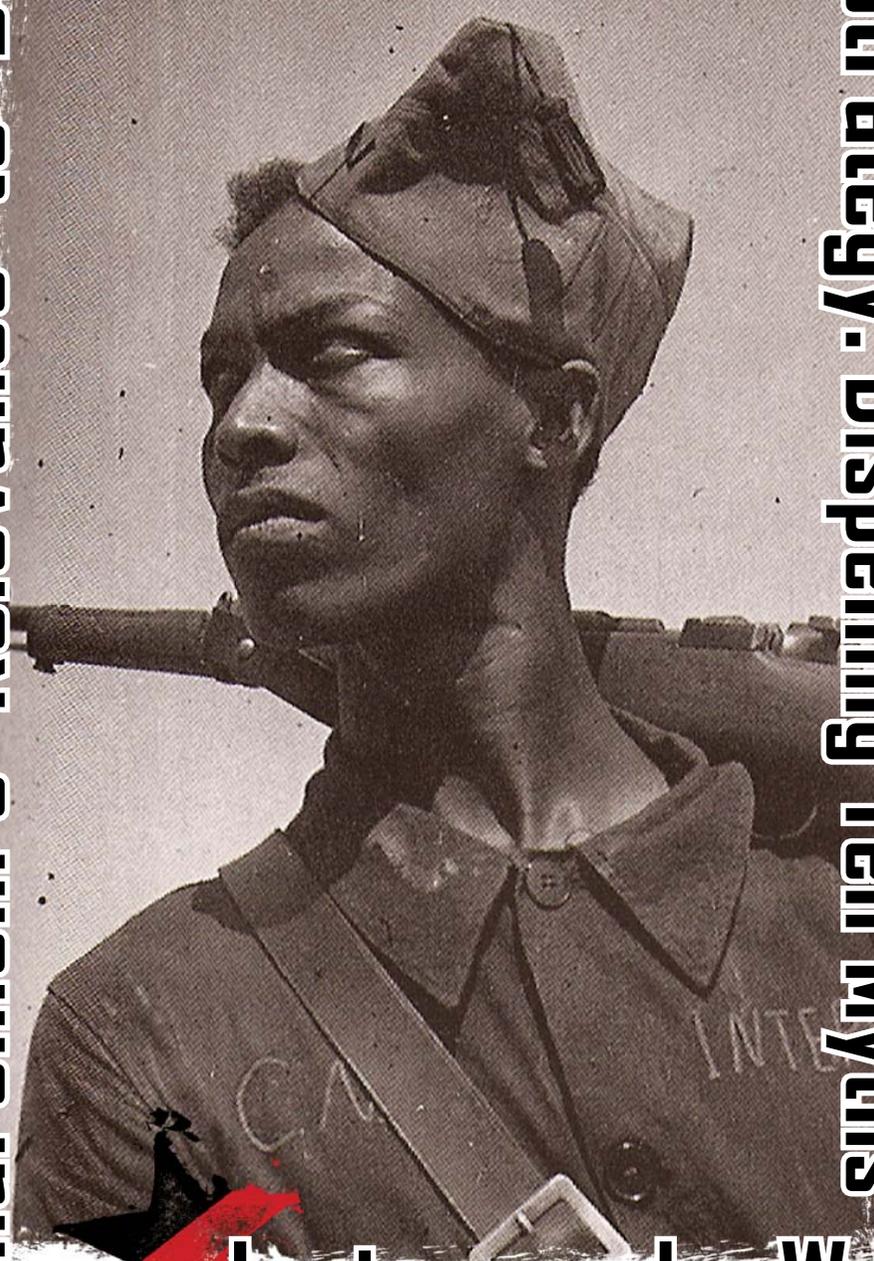


Anarchism's Relevance to Black and Working-Class Strategy: Dispelling Ten Myths



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NOTES:

1. J. Romero Maura, 1971, "The Spanish Case," in J. Joll and D. Apter (eds.), *Anarchism Today*, Macmillan.
2. Eric Hobsbawm, 1993, "Bolshevism and the Anarchists," in his *Revolutionaries*, Abacus, pp. 72-73

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tactical and theoretical unity; by not learning from past mistakes; be weakened by uncritically absorbing fashionable non-anarchist and anti-revolutionary ideas like post-modernism, liberalism and crude identity politics, defining itself as different purely by the violence of its language or actions, or getting wrapped up in bourgeois agendas; engaging in destructive sectarianism and ultra-left posturing, creating tiny anarchist inward-focused milieus rather than an anarchist presence among the popular classes, the masses. Anarchism is from the “beloved common people” (Bakunin), and without them it dies. It must go to the people, merging with the masses and their struggles. Today, anarchism remains basically a working-class movement in the composition of its core militants, but can it reach most of the class?

We shall see.



To have a discussion about anarchism’s relevance to (black) working class strategy in the face of ongoing capitalist restructuring, we need to dispel myths about anarchism and syndicalism, to reclaim the revolutionary core of the anarchist tradition.

Anarchism and syndicalism have been major forces internationally in the struggle of the popular classes against all forms of oppression and domination. I mean here the working class, the peasantry and the poor. And by working class, I mean the term broadly: all those who rely on wages and lack power, including workers, the unemployed and their families, and I include here “blue” collar, “white” collar and “pink” collar workers, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or other division. To be working class is to be exploited, regardless of income level or skill, and dominated, regardless of job title.

Of course, most parts of the working class (and the popular classes more generally) face additional forms of oppression, notably in South Africa, the racial/national domination that affects the majority of the people. Only a bottom-up, libertarian, unified, class-based movement can really end all exploitation, domination and oppression, and no such movement can be built except on the basis of opposing all forms of oppression, including racial/national oppression.

The left tradition has long grappled with issues of strategy, tactics and principle, and this has been the basis of many divisions: these divisions are not simply matters of sectarianism or stubbornness, since different positions have very different implications for political practice.

The anarchist tradition - in which I include syndicalism, which is a variant of anarchism, it is anarchist trade unionism - provides a coherent approach to issues of strategy, tactics and principle. It is a rich set of resources of the working class today, not least the black working class in South Africa, which remains, in important ways, not just subject to capitalist exploitation and state repression, but also racial/national oppression.

South African capitalism centres on cheap black labour, and this remains in place.

But to have a discussion about anarchism's relevance to black working-class strategy in the face of ongoing capitalist restructuring, we need to dispel myths about anarchism and syndicalism, to reclaim the revolutionary core of the anarchist tradition.

So, let's deal with a few myths, one by one, because unless we do this, we will be hard pressed to see what anarchism has to do with our struggle and people here in southern Africa generally:

MYTH #1:

Anarchism means Chaos, Revolt against Technology, or Anyone doing whatever they like with no consequence

Anarchism is, instead, a form of libertarian socialism that opposes social and economic hierarchy and inequality - and, specifically, capitalism and landlordism, as well as the state - and proposes a strategy of internationalist class struggle and popular revolution from below by a self-organised working class and peasantry to create a self-managed, socialist and stateless, social order.

In this new order, individual freedom would be harmonized with communal obligations through equality and participatory democratic forms. This is the opposite of selfish individualism, which is not a feature of anarchism, but of the capitalist order. And to achieve this new society, co-operation is necessary, including a mass movement for change that embodies the features of the society to come: democracy and pluralism, as well as solidarity and humanism, and a revolutionary vision.

This project is underpinned by a rationalist world view and a commitment to scientific thought. So, rather than seek to reject modern technology and techniques, anarchists argue that a scientific analysis of modern

MYTH #10:

Anarchism was absent in Anti-Racist, Anti-Imperialist and National Liberation Struggles

There is a quite a bit more I could say, but let me raise one last issue. The movement was never some narrow factory-based or farmer-based movement, but rather raised a very wide range of issues. Anarchists in Cuba, active from the 1880s, played a key role in fighting anti-black racism and then in the 1890s war of independence. In the United States of America, they actively opposed racist segregation and organised black workers. The movements in Korea and Ukraine, and in Mexico, were part of larger anti-imperialist struggles - anarchist attempts at a different form of national liberation, where the masses - not new elites - were in charge. Anarchists and syndicalists pioneered black unions in southern Africa, and developed a comprehensive program for freedom. Other key examples include Algeria, Egypt, China, Czechoslovakia, Ireland, Macedonia, Puerto Rico and Poland - meanwhile movements influenced by anarchism or syndicalism like the original Zapatistas, Sandinistas and the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa in southern Africa were also crucial.

Conclusions: Back to the Future?

However, anarchism has grown since the 1970s. From 1989 onwards, the myth of communism was shattered and anarchism re-emerged in its old strongholds, as well as in new areas, such as Nigeria. The movement is expanding, and we can expect it to be a major revolutionary tradition worldwide in the next 20 years or so if we do the job right, and rebuild carefully.

But it is perfectly possible the movement can and will throw away its chances, by organising loosely, rather than in coherent formations with

It is quite true that anarchism was at a low point in the twenty to thirty years that followed the defeat in Spain in 1939. As you can see many of my main examples are from before the 1940s. The massive repression seen with the defeat of the earlier anarchist revolutions and anarchist-influenced movements, the rise of Marxism-Leninism, smarter states, and huge mistakes by the anarchists and syndicalists all played a role.

The idea that the movement disappeared and then only re-emerged in the 1990s is wrong. Anarchism and syndicalism remained important working class and peasant currents in many contexts after 1939. This included, for example, important roles in France and Poland in the 1940s, Bolivia and China into the 1950s, Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Cuba into the 1960s, Mexico and Korea into the 1970s, with major revivals elsewhere in the struggles of “1968” and the 1970s. A sterling example is the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU), which has remained a major force from its formation in 1956 until the present, including a notable armed struggle and work in unions and student movements.

But it is also important to highlight the ongoing power of the syndicalists here. In France in the 1940s, for example, there was an important upsurge in influence in the unions, while in Bolivia and Cuba, for example, the movement continued to lead major unions in the 1950s and early 1960s. When the Spanish dictatorship fell in the mid-1970s, the CNT emerged with huge prestige, one rally attracting 250,000 people.

This revolutionary continuity helped lay the basis for the upsurge of the 1990s. For example, the FAU approach, called *especificismo*, is today a major influence on Latin American anarchism, and on the Anarkismo network formed in the 2000s, which at its height brought together over 25 formations in four continents. The re-emergence of the CNT in the mid-1970s reactivated syndicalism elsewhere. In the 1990s, anarchism was part of the new “anti-globalisation” movement in the West but this was only part of a much larger process of anarchist and syndicalist growth.

society exposes its class character and inequities - and insist that modern technology, redesigned where needed, and placed under democratic control, can play a key role in ending poverty, drudgery, environmental problems and enabling the redress of past wrongs, like the economic ruination of the African continent created by imperialism and local ruling classes.

MYTH #2:

Any Idea opposed to the State is “Anarchist”

Anarchism is not just against the state: it is also against all capitalism, all social and economic hierarchy and inequality. A society based on capitalism but without a state is not anarchist; it would still involve exploitation, with one class of people working for the benefit of another. Many ideas that are nominally opposed to the state, such as neo-liberalism, embrace other forms of oppression. Anti-statism is a necessary feature of anarchist thinking, but it is only one part. Opposition to the state does not come from opposition to rules: it comes from, on the one hand, an understanding that the state is an institution of elite/class rule, and, on the other, a general opposition to domination and exploitation, of which opposition to the domination of the state is just one example.

Anarchism aims at collective ownership of the means of production, and a democratically planned economy that is run through community and worker councils and assemblies. This would replace the state with bottom-up governance, markets and the commodity form with distribution by need and planning, and enable a society without economic and social inequality. This also means that anarchist opposition to the state rests on distinctive grounds from other forms of anti-statism, such as the neo-liberals who merely dislike state intervention into capitalism.

MYTH # 3:

Anarchism has always existed, even in Ancient Times

This myth actually comes from the anarchist movement itself, and seems to have emerged mainly from the 1890s. It's a political myth that locates anarchism throughout history and traces it back into ancient Asia and Europe. But it's a myth created by a very new movement: anarchism is a modern political ideology of quite recent origin.

Anarchism only emerged from the late 1860s onwards, and emerged in the International Workingmen's Association, or "First International," which lasted from 1864 to 1877. Anarchism was first formulated by the circles around the International Alliance of Socialist Democracy, better known as the Alliance - Mikhail Bakunin and others. These circles did not invent anarchism, which emerged under the pressure of class struggles in the context of fierce debates on theory and strategy in the rising working class and peasant movements internationally of the time. Anarchism was constituted internationally, by First International sections and currents, not just in Western Europe, but in Latin America (notably Uruguay), North Africa (notably Egypt), Asia (notably Turkey) and east Europe (notably among Russian émigrés).

There is no evidence for an eternal anarchism, which exists outside of definite intellectual and socio-economic conditions. No such ideas exist, and there is no evidence for this anarchist mythology, just as there is no evidence for, for example, nationalist mythologies. So, anarchism has nothing to do with thinkers such as William Godwin, Max Stirner and Leo Tolstoy, who are sometimes identified in the literature as anarchists. It has even less to do with dissident Christian and Muslim sects in the feudal era, philosophers in the ancient era, etc.

And I would add that while the anarchists who invented these myths did so for new political purposes - creating a legitimising narrative for an embattled, repressed and extremely controversial new movement by inventing a transnational story dating back thousands of years - these myths do more harm than good. They only work if anarchism is defined in the vaguest terms, which leads to a lack of clarity on anarchism itself. They rest on sloppy claims,

labourers, such as construction workers, dockers, farm workers and gas workers, and, secondly, workers in heavy industries such as factory workers, miners and railway workers. In addition to these main categories, there were also smaller numbers of white-collar workers and professionals, notably teachers, nurses and doctors, in the syndicalist unions. In all cases, the emergence of gigantic corporations provided a powerful impetus to attempts to create gigantic trade unions.

The second set of social and historical circumstances in which anarchism emerged as a popular movement was amongst peasantries experiencing the long-term restructuring of feudal relationships under the impact of capitalism - an impact that combined with more immediate factors and the presence of anarchist militants to generate large-scale, typically insurrectionary, anarchist peasant movements. The greatest successes of the anarchists amongst the peasantry include Greece, Mexico, Spain, the Ukraine and Manchuria. In each case this anarchist current was able to organise large-scale peasant movements, in some cases, uprisings: in Mexico in 1869, 1878 and 1910; Greece from 1895 onwards; in Spain, most notably in 1936 to 1939; Ukraine from 1918 to 1921; Korea/ Manchuria from 1925; Japan in the late 1920s ... It also had some influence on other peasant-based movements such as the original Zapatistas in 1910s Mexico and the original Sandinistas in 1920s and early 1930s Nicaragua.

MYTH #9:

Anarchism died in Spain in 1939 and only re-emerged in the 1990s

One of the great moments in anarchist history was the Spanish Revolution of 1936-1939, which saw millions of workers and peasants take over the factories and the land, equal rights for women, and the formation of a large popular militia. A huge role was played by the National Confederation of Labour (CNT), a massive anarcho-syndicalist union movement. This was one of a cycle of three big anarchist revolutions over twenty years: there was one in Ukraine from 1918, and one in Korea/Manchuria from 1927.

with a de facto non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical marxism..."² Among the countries that would fit into this category are China, Korea and South Africa.

MYTH #8:

Anarchism was really a Movement of Marginal Groups, such as Students, Tramps, Criminals and the long-term Unemployed

The largest movements in the broad anarchist tradition were the syndicalist trade unions of the 1870s to the 1940s, and the majority of people formally enrolled into the anarchist movement were waged workers. The great strongholds of anarchist power were, in a great many cases, urban industrial centres. The bastions of anarchism in the late 1800s and the first quarter of the 1900s were the great cities of Alexandria, Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Chicago, Guangzhou, Havana, Hunan, Lima, Lisbon, Madrid, Montevideo, Mexico City, Porto Alegre, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Shanghai and Tokyo.

Barcelona, known to many anarchists as the "fiery rose" of the movement, was widely regarded as the anarchist world capital, and there is more than a little truth in this view. However, it was simply first among equals, one of a series of strongholds of radical wage labour, usually urban, and organised predominantly under the red-and-black banners of anarchism.

Anarchism's first and greatest appeal was amongst wage labourers, where it assumed the form of radical unionism. This is not to say that anarchism ignored the rural areas, where anarchism also attracted large numbers of wage labourers, mainly the farm workers of large estates and commercial farms, but also small peasants.

Two main categories of workers were most strongly represented in the syndicalist unions of the 1890s onwards: firstly, casual and seasonal

which undermines the credibility of anarchist thought, and they fly in the face of the facts.

A bear and a dog share common features and are, in fact, closely related genetically. That does not make a bear the same as a dog. Anarchism shares common features with Marxism, liberalism, Proudhonism, dissident religious sects in the feudal period, ancient philosophers like LaoTse and Zeno, but that does not make it the same as any of these... and while you can actually show a "genetic" relationship with Marxism and Proudhonism, there is zero "genetic" link between anarchism and 90 percent of earlier ideas - or even more contemporary ideas that people have dubbed "anarchism," including Godwin, Stirner or Tolstoy.

Anarchism was a product of the modern period, not the expression of a universal, ageless urge for freedom, and it emerged from within the labour and socialist movement. It only emerged in the modern world, which is based on capitalism, modern industry and the modern state, and the ideological beliefs that human progress is possible and necessary by securing direct control of history and using science: science and rationalism, tolerance and debate, and universalism and human rights were essential to human emancipation.

This complex of ideas is often called the "Enlightenment," which has been, in many accounts, presented as a basically Western European phenomenon, and as primarily the project of a few intellectuals. With this story in place, debates on the "Enlightenment" have tended to be quite narrow; partly about which figures to include, partly about identifying contradiction in the works of these thinkers, and partly about the extent to which the "Enlightenment" - read off these figures - was embedded in the widespread racism in the expanding European empires of the time, and so showed a "Eurocentric" or an elitist, racist, rich man's world view.

But these framings are misleading. At one level, the ideas of the "Enlightenment" shaped, and were shaped by, major revolutionary processes, notably the American, French and Haitian Revolutions of the late 1700s, and then the decolonisation struggles across Latin America into the 1820s, with important impacts elsewhere. And the popular classes of the time were central to these struggles, and to the creation and elaboration of "Enlightenment" ideas.

So it's misleading to see the "Enlightenment" as a simple intellectual movement, or to present it as a narrowly European set of ideas. It is not reasonable to cast the "Enlightenment" in "Eurocentric" terms, and then

castigate the “Enlightenment” for being “Eurocentric.” Any reasonable history of the “Enlightenment” must be a world history, as well as a social history, and in this story figures like Toussaint L’Overture, Tom Paine and Simon Bolívar must be central. And while there is no doubt that many “Enlightenment” intellectuals did, at times, express racist or imperialist views, these views were not integral to - but radically contradicted - core “Enlightenment” propositions.

Anarchism is, in this sense, a child of the revolts and revolutions and dramatic changes of the modern period - none of which, to reiterate, were confined to any one country or continent. As key works like Linebaugh and Rediker’s “Many-Headed Hydra” have shown, the multi-racial, multi-national popular classes were makers and shapers of this modern world and of the Enlightenment.

It was the failed promise of the modern world - of advanced technology alongside poverty, of science enslaved to the ruling classes, of imperialism and oppression and exploitation alongside doctrines of human rights and progress - that impelled the rise of the modern working class. And it was from that class, above all, that anarchism was born, drawing on, in part, the ideas of the Enlightenment.

It stands for the belief in democracy (rather than the divine rule of kings), in modern technology (which makes massive improvements in life possible), in science (which improves life and expands knowledge, as opposed to blind faith), in progress and human control (that people can change the world, directly and deliberately for the better, rather than accepting the world as it is).

So, anarchism was born in the First International, an international coalition of unions, political parties and other groups, formed in England in 1864. The anarchists emerged as a new current, as a large majority of the organisation came to oppose Karl Marx - initially a major leader - who wanted a state dictatorship to change society.

In 1872, there was a big split. The vast majority of groups joined the anarchist side; a mere two genuine “national” (country) sections joined Marx. The anarchist movement grew quickly in the 1870s, and by the 1880s anarchist groups existed across Europe, including Eastern Europe and Russia, North America, South America and the Caribbean, and parts of North Africa and central Asia. The first active anarchist in South Africa was an Englishman, a worker called Henry Glasse, who lived in Port Elizabeth from the 1880s.

as Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Bolivia, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Germany, Guatemala, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United States, Uruguay and Venezuela.

The comparative influence of the broad anarchist tradition in these different countries may, in part, be judged by examining the size of anarchist and syndicalist bodies relative to the size of the local working class, and the organised (unionised) working class, specifically. The largest syndicalist union, in purely numerical terms, was certainly the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) in Spain, with perhaps 2 million members at its peak in a country of slightly more than 15 million people.

However, in relative terms the Spanish CNT was not the largest of the syndicalist unions - it was always challenged by the General Union of Labour (UGT), a moderate socialist union of equivalent size, meaning that roughly half of the organised working class was anarchist or syndicalist. By contrast, the syndicalist General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in Portugal, with 100,000 members at its height in a country of 750,000, had no trade union rivals at all, and was, in relative terms, larger than the Spanish movement. The National Labour Secretariat (NAS) in the Netherlands was also briefly the dominant union movement in that country, while the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in France was also syndicalist from the mid-1890s onwards, and dominated the entire labour movement.

Even within Western Europe itself, then, the Spanish movement was less “exceptional” than has been supposed. Once the global history of the broad anarchist tradition is noted, the notion of Spanish exceptionalism becomes even less convincing. In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Portugal, Mexico, the Netherlands, Peru and Uruguay, for example, syndicalism dominated the largest union centres, while large syndicalist minority currents existed in many other countries. Argentina is a good example. There were three main union federations, similar to the situation in South Africa today. But every one of these federations was within the broad anarchist tradition!

In a number of countries, the broad anarchist tradition dominated the revolutionary left, even if it did not dominate the unions. In many cases, “the marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of marxists had been identified

MYTH #6:

Syndicalism was Invented in France in the 1890s and Died Out by the 1920s

Syndicalist ideas were first developed by Bakunin and the Alliance in the 1860s and 1870s, and were first applied on a large scale in the 1870s and 1880s, in Cuba, Mexico, the United States and Spain. This was the “first wave” of syndicalism. It was central to the anarchist wing of the First International.

There was a “second wave” in from the 1890s onwards. This started in France, and lasted into the 1930s. It has sometimes been called the “glorious period” of syndicalism, and saw a massive expansion of anarchist influence in the labour and socialist movements, spanning East Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and parts of Africa. The movement in South Africa, for example, was mainly syndicalist, and connected to a big rise of syndicalism in Australia and Britain.

MYTH #7:

Anarchism was Marginal Everywhere except in Spain

Most books on anarchism have focussed on West Europe, and, within the West European context, on Spain. Part of the reason is that Spain had a very large anarchist movement, lasting from the 1870s to the 1930s. However, many writers have jumped to the conclusion that only Spain had a big anarchist movement, and that therefore, there must have been something odd about Spain to explain why this happened.

This idea, which I will call “Spanish exceptionalism,” building on J. Romero Maura,¹ is totally wrong. In the “glorious period,” anarchists and syndicalists influenced large movements, particularly unions, in countries as varied

MYTH #4:

Anarchism has no African History

There were no groups in most of sub-Saharan Africa and much of Asia or the Middle East at this time, mainly because these regions were only starting to be affected by capitalism and the modern state.

Once large working classes emerged in those areas, anarchism followed. In the early 1900s, substantial anarchist movements emerged in Australia; East Asia especially in China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, and, to some extent, the Philippines; as well as southern Africa, mainly in Mozambique and South Africa; and in South Asia, mainly in India. In the Middle East, anarchism was mainly a force in the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. In the meantime, large movements continued to exist in anarchism’s traditional strongholds in the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe.

In South Africa, there were a number of groups influenced by anarchism: these included political groups like the International Socialist League and the Industrial Socialist League, and revolutionary unions like the Clothing Workers’ Industrial Union, the Horse Drivers’ Union, the Industrial Workers of Africa, the Indian Workers’ Industrial Union and the Sweet and Jam Workers’ Union. The movement was strongest in the 1910s, and mainly based in Cape Town, Durban and Kimberley, and on the Witwatersrand. It was started by white workers, almost all of whom were immigrants, such as Bill Andrews, Andrew Dunbar and David Ivon Jones, for the most part, but became multiracial, including black African activists like Hamilton Kraai and Reuben Cetiwe, Coloureds like Johnny Gomas and Fred Pienaar, and Indians like Bernard Sigamoney and RK Moodley.

MYTH #5:

Anarchism is not about Class Politics

Anarchist ideas were defined against, and must be understood within the context of, rival ideologies such as liberalism, Marxism and nationalism. All anarchists agree that the struggles of the lower classes - the popular classes, meaning the working class which works for wages, and the peasants, meaning small family farmers who do not employ others - are the forces to change society.

Only these classes have a basic interest in changing society. The ruling class - the landlords, the capitalists, the state managers, the military leaders - benefit from the current system. The "middle class" is too weak to change society, and generally benefits, although not always. The middle class is not just anybody with an okay income: it means middle managers, professionals like lawyers, doctors, teachers and small businesspeople.

Only the popular classes have the numbers to change society. Only exploited classes can make a society without exploitation, because only these classes do not need exploitation to exist.

However, there is a basic split in anarchism between two main approaches to mobilising the popular classes. The minority, insurrectionist approach regards struggles for immediate gains as, at best, perpetuating the current social order and as, therefore, a positive danger to the revolution and in violation of anarchist principles. Trade unions, consequently, are seen as counter-revolutionary organisations and anarchist union work a futile and dangerous activity; anarchists must directly, and without mediation, win the masses to anarchism through word and deed.

In practice, the denigration of "reforms," the dismissal of mass organisations, and the frustrations of abstract propaganda of the word have led insurrectionist anarchists from propaganda of the word into "propaganda by the deed": spectacular and usually violent actions designed to rouse the masses from their slumber, including bank robberies to raise funds, labelled "expropriation," and retributive assassinations and bombings. It was from the insurrectionist anarchist tradition that the "anarchist terrorism" that peaked in the 1890s and early 1900s issued. This means, ironically, that the minority insurrectionist

current has often been identified with the entire anarchist tradition in the popular mind.

The other, majority, approach is that which may be referred to as, perhaps clumsily, "mass" anarchism. The aim of mass anarchism is to implant anarchism within popular social movements, such as the trade unions, aiming to radicalise these movements, to spread anarchist ideas and aims, and to foster a culture of self-management and direct action, with the hope that such movements would provide a mighty lever of social revolution, and, in some way, help create the anarchist future.

For mass anarchism, struggles for immediate reforms, waged through direct action, and organised through radically democratic and participatory structures, are essential. These immediate struggles help organise the popular classes, embolden them and raise their confidence and expectations, and create structures and movements that prefigure the future society, structures and movements that can play a central role as levers of a truly popular social revolution.

The main approach adopted by mass anarchists - although not accepted by all - was that of syndicalism. Syndicalism centred on the idea that unions could play a dual role: firstly, fighting for reforms and immediate demands, and trying to organise the mass of workers into gigantic unions; secondly, the unions could play a leading role in the overthrow of capitalism and the state, with the union structures also forming the nucleus of a self-managed socialist society. Despite this focus on trade unionism, syndicalist movements have generally raised a wide range of political issues and have typically been located within larger popular social movements involving working class communities, women and youth.