

Guest Editorial

Paul Chambers and Norry LaPorte

The three articles by Tosstorff, Darlington and Morgan in this issue examine syndicalism from its origins in the nineteenth century through its encounter with Bolshevism to its current manifestations. They were originally presented as papers to a one-day conference at the University of Glamorgan in the autumn of 2007.

Reiner Tosstorff's paper is one of the few articles of its kind available in English. It is the product of extensive research in several languages, notably communicating the former secrets of the Soviet archives to readers. Its focus is the discussions held between the Bolsheviks and foreign syndicalist organisations to set up a new, revolutionary communist-dominated Red International of Trade Unions in the aftermath of the 1917 revolution. Of course, this encounter was far from harmonious. What attracted syndicalists to talk to the communists was as compelling as it became problematic: the Bolsheviks had made a successful revolution, sweeping away 'capitalism' (if this is a suitable definition of Russian society) in a seeming 'red dawn'. It comes as no surprise that the discussions between syndicalists, Bolsheviks and their supporters in the West were laden with tensions and disagreement. The fault lines ran along well established grooves, between the Leninist conception of the 'leading role' of the party and political activism as the means to the revolutionary end; and the syndicalists' prioritisation of economic and industrial struggle. Unlike the Bolsheviks, syndicalists were largely opposed to working within the established, social-democratic dominated 'reformist' unions. Yet, as Tosstorff reminds us, we should not forget the significance of disunity between and within the fissiparous syndicalist organisations.

Those breaking off the dialogue with the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the 1920s emphasised syndicalism's anarchist ideological inheritance in a development marking the birth of Anarcho-syndicalism. Yet, even those syndicalists joining ranks with Bolshevism – most famously, Andreu Nin and Alfred Rosmer – were among the first and most vocal opponents of the Bolshevisation and ensuing Stalinisation of international communism. Importantly, this political flirtation reminds us that communism's pre-1917 roots were not only in social democracy, but also in revolutionary syndicalism. In Germany – home to the largest communist movement outside Soviet Russia until the Nazi 'seizure of power' in 1933 – the breakaway syndicalist-type Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) outnumbered the 'official' Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in Berlin, and in several heavy-industrial centres, until its unification with the Independent Socialist Party (USPD) – through the aegis of the Comintern – at the end of 1920. Internationally, many social democrats and trade unionists visited Russia after the end of the Civil War in 1920 and wrote positively of what they had seen (or, more precisely, what they had been shown). In South Wales, S.O. Davies visited Soviet Russia as a miners' union official in 1920, and was so impressed that he remained more communist in political

orientation than Labourite, despite being the long-serving Labour MP for Merthyr Tydfil. Indeed, during the early years of the Cold War, he was the only British MP to speak in Parliament in support of the Red Army's suppression of the anti-communist rising in East Germany in 1953. In the summer of 1935, he had led a delegation to Berlin to hand a petition signed by 100 MPs to the Nazi authorities, which demanded the release from prison of the Communist leader Ernst Thälmann. Davies' Soviet sympathies were typical of the left of 'old' Labour's 'Russia complex': perceptions of a better world eclipsed the often grim realities of Bolshevik rule that refuted ideological claims to the contrary. While the Left of international social democracy was (generally speaking) impressed by the seeming achievements of Soviet Russia, it was syndicalists who drew attention to the nascent party dictatorship. Yet, in Germany – as in much of the 'developed' western world – syndicalist accounts of the 'dictatorship' in Russia were eclipsed by the accounts of other, less hostile, left-wing parties. Nevertheless, syndicalist activists kept the issue of Soviet political prisoners alive at factory meetings – for example in the massive Hamburg shipyards – and always exerted an attraction to activists on communism's quasi-syndicalist 'ultra-left', who rejected all organisational cooperation with 'reformism'.

Although Reiner Tosstorff's article focuses on syndicalism in 'underdeveloped' southern – or 'Latin' Europe – it also notes its influence in the advanced, highly industrial powerhouse of Germany, the Ruhr. The region's later industrialisation, in the 'heavy industrial revolution' of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and the ensuing waves of immigration, produced a fractured workers' milieu in which social democracy was weak and syndicalism an important expression of radicalism. Syndicalism was also an expression of workers' radicalism in areas of Germany, such as the eastern districts of Saxony around Dresden, where social democracy was deeply implanted but on the right of the national party organisation. In the early years of the Weimar Republic, syndicalism as an organised, political movement and as a 'tendency' among local communists – not least in Berlin – represented a significant challenge to Bolshevism from the left. Ralph Darlington, in his nuanced overview of syndicalism and anarchism in their French, Italian and Spanish contexts, explores national variations on an internationalised leitmotif. Along the way he critically re-addresses two commonly held assumptions: that anarcho-syndicalism thrives best in regions that remain socially and economically under-developed, and that the appeal of this movement resides with the lumpenproletariat and the landless peasantry (historically two groups with relatively low levels of political organisation) rather than the industrial working class.

The discussion is foregrounded with a very useful exploration of the terms 'syndicalism' and 'anarcho-syndicalism'. While in broad terms syndicalism is above all 'revolutionary trade unionism', it has always existed in tension with reformist tendencies and situational imperatives. Moreover, while it is formally internationalist and revolutionary, its concrete manifestations have been shaped by national traditions and contexts, resulting in many nationally specific variants on the theme, which were themselves subject over time to the flux and flow of changing leaderships and directions. Thus, as a generic term with internationalist significance, it is best understood in terms of political action rather than ideology – 'a practical social movement engaged in working class struggle'. Ironically, 'anarcho-syndicalism' began life as a pejorative term deployed by the parties of the Communist

International, but soon became a useful rallying point for those workers increasingly opposed to centralised political control, and for local autonomy, and ultimately played a role in the transformation of anarchism from a minority current to a movement with appreciable mass appeal. Darlington charts the exponential growth of anarchist influence in trade unionism in Italy, Spain and France, noting that rather than being always the product of supposedly 'backward' societies characterised by weak capitalism and underdeveloped industry, the social and economic contexts were much more fluid and regionally variable. For example, while France lagged behind Britain, Germany and the USA, the period after 1905 saw significant, if uneven growth, among the industrial workforce. Moreover, the distinctive French revolutionary tradition had shaped a culture of revolution from below, and when this was combined with an existing political culture that effectively marginalised workers, a revolutionary union based politics that eschewed parties and parliaments came to be seen as an attractive and necessary option that utilised the main weapon in workers' arsenals, their power at the level of the shop floor. In terms of the occupational composition of those drawn towards syndicalism, from 1900 onwards workers were as likely to be drawn from large scale industries as the more traditional small scale industrial concerns, with the overall picture being one of diversity. By 1909, the French Confederation Generale du Travail (CGT) had gained half a million new members, many clearly members of the industrial working class, which raises questions about customary notions that syndicalism mainly had its roots in marginalised sections of the workforce.

Spain, a predominately agrarian society and late entrant to the industrialising sphere, dominated by an absolute monarchy backed by the army and Church, clearly fits the bill of 'backwardness', but again local factors, notably a century of armed struggles against the Madrid establishment, long-standing and widespread anarchist and federalist sympathies and a repressive and unstable political climate, do much to explain the broad appeal of anarcho-syndicalism. While in terms of occupational composition, the Confederacion Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) drew much of its strength from the agrarian labouring class, it had from its inception a heavily industrial character, reflecting its roots in the emerging industrial regions. By way of contrast, Italy, a society marked by deep rural poverty in the south (and a history of spontaneous labour uprisings) and a rapidly industrialising north (but with a lack of those political channels which might have been utilised for reform), saw the steady transmission of revolutionary union action from the south to the north rather than vice versa, although it did not gain a significant foothold in the politicised industrial classes to the same extent as in France or Spain. What we see in all these cases are particular sets of historical and cultural contexts combining with a broader affinity towards an emerging international syndicalism, while at the same time exhibiting distinct national diversities.

Kevin Morgan focuses not on social movements but on an individual, Emma Goldman, utilising her story to address wider issues and themes in the early twentieth century revolutionary Left. In a meticulously researched discussion Morgan focuses on the expressive function of anarchism in order to tease out the tensions between 'social' and 'individual' anarchism. The crucial question here is the compatibility of these distinct tendencies; Goldman's life and principles serve as the canvas on which these tendencies are played out. Interestingly, Morgan avoids conventional analysis of the tensions between socialism and libertarianism and instead focuses on 'elitist and popular' or 'democratic' conceptions of social change' – revolution from above or below. This allows him to engage in what he describes as 'a less innocent reading of her anarchism', which engages with Goldman's fascination with and appropriation of elements of Nietzsche's philosophy, her ambivalence towards syndicalist modes of operation, and her preference for

individual acts of 'propaganda by deed'. Morgan's view is that Goldman saw herself as a vanguard figure – a herald of the revolution – who used her personal charisma, access to public platforms and privileged speaking role, notably in the pages of the literary journal *Mother Earth*, to transform propaganda by the deed into propaganda as deed. Sharing Nietzsche's iconoclasm, Goldman also appeared increasingly drawn to his elitism and to the idea of the lone revolutionary as intellectual and 'superman', a direction arguably at odds with the practical anarchism of solidaristic social movements engaged in working class struggle, but reflective of the fact that there was not one but many anarchisms playing themselves out in this period. Chris Ealham's article on anarchist activist-historian Jose Peirats, while not part of the original Glamorgan history conference, nevertheless nicely complements those papers, not least because it focuses on the creation of labour history. Ealham offers a fascinating account of labour history in the making, and through a poignant account of the trials and vicissitudes of Spanish anarchists in exile, situates the researching and writing of history firmly within the revolutionary struggle itself. Peirats's history of the revolution is no dry academic account, and the history itself, emerging as it does from 'below' and in the context of ongoing revolutionary struggle and sacrifice, situates Peirats and his many collaborators and supporters as 'heralds of the revolution'.

In retrospect, and as Darlington notes, it appears that the influence of anarchosyndicalism as a current within international trade unionism was relatively short-lived. Arguably, the waning of the movement was less to do with internal factors and rather more to do with the disruptive activities of the nascent Comintern and the triumph of fascism in Europe. The CNT has re-emerged in post-Franco Spain, but it has struggled to adapt to a radically re-configured environment.² While it remains recognisably 'anarchist' and 'syndicalist', these currents are of historical interest where the CGT is concerned. Nevertheless, anarchist currents continue to resonate globally, particularly in the alter-globalisation movement (but also in the praxis of environmentalist, peace and women's movements).³ In a very real sense, the series of revolutions that ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent crisis within Marxism, the abortive protests of Tiananmen Square and the creation of a state-sponsored capitalist market in the People's Republic of China, have helped strengthen anarchism's hand. At the same time reformist and mainstream social democratic tendencies appear also to be in crisis in Europe. It is worthwhile therefore to re-consider seriously Darlington's contention that the emergence of anarcho-syndicalism was coterminous with a crisis in both reformist social democratic politics and orthodox Marxism. Opportunities clearly exist, more so with the emergence of the internet, and new heralds of the revolution – notably Chomsky and Klein – continue to carry the torch for anarchism and bottom-up revolution.

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NOTES

1. The first three pieces in the issue were originally presented as papers to a one-day

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have been published in a special issue of *Socialist History* (Issue 34). The fourth feature article in this issue, an evaluation of Jose Peirats's *La CNT en la revolución española* by Chris Ealham, though not part of the conference, also offers an important contribution to our understanding of syndicalism.

2. See B.R. Martinez, 'Anarchism, anthropology and Andalucia: an analysis of the CNT

and the 'New Capitalism', *Anarchist Studies* 14:2, pp. 106-130.

3. D. Held and A. McGrew, *Globalization/Anti-Globalization*, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 112-115.