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Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism

An International Comparative Analysis

Ralph Darlington

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TO COMMUNISM

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An International Comparative Analysis

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University of Salford, UK

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Studies in Labour History

General Editor's Preface

This series of books provides reassessments of broad themes in labour history, along with more detailed studies arising from the latest research in the field. Most books are single-authored but there are also volumes of essays, centred on key themes and issues, usually emerging from major conferences organized by the British Society for the Study of Labour History. Every author approaches their task with the needs of both specialist and non-specialist readerships in mind, for labour history is a fertile area of historical scholarship, stimulating wide-ranging interest, debate and further research, within both social and political history and beyond.

When this series was first launched (with Chris Wrigley as its general editor) in 1998, labour history was emerging, reinvigorated, from a period of considerable introspection and external criticism. The assumptions and ideologies underpinning much labour history had been challenged by postmodernist, anti-Marxist and, especially, feminist thinking. There was also a strong feeling that often it had emphasized institutional histories of organized labour, at the expense of histories of work generally, and of workers' social relations beyond their workplaces – especially gender and wider familial relationships. The Society for the Study of Labour History was concerned to consolidate and build upon this process of review and renewal through the publication of more substantial works than its journal *Labour History Review* could accommodate, and also to emphasize that though it was a British body, its focus and remit extended to international, transnational and comparative perspectives.

Arguably, the extent to which labour history was narrowly institutionalized has been exaggerated. This series therefore includes studies of labour organizations, including international ones, where there is a need for modern reassessment. However, it is also its objective to maintain the breadth of labour history's gaze beyond conventionally organized workers, sometimes to workplace experiences in general, sometimes to industrial relations, and naturally to workers' lives beyond the immediate realm of work.

Malcolm Chase
Society for the Study of Labour History
University of Leeds

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

General

CI	Communist International
Comintern	Communist International
CP	Communist Party
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
GEB	General Executive Board
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions (Amsterdam or 'Yellow' International)
ISNTUC	International Secretariat of National Trade Union Centres
IWMA	International Working Men's Association
KPD	Communist Workers Party of Germany
Profintern	Red International of Labour Unions
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions

America

AFL	American Federation of Labor
ALU	American Labor Union
ARU	American Railway Union
AWO 400	Agricultural Workers' Organization 400 of the IWW
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CLP	Communist Labor Party
CPA	Communist Party of America
GEB	General Executive Board of the IWW
ITUEL	International Trade Union Educational League
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
LWIU	Lumber Workers' Industrial Union
MTW	Marine Transport Workers
NEC	National Executive Committee
OBU	One Big Union
RILU	Red International of Labour Unions
SLNA	Syndicalist League of North America
SLP	Socialist Labor Party
SPA	Socialist Party of America
ST&LA	Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance
TUEL	Trade Union Educational League
UMW	United Mineworkers of America
WFM	Western Federation of Miners
WIU	Workers' International Industrial Union
WLU	Western Labor Union

Britain

ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
BAIU	British Advocates of Industrial Unionism
BSP	British Socialist Party
CLC	Central Labour College
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
IDL	Industrial Democracy League
ILP	Independent Labour Party
ISEL	Industrial Syndicalist Education League
IWGB	Industrial Workers of Great Britain
MFGB	Miners' Federation of Great Britain
MP	Member of Parliament
NAC	National Administrative Council
NMM	National Minority Movement
NUR	National Union of Railwaymen
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SLP	Socialist Labour Party
SS&WCM	Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement
SWMF	South Wales Miners' Federation
TUC	Trades Union Congress
URC	Unofficial Reform Committee

France

CCN	Comité confédéral national (Confederation National Committee)
CDS	Comité de Défense Syndicaliste (Syndicalist Defence Committee)
CFTC	Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (French Confederation of Christian Workers)
CGT	Confédération Générale du Travail (Confederation of Labour)
CGTSR	Confédération Générale du Travail Syndicalist-Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Syndicalist General Confederation of Labour).
CGTU	Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (or CGT <i>Unitaire</i>) (United General Confederation of Labour)
CSR	Comités Syndicalistes Révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Labour Committee)
FBT	Fédération des Bourses du Travail (Federation of Labour Exchanges)
FM	Fédération des Métaux (Metal Workers Federation)
FNC	Fédération Nationale des Cheminots (Federation of Railway Workers)
FNS	Fédération Nationale des Syndicats (National Federation of Syndicats)
FR	Fédération du Bâtiment (Construction Workers Federation)
PCF	Parti Communiste français (Communist Party of France)
SFIO	Parti Socialiste Unifié - Section Française de L'Internationale Ouvrière (Socialist Party - French Section of the Workers' International)

Ireland

IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
IRSP	Irish Socialist Republican Party
ITGWU	Irish Transport and General Workers' Union
ITUC	Irish Trades Unions Congress
IWWU	Irish Women Workers' Union
NUDL	National Union of Dock Labourers
WUI	Workers' Union of Ireland

Italy

CGL	Confederazione Generale del Lavoro (General Confederation of Labour)
FIOM	Federazione Impiegati Operai Metallurgici (Federation of Metal Workers and Employees)
PCI	<i>Partito comunista italiano</i> (Communist Party of Italy)
PSI	Partito Socialista Italiano (Italian Socialist Party)
UAI	Unione Anarchista Italiana (Italian Anarchist Union)
UIL	Unione Italiana del Lavoro (Italian Union of Labour)
USI	Unione Sindacale Italiana (Italian Syndicalist Union)

Spain

CNT	Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour)
CRT	Catalonian Regional Confederation
FAI	Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation)
FNAE	Federación Nacional de Agricultores Españoles (National Agricultural Federation of Spain)
PCE	Partido Comunista Español (Communist Party of Spain)
POUM	Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Labour Party of Marxist Unity)
PSOE	Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party)
SO	Solidaridad Obrera (Worker Solidarity) Sindicatos de Oposición (Oppositionist Unions)
UGT	Unión General de Trabajadores (General Union of Workers)

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Introduction

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, amidst an extraordinary international upsurge in strike action, the ideas of revolutionary syndicalism connected with, and helped to produce, mass workers' movements in a number of different countries across the world. An increasing number of syndicalist unions, committed to destroying capitalism through revolutionary trade union struggle, were to emerge as either existing unions were won over to syndicalist principles or new alternative revolutionary unions and organisations were formed by dissidents who broke away from their mainstream reformist adversaries. This international movement experienced its greatest vitality in the period immediately preceding and following the First World War, from about 1910 until the early 1920s (although the movement in Spain crested later).

Amongst the largest and most famous unions influenced by syndicalist ideas and practice were the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France, the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT) in Spain and the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (USI) in Italy. In France (as well as Spain during the early 1930s) syndicalism became, for a period of time at least, the majority tendency inside the trade union movement, as it did in Ireland with the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union (ITGWU). Elsewhere, syndicalism became the rallying point for a significant minority of union activists, as in America with the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or 'Wobblies' as colloquially they became known. In Britain, where syndicalism was represented within the pre-war Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) as well as (in a more diffuse form) the leadership of the wartime engineering Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement, they continued to operate inside the existing unions but encouraged unofficial rank-and-file reform movements. Within these various syndicalist-influenced bodies and movements a number of prominent industrial militants achieved national and sometimes international reputation. These included Fernand Pelloutier, Victor Griffuelhes, and Emile Pouget in France; Armando Borghi and Alceste DeAmbris in Italy; Angel Pestaña and Salvador Seguí in Spain; 'Big Bill' Haywood, Vincent St. John and Elizabeth Gurly Flynn in America; Jim Larkin and James Connolly in Ireland; and Tom Mann and J.T. Murphy in Britain. Other notable syndicalist unions and movements existed elsewhere in Europe, Scandinavia, and Latin America, as well as in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Russia.

The emergence of revolutionary syndicalism in the years leading up to and immediately after the First World War was only one, albeit conspicuous, dimension of a wider workers' radicalism inside the international labour movement. It reflected growing levels of discontent with the failure of social democratic parties and mainstream trade unions to deliver real improvements in social and political conditions, with new groups of activists (including militant trade unionists, left-wing socialists, revolutionary Marxists as well as syndicalists), organising along different lines to those of the established labour movement leaders.

To those who were attracted to the syndicalist project, parliamentary democracy and working for reforms through the state were rejected as dead ends. Instead of the statist conception of socialism introduced *from above*, syndicalists insisted that society's revolutionary transformation necessarily had to come *from below*, to be the work of the majority, the product of workers' own self-activity and self-organisation at the point of production. This active, voluntarist conception of revolutionary strategy and the subjective character of self-emancipation was underlined by the way in which the opening words of the Provisional Rules of the First International, originally penned by Marx in 1866 – 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves'¹ – were rediscovered to become the syndicalists' watchword.

Hostility to the conservatism, bureaucracy and corruption of the socialist party and trade union bureaucracies, encouraged an emphasis on the collective 'direct action' of workers on the *economic* terrain – with the subordination of all political action to the industrial struggle and the complete independence of syndicalist bodies from all political parties. It followed that the traditional function of reformist trade unionism – struggling to improve wages and working conditions within capitalism through collective bargaining with employers – was regarded as inadequate. Instead, syndicalists campaigned in favour of reconstructed and class-based trade unions that would become militant organisations dedicated to the destruction of capitalism and the state. They believed the road to the liberation of the working class lay through an intensification of the industrial struggle (involving boycotts, sabotage, strikes and solidarity action) eventually culminating in a revolutionary general strike that would lead to the overthrow of the capitalist system and its replacement by workers' control of industry and society. Unions would have a double function – as an organ of struggle against the employers on the frontline of the class struggle under the capitalist system and as an organ of economic and industrial administration after its overthrow. Even though individual syndicalist movements adopted varying strategies and organisational forms in different countries they everywhere incorporated 'a vision of the revolutionary power and creative efficacy of self-reliant workers, an insistence on their right to collective self-management, and a faith in their capacity to administer their own affairs'.²

Of course the syndicalists were not the only ones advocating a distinct revolutionary approach at the time. Between 1870 and 1914 social democracy in the form of parliamentary reformist socialist parties attached to the Second International had emerged as a significant force in Europe and America, but other more radical varieties of socialism had a longer ideological pedigree. These included Blanquism (with its ideas of insurrection by a select and secret group) and Anarchism (with its libertarian viewpoint), the latter of which was to be influential in varying degrees within the syndicalist movement. But even though initially relatively marginalised on the left, it was to be revolutionary Marxism, amidst the upsurge in militant working class activity of the time, which was to make one of the most important

¹ K. Marx, *The First International and After* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 82.

² M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe, 'The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism (1890–1940)', in M. van der Linden and W. Thorpe (eds), *Revolutionary Syndicalism: An International Perspective*, (Aldershot, 1990), p. 1.

contributions. For example, Rosa Luxemburg's rebuttal of the 'revisionist' thesis of 'evolutionary socialism', advocated by the German Social Democratic Party leader Eduard Bernstein, and her theory of the 'Mass Strike' developed in 1905, not only took account of the conservatism of the party and union bureaucracies and their readiness to hold back working class insurgency, but also celebrated the spontaneity and revolutionary potential of workers' economic and political struggles. Similarly Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution' and Lenin's notion of the vanguard party were to lay the basis for an alternative that placed workers' self-activity at the centre of revolutionary Marxist politics. And Gramsci's sophisticated analysis of the experience of the factory council movement in Italy, viewed as the model for a future proletarian state, also contributed to the debate about revolutionary communist alternatives.

It is true that compared with revolutionary Marxism the syndicalist tradition's influence on the socialist movement in the early 1900s was profound. As Eric Hobsbawm has commented:

... in 1905–1914, the Marxist left had in most countries been on the fringes of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified 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 ...³

Yet such alternative Marxist politics inevitably acquired a radical new significance and influence internationally after the experience of the October 1917 Russian Revolution. Indeed, the heyday of syndicalism was maintained for only a brief period of 20 or so years. Its existence as a powerful and influential current inside the international trade union movement effectively came to an end with the ebb of the revolutionary workers' struggles that had shaken many countries in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, which was followed by employers' and state directed counter-mobilisation and repression. But it was the seizure of state power by Russian workers under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, and the subsequent formation of the Communist International (Comintern) and its trade union arm the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), which was to prove a decisive ideological and political challenge to the revolutionary syndicalist movement. Afterwards, although it remained a residual force in Europe until World War Two, syndicalism only survived as a pale shadow of its former self, being displaced partly by a rejuvenated social democracy (which succeeded in containing workers' discontent within established channels) and partly by the new revolutionary Communist parties that were subsequently established and which were to rapidly supersede syndicalist organisations in most countries. There was only one important exception: a mass following was retained by anarcho-syndicalism in Spain during the Civil War of 1936–1939. As Joseph White has commented (with reference to Britain but relevant more broadly), it is difficult to think of any other distinct tendency inside the labour movement during the twentieth century 'whose historical "moment" was as short as

³ E. Hobsbawm, 'Bolshevism and the Anarchists', *Revolutionaries* (London, 1993), pp. 72–3.

syndicalism's and whose working assumptions were so completely displaced and subsumed by events and fresh doctrines'.⁴

But even if revolutionary syndicalism was short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its overall aims – particularly when compared to the architects of the Russian revolution – it nonetheless made a significant contribution to the explosive wave of working class struggle that swept many countries during the early twentieth century. It expressed workers' rising level of organisation, confidence and political consciousness. It came to represent an influential set of policy prescriptions and strategies for labour at a time when all politics was in flux and such matters as the nature of political authority and accountability were open to wide-ranging debate.⁵ Emmett O'Connor has suggested that in the 'lacuna between pioneering Marxism and the triumph of Leninist realism in 1917' the syndicalist challenge that was mounted to jaded orthodoxies was both distinctive and far-reaching.⁶ Certainly in its uncompromising critique of capitalism, syndicalism raised central questions about the supposed neutrality of the state and the extent to which the social democratic policy of nationalisation without workers' control could change society; and in its celebration of workers' militant direct action it challenged the existing industrial and political order as well as the authority structures of the mainstream labour movement. Even though syndicalist-inspired voices were not the only one raising doubts about the drift of labour politics at the time, nor were the syndicalists the only revolutionary current, they nonetheless made a powerful and distinctive ideological and political contribution to a variety of debates about how society could be fundamentally transformed.

Defining 'Syndicalism'

There is often a great deal of misunderstanding about the meaning of the term 'syndicalism' – a term which is related to its French origins, with *Syndicat ouvrier* meaning a (usually local) trade union and *Le Syndicalisme* literally meaning labour unionism in general. To begin with, it should be noted that whilst in the English language 'syndicalism' is often used as shorthand to describe the syndicalist movement, the French CGT actually described their movement as *syndicalisme révolutionnaire*. This means there is the possibility of some confusion arising when 'syndicalism' is used to refer to practices that are more *reformist* in character – that is practices that concentrate on militant, sectional and non-political union activity but with no specifically *revolutionary* intent. Paradoxically, despite formal revolutionary declarations by the CGT during the first decade of the century, a minority of union members (organised in some of the larger unions and federations) were undoubtedly reformist in outlook. Moreover, after 1910 the union leadership *as a whole* moved a considerable way towards accommodating to capitalist society, tempering their

⁴ J. White, *Tom Mann* (Manchester, 1991), p. 170.

⁵ R. Price, 'Contextualising British Syndicalism c.1907–c.1920', *Labour History Review*, 63:3 (1998), pp. 261–76; D. Howell, 'Taking Syndicalism Seriously', *Socialist History*, 16 (2000), pp. 27–48.

⁶ E. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1988), p. 1.

previous ideas with a considerable amount of reformist activity and collaboration with the war effort, although there remained a sizeable revolutionary wing inside the *Confédération*. Nonetheless, despite such internal tensions and variations in emphasis over time within specific movements (in France as in other countries), the term ‘syndicalism’ will generally be used in this book to refer to movements, organisations and/or minority groups that were committed to *revolutionary* objectives, unless specifically qualified otherwise.⁷

On this basis it is possible to define syndicalism in its broadest sense to simply mean: ‘revolutionary trade unionism’. Such a definition would, of course, not embrace *all* unions that have in the past been committed to revolutionary politics, given this would also be true at times of communist and other left-wing dominated unions. But what it does underline is the equal importance of *revolution* and *unionism* – the fact that the essence of syndicalism was revolutionary action by unions aimed at establishing a society based upon unions.⁸ As we have seen this conception differed from both socialist and communist counterparts in viewing the decisive agency of the revolutionary transformation of society to be unions, as opposed to political parties or the state and of a collectivised worker-managed socio-economic order to be run by unions, as opposed to political parties or the state.

Perhaps more problematic is the fact that ‘syndicalism’ is necessarily only a very broad term for a number of related but rather *different* revolutionary union movements that flourished in a variety of forms across the world. Larry Peterson has argued the use of this term has the danger of blurring the distinctions between the movements according to a single exclusive model, when in fact syndicalism was merely one of several factions within a more general movement in favour of revolutionary industrial unionism.⁹ Certainly it is important to bear in mind different movements were sometimes known by varying terms in their respective countries, including: ‘revolutionary syndicalism’ (France and Britain), ‘industrial unionism’ (America), ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ (Spain and Italy), and ‘Larkinism’ (Ireland). And although an *international* phenomenon that grew out of similar economic, social and political conditions, syndicalism undoubtedly manifested itself concretely in direct relation to *national* conditions and traditions, with each country producing its own specific version or versions of the movement which were far from uniform.

Nonetheless, arguably the colloquial description of such different movements as ‘syndicalist’ is both useful and justified because it draws attention to basic fundamental similarities between them, despite some strategic, tactical and organisational differences and variety of labels they used to describe themselves. For example, few of the leaders of the IWW in America called themselves ‘syndicalists’;

⁷ ‘Reformist syndicalism’ comes close to being a contradiction in terms, although a trade unionism committed to non-revolutionary but tactically militant sectionalism and avoidance of politics has a long history.

⁸ F.F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of Its Time* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 1.

⁹ L. Peterson, ‘The One Big Union in International Perspective: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism 1900–1925’, in J.E. Cronin and C. Sirianni (eds), *Work, Community and Power: The Experience of Labour in Europe and America 1900–1925* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp. 64–6.

most, in fact, preferred the term ‘industrial unionist’. Joseph Conlin has attacked those historians who persist in using the term – as ‘A Name that Leads to Confusion’ – on the basis that the IWW diverged in important aspects of strategic orientation and organisational form from those in Europe (and America) who consciously adopted the term for themselves.¹⁰ But as Melvyn Dubofsky has persuasively argued, an examination of the language used in newspapers, pamphlets, books and speeches of the IWW, reveals ideas, concepts and theories (although not all tactics) that are almost indistinguishable from those espoused by European union militants who described themselves as syndicalists.¹¹ Indeed, the IWW paper *Solidarity* frequently headed its reports of news of the French syndicalist movement with the statement: ‘Le Syndicalisme in France is Industrialism in America. Its principles are substantially those of the IWW in America’.¹² And in the words of the American socialist theoretician Robert Rives LaMonte, writing in 1913: ‘In spite of superficial differences this living spirit of revolutionary purpose unifies French and British Syndicalism and American industrial unionism. To forget or even make light of this underlying identity can but substitute muddle-headed confusion for clear thinking’.¹³ Similar arguments apply to the Irish ‘syndicalism’ of the ITGWU (or at least the orientation to a greater or lesser degree of many of its national leaders).¹⁴ In other words the specific strategic approach and organisational forms adopted by individual syndicalist movements and the terms which they used to describe themselves, or have subsequently had pinned on them, are of less importance than the essential underlying nature of the movements that they had in common.

We should also note that any one of the supposedly more nationally-specific terms are themselves problematic given the changes in leadership that tended to occur over time within individual movements. For example, although the term ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ is often used to describe the Spanish CNT, in reality a ‘pure syndicalist’ period under the leadership of Salvador Sequí extended from the foundation of the CNT’s parent organisation *Solidaridad Obrera* in 1907 to its 1919 national congress; it was only then that the anarcho-syndicalists finally, but briefly, took over. After the CNT’s banning in 1924, the union leadership then fell into the hands of more moderate syndicalists; it was with the formation of their own internal minority grouping in 1927 that the anarchists were to eventually come back to the fore with the advent of the Second Republic and the subsequent Civil War. In other words, any attempt to substitute the broad term ‘syndicalism’ with a more defined term, by no means necessarily clarifies our understanding (outside of context) and can, in fact, sometimes be misleading.

¹⁰ J.R. Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too: Studies of the Wobblies* (Westport, Connecticut, 1969).

¹¹ M. Dubofsky, ‘The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism in the United States’, in van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 207–10. A number of other historians have also used the term ‘syndicalism’ to describe the IWW, including John Graham Brooks, Paul F. Brissendon, David J. Saposs and Patrick Renshaw.

¹² Cited in P.S. Foner, *History of the Labor Movement in the United States, Vol. 4, The Industrial Workers of the World, 1905–1917*, (New York, 1965), p. 158.

¹³ R.R. LaMonte, ‘Industrial Unionism and Syndicalism’, *New Review*, 1 May, 1913, p. 527.

¹⁴ O’Connor, p. xvii.

Finally, the use of the broad generic term can also be justified on the basis that syndicalism needs to be understood not only in terms of *ideological* doctrine, but as a mode of action, a *practical* social movement engaged in working class struggle. Frederick Ridley has suggested it was: ‘the sum of *ideas* expressed by the movement and the sum of its *activities*; the outlook shared by members and the form their action took’.¹⁵ Marcel van der Linden’s inclination is to regard the ideological criteria of syndicalism as the least important compared with what the movement did in practice at both the organisational and shopfloor levels.¹⁶ From this perspective it is justifiable to view not only the movement of the CGT in France as revolutionary syndicalist, but also the generally more anarchist-influenced CNT in Spain, the industrial unionist-influenced IWW in the United States and the ‘Larkinite’ ITGWU in Ireland.

However, whilst the broad term ‘syndicalism’ will be used in this book to refer to all these different movements, there will also be an attempt to remain sensitive to the considerable *variations* that existed between (and within) individual movements at any one time, so as not to diminish their distinctive features and trajectories. Similar considerations apply in relation to its more diffuse expression outside of formal organisational boundaries, notably within the leadership of the wartime British shop stewards’ movement where most of the attributes of the pre-war syndicalist tradition were carried over and displayed.

Rethinking Syndicalism

Whilst there is a good deal of general literature available on revolutionary syndicalist movements, it suffers from some crucial limitations. First, virtually all of it is confined to *single country* explorations, which although immensely informative in their own right tend to overstate distinctiveness, make little attempt to draw comparisons with the experience of other countries and tend to obscure the general international nature of the syndicalist movement and the similar factors that gave rise to its origin, development, dynamics and trajectory. Although there have been one or two recent attempts to begin to rectify this deficiency,¹⁷ they have been very explorative and leave many questions unanswered or even not discussed. Yet arguably, an international perspective is needed, not only because this allows us to compare and contrast, but also because there were a number of shared themes and common impulses between the syndicalist movements in different countries.

Second, there still remains a surprising amount of confusion in the way syndicalist movements are assessed in individual countries, involving a number of unresolved debates, controversies and conflicting interpretations offered by different historians on central questions such as: What specific objective and subjective conditions gave rise

¹⁵ Ridley, p. 1 [emphasis added].

¹⁶ M. van der Linden, ‘Second Thoughts on Revolutionary Syndicalism’, *Labour History Review*, 63:2 (1998), p. 183.

¹⁷ Peterson, ‘The One Big Union’; W. Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves’: Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913–1923*, (Dordrecht, 1989); van der Linden and Thorpe, ‘The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism’; van der Linden, ‘Second Thoughts’, pp. 182–96; Howell, pp. 27–48.

to syndicalist movements? Did the residual strength of syndicalism lie with artisans, agricultural workers, casual labourers and other groups of economically marginalised, often unskilled and unorganised workers? Or was it able to sink genuine roots amongst the rapidly expanding industrial proletariat? Is it the case that, compared with the relative emphasis placed on industrial unionism in America and Britain, syndicalists elsewhere generally regarded unionism as synonymous with organisation on craft lines? To what degree did they reject central leadership in favour of decentralisation and local autonomy? How much influence did syndicalism have? Was it a 'cause without rebels', essentially a failure either as an instructor or stimulant to labour militancy, marginalised on the fringes of the movement except for episodic periods? Or (even if syndicalist activists were relatively few in number) did there exist a far broader 'proto-syndicalist mentality' inside the working class movement arising from the mass strikes and anti-parliamentary ferment of the period? Was the rejection of Bolshevism by syndicalist bodies as a whole a reflection of the antagonistic and irreconcilable gulf between the two traditions? Or was there a new synthesis of politics and economics between syndicalism and communism that grew out of both the successes and the failures of the revolutionary workers' struggles of the period?

In the light of the above considerations, this book attempts to add to our understanding by offering a distinctive comparative historiography of the dynamics and trajectory of the syndicalist movement on an international scale. It does so by providing a rigorous and critical analysis of the existing literature, foregrounding hitherto neglected aspects of the subject, deploying new archival findings, revealing fresh insights, and offering a substantively original interpretation and assessment. In particular, there is an attempt (in the second half of the book) to make the first ever systematic examination of the relationship between syndicalism and communism, focusing on the ideological and political conversion to communism undertaken by some of the syndicalist movements' leading figures across the world. The book explores the response of syndicalist movements to the Russian Revolution, Communist International and Red International of Labour Unions, and to the explicit attempt made by the Bolsheviks to woo syndicalists into the new revolutionary communist parties that were established. It explores the limitations in syndicalist strategy and tactics that contributed to the transition to communism and the degree of synthesis between the two traditions within the new communist parties that emerged. The overall strengths, as well as notable weaknesses, of the alternative Bolshevik and communist tradition are also assessed.

In the process there is a thorough review of a number of crucial dilemmas that were confronted by the syndicalist (and communist) tradition(s), including questions such as: Could the trade unions be turned into instruments of revolutionary struggle? Or did their in-built pressures towards reformism ultimately undermine such potential? How far would their conservative impulses carry the leaders of the social democratic parties and trade unions towards accommodation with the existing order? Would they merely blur the contradictions between capital and labour, or actually change sides? Should revolutionaries organise entirely separately from the reformist bodies, whether in newly founded militant unions or specifically revolutionary parties? What kind of leadership role within the working class movement should be provided by the 'militant minority'? What was the relationship between industrial agitation and

socialist politics? Could the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism be achieved by a general strike, or did it require an insurrection?

The book explores such questions by examining the different conceptions of capitalism, revolution, and socialism held by the syndicalist and communist traditions, and the way in which an entire theoretical and organisational heritage was remade on the road from syndicalism to communism. There is a focus on the relationship (and tensions) between trade unionism and capitalism, militancy and accommodation, rank-and-file members and the union bureaucracy, economics and politics, industrial struggle and political organisation, spontaneity and leadership, centralisation and decentralisation and party and class. In examining such issues, questions and themes, the book attempts to provide an overall re-conceptualisation and re-theorisation of the nature of anti-capitalist and revolutionary unionism. In this sense it offers not only a contribution to labour history, but also a contribution to the sociology and politics of trade unionism with contemporary relevance.

It needs to be stated from the outset that the analysis and assessment of syndicalism that is provided derives from a revolutionary Marxist approach (within the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, and the early congresses of the Communist International). Such a theoretical and analytical framework inevitably means it is sympathetic to the revolutionary aspirations and militant activities of the syndicalists. But it also necessarily means a critical scrutiny of their policies and actions. Naturally the readers of the book are not obliged to share the political assumptions underpinning the study, although they do have the right to demand that it should not simply be the defence of a political position, but rather an internally well-grounded portrayal of the actual underlying social processes of the syndicalist movement. It will be up to the reader to judge how far this criterion has been met.

The study focuses attention on syndicalist movements in six different countries - namely, France (CGT), Spain (CNT), Italy (USI), America (IWW), Britain (ISEL and SS&WCM) and Ireland (ITGWU). These particular geographical locations have been chosen for the contrast between less and more advanced contexts of industrial and political development, the relatively large size or evident influence of their respective syndicalist movements, and for some examples of where syndicalist unions and organisations were decisive in developing and sustaining the impetus of the movement internationally. In addition, such a choice of countries has enabled consideration of a variety of syndicalist organisational forms (including unions, union confederations and propaganda organisations, as well as syndicalist-influenced leadership within broader movements) and strategic approaches (including the construction of separate revolutionary unions or operating within existing reformist-led bodies). Finally, it has also allowed a synchronic comparison between movements which had their origins, developed, reached their high point and subsequently declined during a roughly similar period at the beginning of the twentieth century (albeit with considerable variation in the exact timing of such individual phases). The exception to this is Spain, with the role of the CNT also explored in the later Civil War period.¹⁸

¹⁸ Germany has not been included essentially because there was no real effective syndicalist movement until after the First World War and the fall of the Kaiser with the 1918 revolution. See H.M. Bock, 'Anarchosyndicalism in the German Labour Movement:

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