

Unions and Revolution

Workers' Solidarity Federation

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Anarchist-Syndicalists stand for a revolution by the working class and the poor to smash all oppression and create a free stateless socialist society. The trade unions will play a leading role in this process. It is also vital to organise in the community.

Why Class Struggle?

Class struggle is the key to changing this rotten society. We working and poor people create all social wealth but we do not get the benefits. Our work is controlled and exploited by the capitalists and top state officials – the ruling class.

We are not powerless. We can hit the bosses and rulers with mass actions, particularly at the workplace. Only we workers and poor people can create a free society because only we do not need to exploit.

The bosses and rulers created racism (and other oppression). They wanted to super-exploit Black people to make more profits. They wanted to divide our resistance by splitting us into Zulus, Shangaans, Xhosas, Sothos, Indians, Coloureds and Whites. We can only defeat racism by smashing the bosses – of all colours.

All Black people are victims of racism, but the Black middle and upper class elite is shielded from the worst effects of racism by their privileged status. They can live in the suburbs, go to private schools and earn big salaries – we can't. We must fight racism wherever it exists. But the working class must not form alliances with the Black managers and capitalists, because they will always choose profits over socialism.

Defend the Trade Unions

The trade unions are one of the most important mass movements that the working class and poor have built. The unions were built to defend and advance the class interests of the workers and the poor.

Even the most bureaucratic and reformist union must defend its members' interests or it will collapse. The unions have massive potential power because they can disrupt production, the source of the bosses wealth. They promote class consciousness, solidarity, and confidence because they organise people to fight as working and poor people against the bosses and rulers.

It is nonsense to say that the unions "serve" the bosses. Even the most "progressive" boss will oppose the unions because they are a challenge to his exploitation of workers. Even the most reformist union cannot be totally "incorporated" into capitalism because capitalism cannot satisfy the needs of workers.

Full Union Democracy

Unfortunately many unions have a strong bureaucracy of paid officials and leaders. This group is better paid than ordinary workers and has many privileges. Because of these conditions they develop different interests to ordinary union members. Ordinary workers need to take action to improve their conditions, but bureaucrats want the unions to avoid struggles and spend their time negotiating with the bosses.

We oppose the union bureaucracy because it undermines union struggle and because it is a threat to union democracy. The existence of a bureaucracy is not inevitable. The Spanish CNT (a mass Anarchist-Syndicalist union federation) had a million and a half members but only two elected full-time officials. We think the union bureaucracy must be dissolved and the unions controlled by workers on the ground.

Oppose Reformism

Another problem that exists in many unions are reformist ideas. According to these ideas, capitalism and the State can be changed to look after the needs of the workers and poor. We reject these ideas because we know capitalism and the State are based on putting the wealth and power of a minority of exploiters ahead of the needs of the workers and the poor.

Revolutionary Potential of Unions

We think that unions are powerful weapons in the struggle for better conditions and against oppression like racism. We **also** believe that unions can organise workers to go on the offensive and destroy capitalism and the State, by organising the revolutionary seizure and democratic control of the factories, land, and offices.

The idea that unions and union members can only become revolutionary in “revolutionary conditions” is mistaken. Revolutionary situations are not something that “just happen” to workers. They are also the product of workers struggles, workers organisations, and workers aims.

It is also wrong to say unions “exist within capitalism”, and only exist to improve the terms on which workers are exploited (rather than put an end to the system itself). In 1936, for example, the Spanish CNT armed workers to smash an attempted fascist coup, and spearheaded a successful mass movement of 7 million workers and peasants to seize the land and factories and manage them through democratic collectives.

Boring-from-Within

We must do two things if we want the unions to play a revolutionary role. First, get rid of the union bureaucracy and make sure that the unions are controlled by the membership. Second, win the union membership over to Anarchist- Syndicalist ideas.

We must work within the *existing* unions to achieve these goals. All unions are workers combat units. Leaving the mainstream unions to form new “pure” revolutionary unions has serious consequences. It withdraws militants from the unions, leaving them at the mercy of bureaucrats and reformists. It isolates militants in tiny splinter unions because the masses prefer to join large, established unions. Small groups of revolutionaries working inside established unions can achieve impressive results. For example, the main French (CGT) and Argentinean (FORA) union federations were won over to Anarchist-Syndicalism in this way in the early twentieth century.

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