

Making Unions Revolutionary? The Revival and Relevance of an Anarchist/Syndicalist Approach to Building Class-Struggle Unionism for Radical Change after the Death of the Enabling State

Labour movements remain essential to a just transition to a better order, but their ability is contingent upon a thoroughgoing reform and democratization of their structures, and a sharp change in political direction. The global working class is larger than ever, with 100,000 new members every week, and more proletarianisation over the previous five decades in Asia and Latin America than in all of Western modernity. Despite reverses, unions remain one of the world's largest organised movements. But labour's massive growth is matched by its paralysis in the face of the interlocking inequities of the neo-liberal era; this is manifest in an inability to translate popular distrust of governments and corporations into real movements for change. This is largely because organized labour is either still wedded to the failed statist projects of the short twentieth century (1917-1989) – Marxism, social democracy and anti-imperialist nationalism – or simply lacks any vision or strategy able to really change society for the better. Further, labour is crippled by bureaucratic organizational forms. Drawing on the historical and contemporary praxis of anarcho- and revolutionary syndicalist labour, this paper outlines the contours of an alternative labour project. This entails autonomy, solidarity, internationalism and equity; militant abstention from the state and corporatism; policy and political interventions from below by bottom-up unions built around a radical politics and a conscious membership; and pushing back the frontier of control. This is embedded in a strategy of counter-power and counter-culture, rather than party-building, that prefigures – and seeks, through a revolutionary rupture, to introduce – a just society. Given the great historical failure of states and markets, this entails bottom-up collectivization by unions and allied forces, and the creation of a universal, classless human community based on common property, communist distribution, self-management, assemblies and delegates, enabling participatory planning and a pluralistic democracy without the state.