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History of the Anarchist-Syndicalist Trade Union Movement

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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Nigerian Anarchists

In the end the fascists won these various battles. The good news is that Anarchist-Syndicalist ideas have re-emerged across the world since the 1970s. In Spain and Sweden, tens of thousands of workers are currently organised in revolutionary trade unions.

In Nigeria, the Awareness League (AL) was organised in 1989. Its Charter states that it is “inspired by, and committed to the ideals, principals, objectives, goals, ends and purposes of anarcho-syndicalism”. The AL is active in the struggle against the military regime.

We Anarchist-Syndicalists believe trade unions are a mighty weapon in the struggle for improved conditions, and against racism and oppression. We **also** believe that unions can organise workers to destroy capitalism and the State, by organising the revolutionary seizure and democratic control of the factories, land, and offices. However, we also see the importance of organising other sections of the working class such as women, youth, unemployed and the community.

Our ideas on unions have had a massive impact on the international struggles of the working class and poor. This fact is conveniently ignored by most history books.

First International

These ideas were developed by the powerful Anarchist faction in the First International Workers Association in the 1860s and 1870s. The Anarchists said socialism must come from below through mass organisations of the working class, not through the government like Karl Marx taught. The Anarchists organised strong movements in many countries at this time.

In the USA, Anarchists had a mass base among industrial workers and the poor. They played a central part in the huge 1886 General Strike for an 8 hour day. In Chicago, the Central Labour Union was won to Anarchist ideas and organised 65,000 strikers. The bosses responded by framing and executing 4 Anarchist militants and union leaders. The workers holiday, May Day, began as an anniversary of this grave injustice.

One Big Union

Anarchism suffered many problems in the 1880s, including massive repression and also theoretical confusion. But it re-emerged stronger than ever in late 1890s, when comrades began to focus their energies on the unions.

Anarchist-Syndicalism became the dominant influence on the unions of many countries, including Argentina, Brazil, France, Mexico, Paraguay, Portugal, south China, Spain and Uruguay. There were strong Anarcho-syndicalist minority currents in countries such as Britain, Bulgaria, China, Denmark, Germany, Holland, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, Norway, Poland, Sweden and the USA. Millions of workers, peasants and poor people were won over to Anarchism.

World War One

Almost every single Anarchist-Syndicalists union and group opposed the imperialist World War One. They paid a high price for their struggles to end the war and to defend workers rights. In the USA, the Industrial Workers of the World union (IWW) was broken down by severe vigilante and State attacks 1917–8. The IWW group in Australia was banned in 1917 for opposing the war effort.

World Revolution

The Anarchist-Syndicalists played a leading part in the great wave of revolutionary upheaval that shook the world between 1917 and 1922. They were central to the Italian factory occupations of 1919–20, and launched general strikes that escalated into revolutionary confrontations in Mexico (1916), Spain (1917), Portugal (1918), and Argentina (1918–9). They realised that the Russian Revolution had been destroyed by the “Communist” Party which built a one-party State and State capitalism.

Communism and Fascism

Anarchist-Syndicalism stayed a powerful force in the 1920s. But it was weakened by the establishment of “Communist” Parties in many countries. These parties attracted many workers and Anarchists who were impressed by the Russian Revolution. These comrades wrongly thought socialism must be imposed from above by a “revolutionary party” using the State.

The Anarchist-Syndicalist unions also faced repression at the hands of the fascist-type dictatorships that were set up by the bosses in Europe, South America and Japan. The victims of the fascists included all the Argentine, German, Italian, Japanese and Portuguese working class organisations. More movements were smashed during and after World War Two by the Nazi occupation of West Europe, and the Russian Army in Eastern Europe.

Spanish Revolution (1936–7)

Anarchists argued that it was necessary to stop the fascists politically and physically. They helped organise United Fronts to try stop the fascists taking power in Italy and Japan. Heroic resistance continued even under fascism. In 1923 Bulgarian Anarchists launched an armed uprising against the dictatorship. In Spain, armed workers organised by the Anarchist-Syndicalist CNT (National Confederation of Labour) smashed an attempt by fascists to take power in July 1936. The CNT then spearheaded a mass movement of 7 million workers and peasants to take over the land and factories and put them under the control of democratic collectives.