

TRADE UNIONISM VS. ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

Trade unionists often regard anarcho-syndicalism as a direct menace, sometimes viewing the Anarchist objections to authoritarian leadership and to the closed shop as equivalent with Conservative attacks on free trade unionism. Yet at the same time Conservatives view anarcho-syndicalism as "trade unionism gone mad." (One Spanish Rightist said the CNT consisted of "bandits with union cards" - and in a situationist-like phrase another said "the crime of industrialisation led to the industrialisation of crime.")

But some package-deal libertarians think Anarcho-syndicalism is just another form of trade unionism and their objections are based on their repulsions to trade unionism, or even work as such.

What's the difference between the two? Both derive directly from the idea of workers' co-operation.

TRADE UNIONISM is an association of workers for the betterment of their conditions. While its pressures for wages and job security cause it to form political alliances, these differ from country to country. In the USA the union leaders tend to make deals with the capitalists, often for the immediate cash and security advantages of their members, sometimes for the leadership; in England union leaders have formed the Labour Party, and are slightly less inclined to deal with capitalism or nationalism.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM, which does not differ from country to country except in the degree to which workers find it applicable to their immediate needs and interests, is concerned with the taking over of industry by the workers and therefore supersedes any political alliance; it does seek, by direct action, to improve pay and job security, but its main aim is revolutionary change and workers self-management.

TRADE UNIONISM tends to become a division of the working class separating employed from unemployed/unwaged, and creating job cate-

gories to which one is very often bound for life. It is sometimes, in the English system certainly, impossible to get a job unless you have a union card and impossible to get a union card unless you have a job.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM is based on the unity of all the workers in the region, grouping all employed, unemployed or self-employed in the local workers' centre, and providing entry regardless of 'category.'

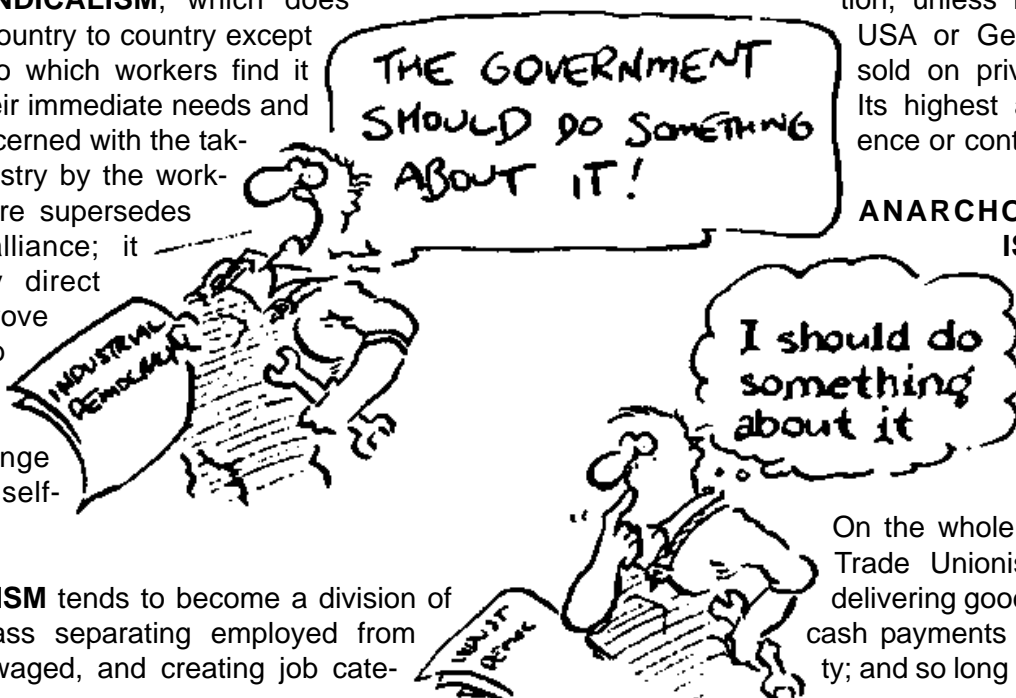
TRADE UNIONISM in many countries looks to a closed shop to defend workers' interests, which - while it means on the one hand the union can obtain limited reforms or increases for all - also means the union is dependent more on parliamentary action than industrial action. The leadership becomes all-powerful since once it exerts its right to expel a member, that person is not only out of the union, but out of a job.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM rejects the closed shop and relies on voluntary membership, and so avoids any leadership or bureaucracy. One or two paid officials suffice for a membership of thousands, and sometimes even that much is considered unnecessary.

TRADE UNIONISM is generally for State intervention, unless it is (as in the USA or Germany) entirely sold on private enterprise. Its highest aim is to influence or control the State.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM fights private enterprise and State control alike. Its aim is to abolish both.

On the whole workers prefer Trade Unionism when it is delivering goods in the form of cash payments and job security; and so long as they can crit-



icise its shortcomings, they fatally accept that its leadership is fairly immovable and inevitably bound to considerations other than the welfare of their members.

The workers prefer Anarcho-syndicalism when they need a tough union, and when they are imbued with libertarian ideas as against accepting authoritarian ideas or taking their ideas from the media.

The term "Syndicalist" - as distinct from Anarcho-syndicalist - has three or four meanings in organised labour. In Italy, France, and Spain it is simply an interchangeable term for trade unionist. In the English-speaking countries, where the term trade unionist is normal language, syndicalism has been taken to mean revolutionary trade unionism, in other words trade unions working towards social change, not necessarily Anarchist. Sometimes it has been used interchangeably with Anarcho-syndicalist, or used as a euphemism for the latter when Anarcho-tends to scare. It has also been used to mean militant - as distinct from revolutionary - trade unionism, aiming

at control, not directly by the working class, but by the leadership in particular of the trade unions themselves.

There can no doubt be forms of Anarchism which reject Syndicalism, which normally means they reject the whole idea of class struggle, and logically any form of activity other than protesting about the iniquities of the State system, without any intention of changing it: this is militant liberalism or mere permanent protest, masquerading as Anarchism.

The term Council Communism is almost synonymous with Anarcho-syndicalism in its original German usage: with the exception that Anarcho-syndicalism is the most militant expression of working class activity imbued with Anarchist ideas, and Council Communism the most militant, and libertarian, expression of a working class imbued with Marxist ideas (but not Bolshevik/Leninist ones: this is the anti-thesis of Council Communism) coming to similar conclusions by a different road. However, the prevalent modern usage of the term Council Communism in "Situationist" - type circles is by those who reject Anarcho-syndicalism because it believes in a permanent organisation of workers. They want the workers to organise "spontaneously" at the very moment of revolution. This is a con-trick, designed to leave the "revolutionary movement," so called, in the hands of an educated class just as does the so-called "revolutionary party."

"Spontaneity" (sometimes nowadays mixed up with autonomy) means that the workers are only expected to come in the fray when there's any fighting to be done, and in the normal times leave theorising to the specialists or students. One does not, understandably, find many workers going along with these views which are more popular with students/intelligentsia who espouse the "marginals" as the new vanguard.

This text was written by Albert Meltzer and taken from his *Anarchism: Arguments for and Against*

It has minor changes by the editor

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