

A History of Anarcho-syndicalism

Unit 5: Revolutionary Syndicalism in Britain, 1870-1910

This Unit aims to:

- Outline the social, economic and political changes that took place in Britain round the turn of the last century
- Explore the arguments that took place within the trade union movement and the rise of 'New Unionism'
- Examine the factors in the growth of the syndicalist movement in Britain
- Explain the differences of approach within the syndicalist movement of the time.

Terms and abbreviations

Fabian Society: Named after a Roman general Fabius Maximus who won his campaigns by slow attrition. The Fabians believed that socialism was best achieved by permeation, gradually reforming existing institutions and through constitutional government rather than through revolutionary upheaval.

SDF: Social Democratic Federation. Formed in 1884, it was always dominated by its founder H M Hyndman, a former independent Tory. Its strategy was based on a crude economic determinism that saw the collapse of capitalism as inevitable and the best that could be done in the meantime was to agitate for palliative reforms.

Taff Vale Judgment: In 1901 the Taff Vale Railway Company successfully sued the Amalgamated Society of Railway servants that supported a strike. The judgment made any trade union liable for the action of its officials, virtually destroying the right to strike.

(Cont'd..)

ILP: Independent Labour Party. Formed in Bradford in 1893 with the object of co-ordinating the efforts of trade unions to gain parliamentary representation independent of Liberal support.

LRC: Labour Representation Committee. The ILP was instrumental, along with the Fabians and the SDF, in forming the LRC in 1900. When the LRC had twenty-nine candidates returned as MPs in the 1906 Election they immediately changed their name to the Labour Party.

SLP: Socialist Labour Party. Formed in Scotland from SDF dissidents in 1903, the SLP were followers of Daniel de Leon an American Marxist. They came to embrace a theory that change would come through industrial unionism and political power gained through elections would rubber stamp the changes.

IWW: Industrial Workers of the World. American syndicalist union formed in 1905.

BAIU: British Advocates of Industrial Unionism. Established by the SLP in 1906 as a propagandist organisation. In 1909 it was reconstructed to include a dual-unionist centre under the title of Industrial Workers Of Great Britain (IWGB)

IUDA: Industrial Union of Direct Actionists. An anarcho-syndicalist propaganda group formed in 1907 supporting a dual-union approach.

Plebs League: Formed by radical students and staff at Ruskin College who were unhappy with the paternalistic and anti-socialist leanings of the administration. After a strike they broke away and founded the Central Labour College in London in 1908. The objective of the League was 'to educate the rank and file as to his [sic] class position and his economic power.'

Introduction

Unit 4 was concerned with how anarchism developed within the French workers' movement as a precursor to anarcho-syndicalism. Here, we turn to the continuing events in Britain, where similar ideas were put into practice in the first years of the 20th Century. The early development of anarcho-syndicalism varied from country to country. One common thread was that, although anarchism emerged as a cohesive set of ideas, the actions which occurred as a result were adapted and developed in practical reality, according to local conditions. So, anarcho-syndicalism did not emerge as a rigid theory with a single blueprint for change to be applied regardless of current economic conditions. On the contrary, it developed out of practical reality, with numerous ever-changing tactics, and based on a set of basic principles.

Background

When the British labour movement split in two during the mid-late 19th Century there remained those who continued to argue that workers should concentrate on bringing about political change as a prelude to economic change. These people aimed to establish a socialist government, which would then take the economy into public ownership. This was the approach that eventually led to the establishment of the Labour Party. On the other hand, there emerged a group who spurned the idea of political reform. These people pointed out that workers could not trust governments to bring about change. Instead, they urged workers to organise themselves to confront capitalism directly: this would lead to the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.

The British workers' movement of the 19th Century was shaped by Chartism and its eventual failure (see Unit 2). The downfall of Chartism was followed by 60 years of steady growth in trade unionism. The form of this trade unionism had little to do with the revolutionary ideas that were present among the Luddites or the direct actionist Chartists. The aim of the mainly craft-based trade unions, which dated back to the mid-18th Century, was respectability

within the established order. They did not seek to change the system, but to find a role within it. Unions sought to portray themselves as sober insurance societies whose affairs were business-like and entirely respectable. Improvements in conditions were to be achieved through industrial conciliation and union recognition through legal changes forced on capitalism by parliamentary lobbying. The great mass of unskilled workers and women toiling in sweated workshops were not organised and were largely ignored by the 'aristocratic' craft workers so that up until the 1880s, there were no permanent established unions for unskilled workers.

By the 1870s it seemed that the craft unions' reformist strategy was making some gains. The second Trade Union Congress held in Birmingham in 1869 claimed to represent some 250,000 workers. The campaign to win over the ruling class to the idea that there was a place for sober and responsible trade unions within society was meeting with some success. In 1871, the Trade Union Act was introduced, which gave unions partial legal recognition.

At the third Trade Union Congress in 1871 a "Parliamentary Committee" was set up to lobby MPs. This was to be the final push for full recognition for trade unions. It was hoped that, through better lobbying of Parliament, the 1825 Trade Union Act that still left unions open to criminal prosecution, could be overturned, granting them full legal status. The Parliamentary Committee met with immediate success. In 1871, Robert Applegarth became the first trade union leader appointed to a Royal Commission and the 1874 general election returned the two miners' leaders McDonald and Burt to Parliament as Liberal MPs.

The extent to which the TUC were concerned with the plight of unskilled workers in general, and women workers in particular, can be gauged by the fact that when middle-class women tried to voice the grievances of the working women they were attempting to organise, they were thrown out of the 1870 annual conference. Broadhurst, the Liberal MP and leader of the Parliamentary Committee, argued against the wisdom of sending women to Congress "*..because, under the influence of emotion, they might vote for things they would regret in cooler moments*".

The unions were instrumental in bringing about the notion of a 'family wage', which sought to imitate a middle-class model of family

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morals and economics. This model promoted as head of the family a male 'breadwinner' who kept his wife out of the workplace and in the home. Unions promoting this form of 'family wage' also pushed during the 1880s for 'protective' legislation that excluded women from certain trades e.g. the chain and nail trade of the Black Country and the pit brows at mines throughout the country. Women pushed out of these trades were left unemployed or forced to take employment in occupations that made it difficult for workers to become organised. This included domestic service – by 1911 39% of all women employed were found in service – and part-time and seasonal work was common. Union activity in relation to women was generally concerned with keeping women out of trades. The reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, the employment of women in any industry automatically brought wages down because women were paid less than men: secondly, it was claimed that the presence of women in some workplaces corrupted them. Unions cited both at the time as good reasons why women should remain in the home. They were supported in this by middle-class reformers who saw the absence of women from the home as a major factor in the poor health of working-class children and insobriety of working-class men. In occupations where women were able to organise, most notably the Lancashire cotton industry, where the majority of workers and union members were women, there were very few women trade union officials. The men, workers and union officials alike, took care to keep women out of the most specialised and highly paid jobs in the industry and ensured they stayed in subordinate positions.

The adoption of the middle-class model of gendered relationships by unions meant that women were expected to find a husband or support a working father. The reality, however, never matched the image of the 'angel in the home' promoted by the middle-classes and the trade unions: it simply encouraged sexual discrimination and led to hardship.

However, the enclosed world of respectable trade unionism was soon to be hit by economic recession. The major depression of 1873-96 led to widespread unemployment and rocked the craft unions to their foundations. In the face of growing unemployment, workers increasingly began to challenge the "respectable trade unionist" strategy. Among them was Tom Mann, an engineer who was later to play a prominent role in British syndicalism. Writing in a pamphlet arguing for the eight-hour day in 1886, Mann summed up the growing mood of discontent with current union thinking thus:

"To Trade Unionists, I desire to make a special appeal. How long, how long will you be content with the present half-hearted policy of unions... what good purpose are they serving now? All of them have large numbers out of employment... None of the important societies have policies other than endeavouring to keep wages from falling. The true union policy of aggression seems entirely lost sight of; in fact the average trade unionist of today is a man with a fossilised intellect, either hopelessly apathetic, or supporting a policy that plays directly into the hands of the capitalist exploiter."

Mann was not alone in his anger. The depression saw a rekindling of socialism. A number of socialist bodies were formed, including the Fabian Society and the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF). The latter attracted a number of trade union activists and was prominent in organising large unemployment demonstrations in Trafalgar Square in 1886 and 1887. At both demonstrations widespread disorder occurred with police and property being attacked.

New Unionism

The biggest threat to this genteel world of the established trade union order came from the hitherto-ignored unskilled workers. From the 1880s onwards, there was an explosion in unskilled organisation. In 1886, a union of seamen was launched: by 1889 it claimed a membership of 65,000. A gas workers' union was established in 1889 and soon had a membership of 20,000, including many workers employed outside the gas industry. The gas workers embarked on a bitter struggle with the gas companies for the eight-hour day, which led to confrontations with the authorities in numerous towns. This struggle gained widespread publicity and helped spread the idea of unskilled unions. Also, in 1889, a dockers' union was formed and it too began agitation for the eight-hour day. The port of London itself was soon paralysed.

The new unskilled unions were distinguished from the craft unions in that they often had the word 'general' in their title, indicating that they aimed to organise unskilled and casual workers. For instance, the General Railway Workers' Union was formed in 1890 to cater for casual railway labourers and others excluded by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants. In order to attract low paid workers, these new general unions tended to have low entrance fees and unlike craft unions, did not depend on benefits to attract members. They relied instead on aggressive strike tactics to win concessions from the employers. From the outset the new general unions were more politicised than craft unions. Most of those organising new unions classed themselves as socialists and were often active in socialist political organisations. As a result general unions, unlike craft unions, began to argue for capitalism to be replaced by some form of socialist society.

The spread of unskilled unions became known as "New Unionism", and the new organisations rapidly became established throughout the industrial areas of England, Scotland and Wales. There was an increase in union membership from just over 750,000 in 1888 to 2.5 million by 1910.

The growth of this far more militant, politicised form of trade unionism did not win favour with established respectable unionism. Clashes began to take place between 'labour' and the 'trades' within the TUC from the 1890s onwards. John Burns described the differences as follows at the 1890 TUC congress:

"Physically the "old" unionists were much bigger than the new...A great number of them looked like respectable city gentlemen; wore very good coats and high hats and, in many cases, were of such splendid build and proportions that they presented an aldermanic, not to say a magisterial form of dignity. Amongst the new delegates not a single one wore a tall hat. They looked like workmen, they were workmen."

Clashes between new and old unionism occurred with increasing frequency over the next few years. But the days of "magisterial" trade unionism were numbered, not least because the introduction of new technology was undermining craft unionism, through the process of de-skilling. Craft unions had hitherto been dependent on the relative shortage of their skills to maintain their privileged position. While some craft workers attempted to cling to their privileges, many now looked to amalgamating their organisations with unskilled workers in order to maintain their industrial strength.

Amalgamation was already beginning to occur by the 1890s. In 1891, for instance, Tom Mann stood for secretary of the craft-based Amalgamated Engineering Union on a ticket arguing for the union to be opened up to less skilled workers. Though he was narrowly defeated, his campaign had its effect. The following year, the rules of the union were changed to accept less skilled workers.

Capitalism & Socialism

It was not just de-skilling that propelled amalgamation. Unlike France (see Unit 4), where capitalism was slow to centralise, Britain saw capitalism coming under greater central control by 1890. Through an on-going process of business amalgamation, capitalist production was increasingly concentrated into larger units, which led to a far greater degree of concentration in the patterns of ownership and control. The growth of employers' associations contributed to this centralisation.

This new world of highly centralised capitalism hastened the demise of the craft-based union, as capitalists became far more organised and able to co-ordinate their attacks on the unions far more effectively. The idea that workers should organise on an industrial basis began to be advocated by an increasing number of workers. For instance, in 1889, the Miners' Federation of Great Britain was established in order to resist attacks by the increasingly co-ordinated mine owners' organisation.

Another factor undermining the old craft unions was the spread of socialist ideas. The idea underpinning craft unionism was the need to protect workers' craft status, largely through ensuring only skilled workers could join the union and work in the trade concerned. By its very nature, this was a divisive idea. The spread of socialist ideas, which generally emphasised the need for workers' solidarity, inevitably undermined the notion that all that mattered was protecting sectional interests. Socialist ideas were spreading rapidly amongst the unions as can be seen by a resolution that was passed by the TUC in 1893. This resolution urged unions to support only parliamentary candidates pledged to the collective ownership and control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, much to the horror of the more magisterial members. This was seen as a turning point by many socialists and was to pave the way for the establishment of the Labour Party.

The birth of New Unionism was not greeted with much joy by the ruling classes. It was one thing to grant limited legal rights to the top-hatted gentlemen from the craft unions, but quite another to grant legal status to the likes of William Thorne, leader of the gas workers' union, who boasted of his part in leading an attack on scabs during a strike for the 8-hour day in Leeds. The sight of the 'great unwashed', organising and paralysing industry through militant strikes, coming under the influence of 'alien' socialist doctrines terrified the ruling

classes into action.

The employers, backed up by the state, unleashed an attack on trade unionism in the 1890s. Striking miners were shot in Featherstone, Yorkshire, in 1893. In the same year, gunboats were anchored on the river Mersey during a dockers' strike. The police and army were trained in how to deal with demonstrators and began regularly practising baton charges.

In 1897, due to a strike in London by engineers and other unions for the 8-hour day, the newly formed Employers' Federation of Engineers Associations organised a national lock-out in a bid to break the increasingly militant engineering union. The dispute lasted six months and was the first large-scale national dispute in British history. The attacks on organised labour culminated in the Taff Vale ruling by the House of Lords in 1901, which in effect allowed employers to claim damages against unions, and in doing so removed the unions' limited legal protection.

Capitalism's New Face

With the return of full employment around the turn of the century, the British ruling elite faced a growing crisis. The employers' attacks had proved only a temporary and minor setback to New Unionism and union membership continued to grow rapidly. This prompted a quite remarkable change of strategy by a large section of the ruling class. A number of capitalists and politicians began to argue that, rather than attempting to eradicate the unions, they should be 'assimilated' or 'incorporated'. Through apparently meeting some demands of the less militant leadership, it was argued, the unions could be manipulated and used as agents to control the problem of growing working class militancy.

Sir Benjamin Browne, a powerful shipbuilding magnate, characterised this breathtaking change of attitude by a capitalist class hitherto ferocious in its commitment to the free market doctrine:

"What we want is to negotiate with workmen as much as possible on equal terms...I am for all unions...if unions and employers were encouraged a little more, they would be able to do their work, so that stoppages would be the rarest thing in the world...I have always advised employers that we get on far better when we go through the unions than when we act independently from them."

This change of strategy was soon put into action. The first fifteen years of the 20th Century saw the introduction of a number of reforms as the British state took its first tentative steps toward establishing a system based on what was later to become welfare capitalism. The state introduced bargaining and conciliation mechanisms and they were soon being used throughout much of British industry. The aim of these new procedures was to channel workers' anger away from action and into negotiation, where their demands could be shaped and modified. The 'responsible' trade unionist, who was willing to negotiate and act in the interests of the industry as a whole, was to be the conduit through which management hoped to exercise control over the workers.

The reversal of the Taff Vale decision through the Trade Dispute Act of 1906 ensured that union funds were once again immune from prosecution. Similar immunity from prosecution was also given to trade unionists engaged in 'responsible trade union activity'. In 1908, Acts were passed which limited the number of hours worked in the mines. Trade boards were introduced in 1909 to

regulate wages in sweatshop industries. In 1911, the Industrial Councils were set up as a permanent institutionalised link between labour and capital. Between 1906 and 1914, various welfare programmes were introduced, which are still seen by many as the origin of the modern welfare state.

History books often give the impression that the initial trade union and social reforms were brought about by well-meaning, progressive, upper class reformists, who exposed the true horrors of working class life to a basically caring but ignorant ruling elite. Other sources point to the fact that reforms were introduced to ensure an adequate supply of labour. By the turn of the century, it was becoming increasingly clear that a modern industrial economy was needed to ensure a reasonably healthy and educated workforce. It was also apparent that this could not be left to the free market and that state intervention would be required. While both arguments have some weight, a factor not often taken into account by either is that it was the workers' militancy and the threat it brought that were crucial to bringing about these changes.

There was a fear among Britain's ruling elite, often bordering on the hysterical, that the uneducated masses could, at any time, embark on a revolutionary orgy. Through introducing limited reforms to eliminate some of the worst excesses of capitalism, and through union assimilation, it was hoped to shape working class culture away from revolutionary notions. It should be noted that even the welfare reforms that were introduced included a large element of social control. For example, unemployment benefit was denied to those dismissed for 'industrial misconduct' and those deemed 'guilty' of insubordination towards employers. The aim of welfare reform was to ensure a regulated workforce subject to state discipline. Reform was to encourage the idea of the responsible worker, while isolating and punishing those who argued for class conflict.

Economic Decline

Another major factor increasingly exercising the minds of British capitalists was the deteriorating economy. The great depression of the late 19th Century marked the end of Britain's dominant position in the world economy. From the 1870s onwards British capital was faced with increased competition from the high-tech, high investment economies of Germany and the USA.

During the period between 1870 and 1914, the heyday of British imperialism, the notion that 'population is power' had a major impact on women. The production of 'inferior' workers of poor stature and indifferent health was primarily laid at the feet of working-class women who were deemed poor or 'feckless' mothers. On the other hand middle-class women suspected of using contraception were deemed traitors to their class for refusing to produce enough babies of the 'superior' type to populate and maintain the British Empire and become the managers of British capital. The drive to produce better 'workers' and 'managers' for Britain's capitalist system weighed heavily on women who, as we have already seen, were already being excluded from trades and the workplace in general by unions whose interests mirrored the requirements of capital. Re-production became a by-line of capitalist production, and even this basic human function was appropriated to the needs of the state, within a sexist model of human reproductive responsibility. This model was supported by the predominantly male trade unions.

As it was, Britain was unable to maintain adequate levels of investment and productivity was lowered. The only way British capitalism could maintain profit levels was to force down wages. This posed a problem. How, during boom times, without unemployment to discipline workers, does capitalism control wages to compete with more efficient economies? It was a problem that British capitalism was to struggle with for much of this century, and part of the solution was found in the ongoing incorporation of the trade unions.

The initial incorporation strategy was to grant limited union power, in the hope that the workforce could be manipulated into accepting lower wages in exchange. According to economic orthodoxy, this would lead to greater investment and thus restore Britain's failing economic power. At first, this appeared to work. Even though the first years of the 20th Century saw an economic boom, with both full employment and rising union membership, wages declined in real terms. Between 1900 and 1914, average wages fell

by 10%. All seemed rosy for British capitalism. The 'golden era' of the Edwardian period was marked by growing inequality as rents and profits exploded, while working class living standards declined. It looked to some capitalist leaders as if Britain's economic decline could be reversed through this strategy.

Bureaucracy vs. Militancy

In reality, any satisfaction British capitalism felt at its new-found profitability was short-lived. If anything, the increased use of bargaining procedures to control workers' militancy had the opposite effect. The spread of bargaining procedures required an increase in union bureaucracy to staff the newly formed negotiating bodies. This growing bureaucracy, enamoured by their new-found status, soon began to take on conservative attitudes. Union leaders became reluctant to call strike action that might jeopardise their good relations with the employers. The goal of ensuring union recognition and maintaining negotiating rights became an end in itself.

As a result, union officials came to be viewed with growing hostility by ordinary union members. They appeared remote, cut off from the shop floor, and increasingly lost any sense of militancy the deeper they became embroiled in bargaining structures. This resulted in the growth of a form of strike action that was later to characterise Britain's post-war industrial relations - the "unofficial" strike. As wages continued to fall, anger among workers grew due to the slowness and ineffectiveness of bargaining machinery. This quickly developed as the growing mistrust of union officials was combined with plunging living standards.

The state's attempt to portray itself as the workers' friend also proved not to be as popular as the protagonists of 'incorporation' had hoped. In retrospect, this was hardly surprising, given the historical distrust of the state among British workers; ever since feudalism gave way to capitalism, the state had been brutal in its support for capitalism against workers' interests (see Unit 1). Reforms such as the poor laws had been introduced, supposedly to relieve workers'

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suffering. Bitter experience to the contrary had led many workers to associate the state and its laws with working class oppression. At the turn of the Century, the hated poor laws were still in operation and still causing bitter resentment. The courts too were generally viewed by workers as far from neutral, perceived to be acting in the interests of the capitalists. As a result, anti-state feeling ran deep among Britain's working class.

The almost instinctive anti-state sentiments were found in much of Britain's early socialist thinking, most notably in the work of William Morris, who rejected incremental reform, arguing for autonomous workers being fully in control of all aspects of production. Morris and his associates in effect argued for direct workers' control as opposed to piecemeal reform by a benign state.

Mistrust of the state not only hampered the ruling elite's attempt to cast itself in a new light, it also caused considerable problems for the growing socialist movement. All the socialist parties and groups that emerged towards the end of the 19th Century - the Marxist Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884, the Fabian Society (1886), the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1893 and, in 1900, the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) forerunner of the Labour party - were fully committed to winning political power through the Parliamentary process. All these groups sought to cast the state as a neutral force that could be used for the benefit of the working class. This was in direct contradiction to many workers' instincts and experience.

This long held mistrust appeared to be well-founded when, in the 1906 Election, the return of twenty-nine LRC candidates, who immediately became the Labour Party, failed to become a new fighting force for the working class. On entering Parliament, these new MP's seemed quickly to forget their socialist ideas. Instead, they seemed more interested in tail-ending, and generally defending, the Liberal Party's welfare capitalism than promoting an independent socialist alternative. This sounds all too familiar today, with the current antics of New Labour and the inevitable actions of the various 'Socialist' left parties. whenever power is within their grasp.

Under the social and economic conditions described above, it would have been surprising if some form of syndicalist movement had not developed in Britain in the years leading up to the First World War. The existence of a powerful syndicalist movement in France had long cast a shadow over the British labour movement. The French CGT argued for direct action rather than conciliation, it shunned parliamentary action and did not see the state as neutral but as acting in the interests of capitalism. This example of a different kind of workers' organisation just across the channel, coupled with the economic and political changes within Britain, helped in the emergence of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain.

In the event, the first syndicalist group to appear in Britain was more influenced by events in the United States rather than in France. In 1903, increasingly disillusioned with the SDF's exclusively political strategy, which ignored the workplace struggle, a group of workers in Scotland split away to form the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). The SLP was influenced by the ideas developed by the American socialist, Daniel de Leon. At this stage the de Leonist movement in Britain, as in the USA, was not syndicalist. Although the revolutionary potential of industrial conflict was not ignored de Leon looked to revolution primarily through political methods. However, as De Leon's moved closer to revolutionary syndicalism after 1904, so to did his British supporters, especially after his involvement in the foundation of the American IWW (Industrial Workers of the World) in 1905. We shall examine de Leon's ideas in more detail when we look at the history of American syndicalism.

It was no accident that the idea of industrial unionism developed in the US should prove attractive to British workers. The already mighty and more advanced US economy had gone through a process of capitalist centralisation earlier than Britain. American capitalists had used the concentration of power to unleash a bitter anti-union crusade. As a result, the idea of industrial unionism as a way of combating concentrated capitalist power was far more advanced. The formation of industrial unions, with their emphasis on local organisation, soon became one of the central themes of British revolutionary syndicalism.

In 1906, following the example of the American de Leonists, the SLP set up the British Advocates of Industrial Unions (BAIU). It was hoped this would lead to the creation of industrial unions in Britain.

The SLP-BAIU published two monthly papers, *The Socialist* and *The Industrial Worker*, and began to expand throughout Britain. The organisation came to prominence during a bitter dispute in 1911 at the Singer sewing machine works, where it had considerable support among the mainly female workforce.

Though the strategy of building industrial unions proved to be relevant in Britain's centralised economy, the method of achieving it – the 'dual union strategy' - hampered the SLP-BAIU's progress. The idea of building entirely new revolutionary industrial unions made much more sense in the US, where union membership was still small. In Britain, there was a well-established existing union movement.

The problem of creating new unions, plus the fact that the SLP-BAIU was still committed to parliamentary action, caused a split in 1908, which led to the formation of the Industrial League. One of its leaders, E J B Allen, published a pamphlet a year later, entitled *Revolutionary Unionism*, which laid out a different strategy to that of dual unionism. Allen rejected deLeon's idea of building a separate socialist party, arguing that the industrial unions should be independent of all political parties. Though he did not rule out parliamentary action entirely, he was unclear as to the extent unions should support it.

There was also a third group arguing for revolutionary unions in Britain in the first years of the 20th Century. These were the anarcho-syndicalist groups, which had developed from existing anarchist groups and had begun to spread across Britain. In 1907, the anarchist paper *Freedom* launched *The Voice of Labour*, edited by a shop steward, John Turner, a former associate of William Morris. It railed against the "blight of respectability" that had fallen upon union officials, many of whose main interest was establishing a political career. The paper argued for revolutionary propaganda within existing unions as a way of promoting industrial unions and of overcoming the sectionalism of the individual workers' organisations.

Along with this "boring from within" approach, there were other anarcho-syndicalists who advocated the dual unionism approach, most notably the Industrial Union of Direct Actionists (IUADA), formed in 1907 by Guy Aldred. Though there were differences over strategy among the anarcho-syndicalist groups, this does not seem to have prevented close co-operation between them. Anarcho-syndicalists worked both within existing unions and in alternative industrial

groupings. Anarcho-syndicalist groups were formed in most industrial centres, with activities ranging from street corner speaking and providing social club facilities, to organising anarchist Sunday schools and rambles.

As well as the growth of groups arguing for some form of revolutionary unionism, a number of individual trade unionists were attracted to syndicalist ideas. An important vehicle in spreading these ideas was the newly formed Plebs League and Central Labour College. This formed a new working class education movement, formed after a dispute at Ruskin College. Influenced by syndicalist thinking, the new movement spread its ideas through a network of study groups, which was particularly strong among South Wales miners, where a number of activists adopted the ideas and practices of revolutionary syndicalism.

Tom Mann

1910 proved to be a turning point in the development of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain. Tom Mann returned to Britain as a convert to syndicalism. This change of view had come about after his experiences of state-controlled industry and Labour administration in Australia, in particular during a strike involving the miners of Broken Hill in South Australia. Here the ruling Lib-Lab state government had sided with the mine owners and ordered in troops to break the strike, leaving many workers unemployed and imprisoned. Actions such as these by socialist politicians had left Mann disgusted with 'political methods' and 'state socialism'.

The backing of Mann proved a major boost to the syndicalist movement. Mann was a well-known national figure due to the prominent role he had played during the 1889 dock strike, and the fact that he had been the first general secretary of the Independent Labour Party. He was also well-known among workers' organisations, having written the original pamphlet advocating the 8-hour day. His conversion to syndicalism received widespread coverage. Although, upon his return, he briefly joined the SDF, he soon left, giving the following reason in his resignation letter:

"I am driven to the belief that the real reason why the trade union movement of this country is in such a deplorable state of inefficiency is to be found in the fictitious importance which the workers have been encouraged to attach to Parliamentary action... I believe that economic liberty will never be realised by such means. So I declare in favour of Direct Industrial Organisation, not as a means, but the means whereby the workers can ultimately overthrow the capitalist system and become actual controllers of their industrial and social destiny."

Conclusion

The period 1870-1910 was characterised by major developments and shifts in the British union movement. Despite attempts to 'incorporate' it by the state, more radical elements remained, and these began developing growing revolutionary syndicalist organisations by 1908.

Both anarchists and Marxists were attracted to revolutionary syndicalism as they became more and more disenchanted with the attitude of the trade union leaders, the failure of the Labour Party and the sterile economic determinism of the orthodox Marxist parties.

The revolutionary syndicalist movement drew inspiration from both the French and American experiences, although, it did build on the ideas of the indigenous anti-state traditions that originated in Britain during the 19th century. There were differing views on how a syndicalist union could be established, given the history of the British trade union movement. However these differences, in the tactics and strategy, did not prevent anarcho-syndicalists co-operating closely and many anarcho-syndicalists worked within the existing unions as well as the dual-union groups.

Syndicalist influence had steadily spread up to 1910 when Tom Mann returned from Australia to throw his weight behind the movement. The Plebs League had already spread syndicalist ideas through rank and file trade unionists especially the miners of South Wales. In fact Mann, if anything, was a little behind much of British syndicalist thinking as initially he did not rule out parliamentary politics completely. What he was able to do was put his personal prestige and organisational ability into the formation of a coherent syndicalist movement.

British syndicalism mainly grew up in male-dominated industries such as mining, transport and on the docks. Consequently, it seems, the aims and objectives of anarcho-syndicalists at the time did not incorporate women or women's issues. Histories of labour during this period tend likewise to overlook women's contribution and roles in the development of the movement. Even anarchists writing in the late 20th century about the movement have automatically concentrated on men. This leaves us with the problem of the missing persons of history; women. Accordingly, the history of women in the early stages of British syndicalism, as with the early stages of syndicalism elsewhere, is a history still waiting to be written.

Many labour historians have argued that the British working

Key points

class was, and still is, naturally conservative in its ideas and outlook. Consequently they argue that syndicalism was a foreign idea imported from the CGT in France by a few isolated revolutionaries and was always a small movement with little real influence. Other, usually Marxist, historians have conceded that syndicalism did have some influence but was an incoherent idea and was simply the forerunner of a more sophisticated form of socialism that was to emerge with the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. British syndicalism grew out of existing social and economic conditions and the attempts by workers to change those conditions. That is not to say that events in France did not influence the British workers' movement. After all, there were many similarities between the conditions in both countries. But there were also differences, and these were reflected in the form that the British movement took. This movement was to grow and spread syndicalist ideas throughout the labour movement in the years leading up to the First World War. It is this period in British syndicalism is examined in Unit 6.

- During the nineteenth century the trade union leaders in Britain increasingly sought respectability and acceptance by the state
- An increasing number of unskilled workers became unionised in what became known as New Unionism. These unions were often influenced by socialist ideas
- Changes in capital's relationship with the working classes impacted on women, who were seen by the middle-classes and by male trade unionists as;
 - o better placed in the home rather than the workplace, and;
 - o to blame for the lack of 'managers' (if middle-class) or inferior (if working-class)
- The state attempted to forestall militancy amongst the working class by introducing welfare reforms as a method of social control
- British syndicalism grew out of existing indigenous economic and social conditions but did draw on and adapt ideas from France and the United States
- The return of Tom Mann provided British syndicalism with a major boost due to his prestige within the labour movement.

Checklist

1. After the end of the Chartist period what were the main characteristics of the growth of British Trade Unions and what were the factors that led to changes?
2. What was New Unionism and how did it differ from earlier trade unionism?
3. How did economic changes affect British capitalists and their attitudes to the working class?
4. What were the main causes of unofficial strikes?
5. Where did British syndicalism draw its inspiration from and what effect did this have on the methods of organisation?
6. Why was the return of Tom Mann important to the British syndicalist movement?

Answer suggestions

1. *After the end of the Chartist period what were the main characteristics of the growth of British Trade Unions and what were the factors that led to changes?*

The growth in union membership in the mid-late 19th century was mainly in craft unions that sought respectability. They wanted to portray themselves as business-like and sober insurance societies and sought a role within capitalism. Improvements in conditions were to be achieved through industrial conciliation and Union recognition through law changes forced on capitalism by parliamentary lobbying. Economic depression exposed the flaws in this strategy and this, coupled with the increased centralisation of British capitalism and the effects of de-skilling, saw workers becoming increasingly critical of the attitudes of the union bureaucracies. These workers were often influenced by socialist ideas that had witnessed a revival. The great mass of unskilled workers and women were not organised and were largely ignored by the aristocratic craft workers so that, up until the 1880s, there were no permanent established unions for unskilled workers.

2. *What was New Unionism and how did it differ from earlier trade unionism?*

New Unionism was the name given to the formation of general unions that organised unskilled workers and challenged the older 'aristocratic' craft unions. These unions were generally more militant and politicised and less inclined to seek any accommodation with the employers.

3. *How did economic changes affect British capitalists and their attitudes to the working class?*

Increased competition from the high investment economies of Germany and the United States saw profits decreasing. There was also economic depression and low productivity and so the employers tried to find some sort of accommodation with the unions. This led to the spread of bargaining procedures and some welfare reforms aimed at curbing union militancy and encouraging a 'responsible' attitude to industrial relations.

(cont'd..)

Some discussion points

4. *What were the main causes of unofficial strikes?*

There was a growth in union bureaucracy and these bureaucrats, smitten with their new-found status, soon began to take on conservative attitudes. The Union leadership became reluctant to call any strikes that might upset their good relations with the employers. Union recognition and maintaining negotiating rights became an end in itself. As a result, the union officials came to be viewed with suspicion by ordinary union members. They appeared remote and cut off from the shop floor. This, added to the fall in living standards, resulted in the growth of unofficial strikes.

5. *Where did British syndicalism draw its and what effect did this have on the methods of organisation?*

British syndicalism drew on the indigenous anti-state traditions of the British labour movement as well as being influenced by the practices of the French CGT and ideas of Industrial Unionism from the United States. This meant that some syndicalists advocated a dual union approach by setting up revolutionary alternatives to the existing unions. Others sought to influence the existing unions from inside through amalgamations into industrial unions and through the spread of revolutionary propaganda. This however did not exclude many anarcho-syndicalists from working within both groupings.

6. *Why was the return of Tom Mann important to the British syndicalist movement?*

Tom Mann was a well-respected figure in the British trade union movement due to his previous involvement in the formation of the new unions at the end of the 19th century. While in Australia and New Zealand he had become disillusioned by reformism and parliamentarianism, and become convinced by syndicalist ideas and tactics.

- What are the similarities and differences between the problems facing the working class at the beginning of the twentieth century and today?
- What relevance do the two strategies of the British syndicalists, dual unionism and 'boring from within', have for anarcho-syndicalists in Britain today?
- What does the almost total absence of accounts about or from women in the early stages of British syndicalism either in original source materials or in late twentieth-century histories of the movement say about women's position in society? What does it say, if anything, about early British syndicalism?

Further Reading

Bertrand Russell. Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism. Routledge, 3rd edition, 1985 (orig. published in 1918). ISBN 0415098939. £7.50 -AK-

Detailed, readable and comprehensive, not anarcho-syndicalist in perspective but highly recommended as a contemporary, critical and engaging text.

Bob Holt. British Syndicalism 1900-14. Pluto Press. 1963. ISBN 0904 383229. -LI-

Standard and probably the best all-round labour history book for the period covering Units 5 and 6. Good detail but easily readable and accessible.

John Quail. The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists. Paladin. ISBN 0586082255. -LI-

The only book of its kind-British Anarchism from an Anarchist point of view-now sadly out of print. If you can find a copy, see especially chapter 13 'Anarchism and the Origins of the Syndicalist Revolt, 1889-1910'.

John Lovell (ed). The World of Labour: G D H Cole. The Harvester Press, 1973 (first published in 1913 by G Bell, London). Part of "Society & The Victorians", no. 11. ISBN 0901 759805. -LI-

Comprehensive and contemporary, as with Russell's text, this is commendable for the detail of labour history rather than for the anarcho-syndicalist viewpoint.

Henry Pelling. A History of British Trade Unionism. Penguin. 1963. -LI-

General history of the trade union movement, both reformist and syndicalist, especially useful for the early period.

Albert Meltzer. First Flight: The Origins of Anarcho-Syndicalism In Britain. KSL pamphlets. £1.00 -AK-

A brief sketch, from Chartism to the 1970s, which gives some context to the pre-war period in Britain.

The Industrial Syndicalist. Spokesman. ISBN 085124081X. -LI-

Hardbound facsimiles of the famous monthly paper, now getting harder to find in second-hand shops and libraries. Worth the search though, if you are after direct source material.

Anon. George Cores - Personal Recollections of the Anarchist Past. KSL pamphlets. ISBN 1873605056. £1.00 -AK-

Cores was a shoemaker, and anarchist activist from the 1880s until 1939. This is wide-ranging, but includes brief mentions of the Syndicalist Revolt and after.

Unofficial Reform Committee of the South Wales Miners Federation. The Miners Next Step. Phoenix Press. ISBN 094898421X. £1.50 -AK-

Published in 1912, this is one of the very few English-language Syndicalist documents produced by workers, for workers, in a particular industry. A "Suggested Scheme for the Reorganisation of the Federation". With an introduction from NUM activist Dave Douglass.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).