

Education for revolution

Anarcho-syndicalist pedagogy

Mandy Moussouris and **Shawn Hattingh** explain the roots and principles of anarcho-syndicalism and what these mean for the practice of worker education in movements inspired by these principles and traditions. Emphasising the democratic practice, working-class rooted, organic and critical nature of the pedagogy, they explain that the practice seeks to intersect employed and unemployed women and men. Practically, the education provides a platform for post-revolutionary practice of direct democracy at the point of production and, thus, naturally included spractical skills such as trades, accounting and sciences.

The emblem of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905 based on anarcho-syndicalist principles and practices, has three stars on it. Each represents an ideal central to the union; one represents working-class 'organisation', one working-class 'emancipation' and one, importantly, working-class 'education'. The notion that education, organisation and emancipation were equally important pillars of struggle was and is central to all anarchist/syndicalist unions.

WHAT IS ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM?

Anarcho-syndicalism was one of the forms of unionism born from the struggles of the working class (workers and the unemployed) in Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and parts of Africa starting in the 1860s. It reached its zenith when the militant rank and file members of the 2-million strong revolutionary Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) played a central role in the Spanish

Revolution of 1936. In fact, between 1870 and 1920, most of the largest unions in Latin America, the Caribbean, France, Holland and Spain were based on anarcho-syndicalist ideology, practice and principles.

Anarcho-syndicalism was, and is, similar to other socialist movements – including Bolshevism – in that at its heart it aims for the working class to overthrow capitalism. It, however, also differs from other socialist movements. From the beginning anarcho-syndicalism also aimed to end all other forms of oppression through revolution, including religion, the state, patriarchy and racism.

The main difference between anarchists and other socialists/Marxists was and is that anarchists are opposed to all forms of states, even ones that have labelled themselves socialist. Anarchist analysis sees the state system as a hierarchical structure that by its nature is designed for a minority (the ruling class) to rule over a majority. For anarchists, history has

shown that wherever a state exists there has never been freedom and equality. Even in the Soviet Union and African socialism, an elite political class emerged in these states as a result of their innate hierarchical structure, which necessarily centralises power, and those with power became the ruling class which continued to rule over and exploit workers, peasants and the unemployed. These societies were not socialist but state capitalist. Anarchists argue that true equality and a communist society was not achieved in such cases because the state was not destroyed. For anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists the working class must liberate itself by not only defeating capitalism, but also ending the state system and indeed all forms of coercive and hierarchical social structures. Only once this has been achieved will all be able to equally participate in a free and equal society – a society based on grass-root, participatory democracy or self-governance from below.



Shop stewards mapping their work related pain. Credit: Rob Rees, NALEDI.

For anarcho-syndicalists the revolutionary union (based on direct democracy with workplace committees and councils as the base where power resides) were and are seen as the revolutionary vehicles for the self-liberation of the working class. Anarcho-syndicalists reject the idea that political parties are revolutionary precisely because they mimic the state form and are at best based on representative democracy, which does not break down the power differences between the leaders and the led. Thus, at the heart of anarcho-syndicalism is the view that the working class, through revolutionary unions (or similar working-class formations), can and will undertake a revolutionary struggle against the state and capitalism. The aim of this revolution was to socialise the means of production and wealth and to run companies and the entire economy on the basis of worker self-management to meet the needs of all. Community and worker councils would be federated to plan the economy based on direct democracy. Federated community councils would replace the state and allow for direct democracy and freedom to be practised throughout society.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING-CLASS SELF-EDUCATION

As part of workers and the broader working class defending their interests against capitalists, landlords and the state – and to prepare for both the revolution and the subsequent running of a communist society based on direct democracy – anarcho-syndicalist unions had massive education programmes amongst workers and within working-class communities. Importantly, most worker-education initiatives across the globe at the height of the anarchist-syndicalist union movement between 1900 and 1930 were rooted in the community and focused on the education of all, including children. Ferrer's school in Spain, the Modern School in New York, initiatives in Cuba and Mexico were all classic examples of worker-led education grounded in communities and focusing beyond the education of the employed (at the time mainly men) to education of all.

As part of mass working-class education, distribution of written material was seen as vital by anarcho-syndicalist unions. The CNT in Spain ran numerous daily newspapers and a number of periodicals. One of its newspapers,

Solidaridad Obrera, was the biggest in Spain in the mid-1930s and had a daily circulation of 200,000. These periodicals and newspapers carried articles ranging from the news to theoretical pieces based on working-class and anarchist perspectives and analyses.

Central to anarchist education were also spaces in which workers and the unemployed (anarcho-syndicalist unions organised both those with jobs and those without) could debate, discuss and develop analyses of society and the root causes of oppression and how to overcome these. Militants of CNT, for instance, ran hundreds of educational and cultural centres – called *ateneos* or anarchist meeting houses – across working-class areas in Spain. These were centres where activists held discussions, courses and debates and were defined by a democratic form of self-education. The importance of these cultural and educational centres is difficult to overstate for the working class in Spain between 1900 and 1937. They provided the building blocks for organised community politics, where education and discussion were viewed as essential for the development of free people who would be capable of taking on the building of a new society according to anarchist principles. The *ateneos* signified a unique space where local people could come together to solve problems and broaden their horizons.

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, initially with ties to both the socialist and anarchist labour movements, had similar spaces of democratic and revolutionary self-education in the form of union halls and more informal self-education sessions called 'hobo jungles' in the countries it organised, including in the United States of America, Britain, South Africa and Australia. These served as forums for learning, critical reflection, and debate, particularly through the first three

decades of the twentieth century. The hobo jungles served a similar function as the union hall in terms of being subversive and self-educational spaces, which migrant workers used to educate themselves about capitalism, the role of the state, and the ideology and practices of revolutionary syndicalism.

Within many of the anarcho-syndicalist unions, women members sometimes formed their own federations and women's groups. For example, in Mexico in 1922, the Federation of Libertarian Women was formed to fight evictions and defend the interests of domestic workers in Veracruz. Self-education, based on a form of anti-state and anti-capitalist feminism, was central to the Federation of Libertarian Women.

Culture was another key educational tool within anarcho-syndicalist unions. Many anarcho-syndicalist unions had drama groups, which were used to highlight issues facing the working class, to build class consciousness and to promote solidarity. Such activities were intended to further a working-class counter-culture. Songs were also important educational tools. The IWW, for instance, has its own song book; one of its key members was the legendary Joe Hill who wrote and performed many songs which were aimed at

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building and celebrating a working-class counter-culture. Some of the songs and slogans of the IWW are still used by unions today. *Solidarity Forever*, for example, was composed by the IWW and the slogan an "Injury to one is an injury to all" was an IWW slogan that succinctly defined what working-class solidarity should be in a few words.

BUILDING A NEW WORLD WITHIN THE SHELL OF THE OLD

For the anarcho-syndicalist unions, workers' education had to be the antithesis of the education that was offered by capitalist and state systems. The working class needed to contest the monopoly the state and capitalism had over education and do so in a way that was democratic and did not contain any of the oppressive pedagogy of state, religious and capitalist schools. Without the working class developing its own education that was in its own class interests, revolution would not and could not be possible. Such education had to develop revolutionary class consciousness, it had to unmask the enemy in terms of the capitalist and state systems, and it had to build self-organisation but, most importantly, it had to do so in new and different ways. Anarchist education had to reflect the principles of participatory democracy envisaged for and essential to the new society.

Using democratic, participatory learning, another key component of anarchist education was to prepare the working class to run a post-revolutionary libertarian-communist society based on worker self-management and direct democracy without a state. Skills development – including very practical skills such as trades, accounting, and

sciences– were therefore a key component of education in anarcho-syndicalist unions and this form of skills development was seen as revolutionary in itself.

Anarchist education is necessarily non-hierarchical and based on attempting to break down the culture of 'great leaders' to engender a genuine egalitarianism and support critical thinking amongst workers

and the broader working class, which was seen as a prerequisite for any genuine revolution. As the Italian anarchist Enrico Malatesta put it: "only those that wish to dominate prefer sheep, the better to lead them. We prefer intelligent workers, even if they are our opponents, to anarchists who are such only in order to follow us like sheep. We want freedom for everybody; we want the masses to make the revolution for the masses. The person who thinks with their own brain is to be preferred to one who blindly approves everything. Better an error consciously committed and in good faith, than a good act performed in a servile manner."

THE LEGACY OF ANARCHIST/ SYNDICALIST EDUCATION

Anarcho-syndicalist unions, such as the CNT and IWW, continue to exist today and still practise non-hierarchical education with the aim of building class consciousness, working-class counter-culture and counter-power.

Although the anarcho-syndicalist unions have declined, new movements – including those that are undertaking the Kurdish liberation struggle – have become influenced by anarchism since the 2000s. Like the anarcho-syndicalist unions they conduct anti-hierarchical revolutionary self-education with the aim of furthering critical thinking amongst activists. This pedagogy has made a massive contribution to the current experiment underway in Rojava in Northern Syria to create a new stateless society based on libertarian socialism and feminism. The reality is that because anarchist education was born in the struggle of the oppressed, it continues to have relevance and is at the heart of the struggle for a new equal society today in places such as Rojava. ¹⁸

Shawn Hattingh is from the International Labour Research and Information Group and Mandy Moussouris writes in her personal capacity.