was seen as a critical

accompaniment to the economic-based class struggle, so they became integrated organisations in the pre-revolutionary period. They were also seen as the means by which society could take control of the means of production in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. From then on, new structures would be developed by workers themselves to organise society based on the principle of freedom. All involved would decide these structures, at the time, through the direct democratic process.

There was therefore a difference between the early libertarian approach and that of many of the syndicalists - a difference that, as ever, was tested through practice. In this case, the lessons of experience were learned hard. In the main, capitalism reacted with unrestricted force to the rise of syndicalism. Faced with a movement which argued for outright class war as the means of building a new world within the old, the ruling class went into kill mode, unleashing wave after wave of violence and repression across the world against the syndicalist movement.

As a result, many syndicalist movements began to rethink the strategy of the general strike. They were seeing and experiencing international capitalism ruthlessly trying to smash the threat they posed to its dominance. The revolutionary movement was itself under threat, under the combined weight of brute force and the development of anti-revolutionary tactics by the state, such as imprisonment, torture, 'disappearances', harassment and victimisation of anyone considered a potential 'ringleader' or who was particularly active. As a response, they began to consider their own offensive moves to defend their revolution. From this came the realisation that the general strike idea could be made more effective by making it a more pro-active action. Instead of it being a matter of withdrawing working class co-operation in order to bring down capitalism, it could become a means through which workers would take immediate control of both industry and the community to actively destroy capitalism and defend the revolution. As an alternative to simply staying away from work, they would take control of it in order to ensure production on behalf of the revolution.

The lessons of both Russia and Spain were to drive home this point. International capitalism attempted to crush both, through assisting the capitalists and the fascists respectively and, in both cases, actively isolating and attempting to starve out the forces of

revolution. Economic power was not going to be enough - physical force and firepower would be needed to defend the revolution. The main vehicle for these violent defence units was the workers' militia. Like all anarcho-syndicalist organisations, the militias would be based on the principles of freedom and direct democracy. Membership would be voluntary, delegates would be elected to co-ordinate activity, and they would be subject to immediate recall.

Through bitter experience, it was realised that capitalism would not stand by and let a passive, planned general strike succeed. What was needed was something more pro-active and flexible - with more spontaneity. As modern anarcho-syndicalism began to take shape in 1930s Spain, an element of spontaneity was incorporated into its tactics. Gone was the syndicalist implication that the organised revolutionary movement would effectively determine the course of the revolution and provide the organisations for the post-revolutionary society. In its place, anarcho-syndicalists came to see their organisations as placed within the broader working class, growing as the revolutionary temperature increases. Their integrated social, political and economic organisations would provide a focus for self-reliance in the build-up to revolution, as well as launching mass direct actions in the form of general strikes whenever possible, and supported spontaneously by the wider working class.

## Collective solutions

The rise of authoritarianism within the Russian revolution presented perhaps the biggest reason for the anarcho-syndicalists to ditch the syndicalist idea of society being run by the unions. The fear was stark; that the unions could become an authority within wider society, by concentrating power in their organisations within the production process. What about those who were not in revolutionary unions – would they get an equal say in the running of their workplaces?

The answer to this question was that everyone must get an equal say in the running of their workplace after the revolution, otherwise a central tenet of anarcho-syndicalism would be breached. The solution was to apply the principle, not the organisation, to the post-revolutionary situation. In other words, the idea was that in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, workers would organise their own structures based on elected recallable delegates. This was duly tested within the Spanish revolution. Although the anarcho-syndicalist union confederation in Spain, the CNT, spearheaded the initial take-over of industry/agriculture, it did not then attempt to 'own' or run the liberated workplace. Recognising that not all workers were part of the union, the CNT encouraged the formation of collectives, which included everyone involved, both CNT and non-CNT members, and these collectives elected peasants' and workers' committees. Moreover, membership of the collectives was voluntary, so people could choose to stay out if they wished. In this way, though the CNT played a major role in the move towards workers' control of work, its objective was to establish community control over society by the whole of society. If it had sought to take over workplaces itself, it would have placed itself as a barrier to this process, instead of assisting it.

Another learning process took place within the early syndicalist movement, around the internal structures of their organisations. At the time, they envisaged the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism as imminent. When this did not happen, they were left with longer-term organisations than they had originally planned for. At the same time, they became aware of the potential flaws and weaknesses within such organisations. Many syndicalists in Britain had seen the corruption that had grown in the existing reformist unions, as leaders sought election and became embroiled in government, forming a new arm of the capitalist class. Workers, once elected into full-time positions,

quickly lost touch and began to be absorbed by capitalism. The syndicalists were horrified at the possibility that this could happen within their organisations and, as a result, they increasingly sought more democratic control and accountability in them.

Once again, experience of practical realities led to the revision of previous conceptions, and in this case, organisational structures. By the time the anarcho-syndicalist movement emerged, the idea of full time positions within anarcho-syndicalist organisations was rejected. Officers of the union were elected as delegates, carrying out their duty after work. Here we should emphasise the word 'delegate'. The whole ethos of anarcho-syndicalist organisations was (and is) therefore based on decentralisation and direct democratic control from the bottom up. The life of the organisation is conducted by the activity of the membership as a whole rather than through elected officials. As early as the 1930s, the drive for democratic control had ensured that the Spanish CNT, with a membership of one million, only maintained one full-time administrative position.

The emerging 'permanence' of anarcho-syndicalist organisations also allowed the movement to extend and broaden its activity. As we have already seen, just because workers came together in unions to fight capitalism, this did not mean that these organisations were solely about economic issues. Quite the contrary; building the new society in the shell of the old meant exactly that. Consequently, numerous educational, social, youth, women's and cultural groups were formed within and around the anarcho-syndicalist union. Spain again presents a clear glimpse of this, illustrating how anarcho-syndicalism really is not just talk or theory. The years leading up to 1936 brought a rapid rate of development of the working class culture that would contribute to the basis of the future society, alongside but separate from the dominant capitalist culture. After the revolution, this culture continued to develop in an explosion of expression and new ideas of liberation.

## A real living alternative

The anarcho-syndicalist 'union' bears no resemblance to the trade unions of today. The difference stems from the recognition by anarcho-syndicalism that what has to be overcome is not just economic exploitation, but oppression as a whole, and this has various origins and reappears time and again in different forms. Over the years, as anarcho-syndicalists have gathered experience, these unions have become broad and adaptable, to allow struggle against the full range of oppression dished out by capitalism, the state, and their sick society.

To give just two prominent examples, the Mujeres Libres and the Juventudes Libertarias have been actively engaging with women's issues and youth resistance respectively, since the 1930s. The use of the Spanish CNT example is not accidental, for it was in the Spanish revolution that the strength of the idea of building the new world within the old was really borne out. The anarcho-syndicalists were able to defeat Franco's fascist coup in their stronghold of Catalonia and, using the strength of their own existing organisations and the defeat of fascism as a springboard, they launched the new society (see Units 15-18).

The fact that this new society succeeded at all is remarkable given the ranks of world-wide opposition (including the Soviet-sponsored communists); the fact that it actually flourished, practised the principles of freedom and equality, and improved production and quality of life during a bloody war, is testament to the idea. Much crucial groundwork for the establishment of libertarian communism in Spain had been underway for many years, within and around the CNT, as shown in the resolutions passed at the CNT conferences in the years before the Spanish revolution. Indeed, in many ways, this period foreshadows the revolution, which was not timely or prepared for, but forced upon the CNT by the fascist coup (see Units 15 and 17). As one Spanish anarcho-syndicalist wrote at the time:

*"The Spanish revolution was mature in the popular consciousness for many years, the anarchists and syndicalists of Spain considered their task to be the social transformation of society. In their assemblies, in their journals, their brochures and books, the social revolution was discussed incessantly and in a systematic fashion."*

## Dark ages

While holding up Spain as the first example of a large anarcho-syndicalist movement, it must be made clear that the CNT made significant mistakes during the Spanish revolutionary period. After all, anarcho-syndicalism is not a theory, but a movement shaped by reality. Looking for mistakes and weaknesses is part of the means by which we learn, change and move the anarcho-syndicalist project forward. Ahead, everything still looks the same - a world striving for ever-greater freedom, based on equality, solidarity and direct democracy.

Without wishing to sweep the entire remainder of the 20th Century aside, the global anarcho-syndicalist movement struggled and largely failed to come to terms with the lessons of Spain. Before it could, it was hit with a barrage of setbacks that knocked the life out of the international movement for half a century.

There was the rise of totalitarianism, both fascist and communist, and the effects of the Second World War, which in breaking up workforces and wiping out dissent, all but finished the international anarcho-syndicalist movement. After the war, Marxism dominated the socialist movement, and anarcho-syndicalism kept a foothold in only a handful of countries.

The post-war rise of Marxism occurred because it responded to the capitalist boom and its attendant prosperity, by becoming increasingly reformist - as it had done previously, prior to the Russian Revolution. The British Communist Party now concentrated its strategy upon influencing the Labour Party. Meanwhile, in the less developed world, Soviet imperialism made inroads as state control (and Soviet aid) was seen as a means to organise national liberation struggles, aimed at bringing freedom from the dominance of capitalist imperialism. Others trod their own path without Russia, and from South America to China, state-oriented communist revolutions occurred. Unfortunately, as in Russia, state control only brought new elites based on a small intelligentsia. Tragically, the same mistakes were repeated across the globe as workers, who had shed blood to throw off advanced capitalist or imperial dominance, found themselves facing a new ruling class, often more brutal and corrupt than that they had overthrown. Driven by Marxism, these new elites introduced forced industrialisation programmes, which achieved little but undermined the rural economy, often leading to widespread starvation.

## Postscript

In the advanced world, reformist socialism was sucked into increasingly bourgeois politics. Socialist parties, which had once set out to conquer political power under the flag of socialism, gradually sacrificed their socialist convictions one by one, until they became political lightning rods for the security of capitalism. The capitalism they had sought to conquer had finally conquered them and their 'socialism', and there was nothing left to fight for except the enemy. Some of the socialist parties, though crumbling in terms of any pretence at revolutionary intent, were successful as capitalist puppets, and they lured many bourgeois minds and career hungry politicians into their camp, which helped to accelerate the decay of socialist principles. Soon, success was measured in terms of votes at the polls. Even talk of struggle, direct action, self-reliance and self-education was increasingly seen as a hindrance to this 'success'. Hence, such 'ideals' were sacrificed to the god of the polling booth. Activity in the workplace and the community gradually fell away. All that was required of the workers was that they turn out on polling day. Socialist parties encouraged apathy as a means of control, until what was once a living, breathing socialist movement withered to become an electoral machine.

In Britain, the drift away from socialism has finally run its course with the rise of New Labour, which now can no longer bear to speak the name. The idea of a state controlled 'communist' system as an alternative to capitalism has also effectively died, with the final collapse of the Soviet Union. The workers' state in China is now rushing to embrace the free market. Practically, only Cuba and North Korea are left to carry the Marxist banner.

The rise of syndicalism around the turn of the century was the first real global mass-movement that was based largely upon the ideas of libertarian socialism, developed in and around the First International. While many 'mistakes' were made, they were learned from, and the result was the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism in a recognisable form.

The first real opportunity to put anarcho-syndicalism into practice came in Spain in the 1930s. Again, mistakes were made, although, it has to be said, the remarkable success of the collectives movement also provided a clear demonstration that people could run their own communities and production systems using anarcho-syndicalist principles, even in modern industrialised cities such as Barcelona.

The second half of the 20th Century was a dark age for global anarcho-syndicalism, as workers embraced Marxism and social democracy around the world. Towards the end of the century, it became all too apparent that both these options for achieving a better world had failed dismally and would continue to fail, not least due to the fundamental weakness of maintaining that tool of oppression, the state.

Now, at the start of the 21st Century, there are signs that anarcho-syndicalism has begun to re-emerge as a real hope for the future. It does not have all the answers, but it does have a long history of experience of struggle and of a working class learning from its mistakes. As it slowly recovers its strength, anarcho-syndicalism may emerge any time soon, as it has before, as a movement against oppression aimed at ever-greater human freedom.

In the next and final Unit in this course, we shall attempt to assess the current aims, aspirations, ideas, tactics and, above all, the spirit of anarcho-syndicalism in Britain at the start of the 21st Century.

## Key points

- For both libertarian socialism and modern anarcho-syndicalism a future society would be democratically controlled, since the goal is the management of things, not people.
- There is no all-embracing 'theory of anarcho-syndicalism'. Anarcho-syndicalists simply advocate a broad-based range of federated organisations, sharing the same basic aims and principles opposed to capitalism, parliamentarianism and state control, and for the establishment of libertarian communism.
- In rejecting capitalism, the anarcho-syndicalist movement totally rejects the morality that underpins capitalism and the society based on that morality.
- In direct action the basic tenet of anarcho-syndicalism was laid down; that the task of freeing the workers can only be achieved by the workers themselves.
- For anarcho-syndicalists the economic struggle cannot be divorced from the wider political power struggle; they are part and parcel of the same thing.
- State socialist parties incorporated the general strike idea into their own strategy in an attempt to win votes.
- Integrated social, political and economic organisations will provide a focus for self-reliance in the build-up to revolution, as well as launching mass direct actions in the form of general strikes whenever possible, and supported spontaneously by the wider working class.
- The whole ethos of anarcho-syndicalist organisations was (and is) based on decentralisation and direct democratic control - from the bottom up.

## Checklist

1. What were the differences between the Marxist and libertarian socialist attitudes towards the peasantry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?
2. What is meant by the phrase, "the management of things not people"?
3. How did the early syndicalists see the building of a "new society in the shell of the old"?
4. What was the libertarian socialist attitude towards work and leisure?
5. What is meant by the expression "planned spontaneity"?
6. Do anarcho-syndicalists see a future society run by the unions?

## Answer suggestions

1. *What were the differences between the Marxist and libertarian socialist attitudes towards the peasantry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

The Marxists determined that the peasantry were condemned by the laws of history to be reactionary, only seeking to own and cultivate their own small patch of land. They decided that the new workers' state would have to forcibly collectivise the land. The libertarian socialists bitterly disagreed with this, arguing that irrespective of whether they were 'reactionary' or not, collectivisation could only work if it was voluntary – and free. They were confident in both the peasants and their ideas.

2. *What is meant by the term, “the management of things not people”?*

A future direct democratic society would not be some all-embracing state-like system where decisions about all aspects of human life are made by some centralised administration. Things are the products and services we make/provide because we decide we need them, they will need to be managed, leaving people to manage themselves. Government will be replaced by 'industrial' organisation. People will come together freely within the production process to plan, make and otherwise ensure their needs are met. Outside the workplace and production process people will naturally and freely come together on the basis of their common interests to pursue their own desires and needs. These groups will be self-organised, voluntary and entirely self-regulated. The organisation of society will therefore be limited exclusively to the needs of production and consumption. Society and the life of those within it will therefore have two components – self-managed, federated production/provision for needs, and the rest, made up of a patchwork of interlocking self-interest groups, all self-regulating, overlapping and interacting as their interests coincide.

3. *How did the early syndicalists see the building of a “new society in the shell of the old”?*

In rejecting capitalism and the state, the early syndicalist movement totally rejected the morality that underpinned capitalism and the society based on that morality. The new society will be based on a new socialist morality that will not simply emerge miraculously

from the ashes of some future socialist revolution, but exists in the here and now, within the shell of the capitalist system. In building the new society in the shell of the old, they sought to create a new socialist culture within the working class, based around the main organisation of the working class - the union movement. This culture was to be built totally independently of the existing capitalist order based on the principle of solidarity, the very negation of that of the capitalist principles of pure self-interest and the pursuit of profit. In order that the new society could evolve, a means of struggle was needed that was also independent of the existing capitalist system and the existing social order; direct action.

4. *What was the libertarian socialist attitude towards work and leisure?*

Despite the obviously alienating working conditions at the time, the libertarian socialists did not see work per se as the problem, but the system that created the working conditions. They did not therefore see production in the future society as primarily a necessary chore of utopia. Self-management of production will transform the production process so that it not only ensured that all society's needs were met, but also became part of the means of personal liberation. People will be able to enjoy most work, because they were in control of their actions, they did work freely, and they could be creative in the way they undertook it.

5. *What is meant by the expression “planned spontaneity”?*

The faith of the early syndicalists in the economic power of working class solidarity that the movement became very mechanistic with the basic idea was that it would continue to grow until it became unstoppable. The general strike was the point where the workers would withdraw all forms of co-operation, both economic and social, leading to the final collapse of capitalism, heralding the free society. In practice they realised that making it a more pro-active action could make the general strike idea more effective. It could become a means through which workers would take immediate control of both industry and the community to actively destroy capitalism and defend the revolution. As an alternative to simply staying away from work, they would take control of it in order to ensure production on behalf of the revolution. Anarcho-syndicalists also came to see their

## Suggested discussion points

organisations placed within the broader working class, growing as the revolutionary temperature increases. Their integrated social, political and economic organisations would provide a focus for self-reliance in the build-up to revolution, as well as launching mass direct actions in the form of general strikes whenever possible, and supported spontaneously by the wider working class.

### 6. *Do anarcho-syndicalists see a future society run by the unions?*

The rise of authoritarianism within the Russian revolution presented perhaps the biggest reason for the anarcho-syndicalists to ditch the syndicalist idea of society being run by the unions. The fear was stark; that the unions could become an authority within wider society, by concentrating power in their organisations within the production process, while those who were not in revolutionary unions would not get an equal say in the running of their workplaces. So the idea developed that everyone must get an equal say in the running of their workplace after the revolution, otherwise a central tenet of anarcho-syndicalism would be breached. The solution was to apply the principle, not the organisation, to the post-revolutionary situation. In other words, in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, workers will organise their own structures based on elected recallable delegates. Similar structures will operate within the wider community and these can be inter-linked in a web-like structure.

- What are the main differences between the early libertarian socialists, syndicalists and today's anarcho-syndicalist movement?
- In the industrially 'developed' world, leisure is seen as separate from work, and many forms are commodified and informed by capitalist concerns (t.v., film, sports, hobbies magazines). How might this split be resolved, and capitalist interests be withdrawn? What alternatives can we explore?
- How can 'repression from within society' i.e. sexism, racism, disablism and other forms of adverse social discrimination be countered effectively in the twenty-first century?
- In which ways is direct action 'far more than just a street tactic'? Why is this important?

## Further Reading

This Unit draws on ideas introduced in Units 1-22, so these are a starting point for tracing the origins of anarcho-syndicalism. To find out more, you can always contact us at SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW (da@directa.force9.co.uk). Alternatively, try the Internet; the Direct Action website is one starting point for links to SF and other organisations and their ideas ([www.directa.force9.co.uk](http://www.directa.force9.co.uk)), or libraries and second-hand bookshops. To mail order further reading, try the AK catalogue, from AK Distribution, PO Box 12766, Edinburgh, EH8 9YE (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd).