

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 direct industrial action and revolutionary trade union struggle, were to emerge as either existing unions were won over to syndicalist principles in whole or in part, or new alternative revolutionary unions and organizations 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 (SS&WCM), 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 (Portugal, Germany, Holland), Scandinavia (Sweden and Norway), and Latin America (Argentina, Mexico and Chile), as well as in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Russia, amongst other countries.

Introduction

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-organization 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 organizations 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 organizational 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

¹ K. Marx, *The First International and After* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 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, Scolar Press, 1990), p. 1.

Introduction

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, a revolution made 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 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 twenty 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

³ E. Hobsbawm, 'Bolshevism and the Anarchists', in E. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London: Abacus, 1993), pp. 72-3.

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 organizations in most countries. There was only one important exception: a mass following was retained by anarcho-syndicalism in Spain during the Civil War of 1936-9. 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 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 organization, 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 revolutionary syndicalist movement, the French CGT actually described their movement as *syndicalisme revolutionnaire*. 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

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

⁵ R. Price, 'Contextualising British Syndicalism c.1907-c.1920', *Labour History Review*, vol. 63, no. 3, (1998), pp. 261-76; D. Howell, 'Taking Syndicalism Seriously', *Socialist History*, no. 16, (2000), pp. 27-48.

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

Introduction

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 (organized 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 previous ideas with a considerable amount of reformist activity and collaboration with the war effort, although there remained a sizeable revolutionary wing inside the union. 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, organizations and/or 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 collectivized 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 Peterson⁹ 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. 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’ (United States), ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ (Spain and Italy), and ‘Larkinism’ (Ireland). And although an *international* phenomenon that

⁷ As Joseph White has pointed out, based as it was on the assumption that the conflict of interests between workers and capitalists was absolute and irreconcilable, syndicalist theory was perforce committed to revolution and a ‘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), ‘Syndicalism in a Mature Industrial Setting: The Case of Britain’, in van der Linden and Thorpe (eds.), *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, p. 111.

⁸ F. F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of Its Time* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 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: Temple University Press, 1983), pp. 64-6.

Introduction

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 organizational differences and the variety of labels they used to describe themselves. For example, few of the leaders of the IWW in America called themselves 'syndicalists'; most, in fact, preferred the term 'industrial unionist'. Those calling themselves syndicalists were mostly competitors to the IWW, urging affiliation of radicals with the mainstream unions rather than building a separate revolutionary union. And 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 organizational form from those in both 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 organizational forms adopted by individual syndicalist movements, and the terms which they used to describe themselves,

¹⁰ J. R. Conlin, *Bread and Roses Too: Studies of the Wobblies* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1969). In broad terms, the IWW is often assumed to have differed from European syndicalists in at least three important respects. First, the IWW favoured 'dual unionism' in opposition to the established American Federation of Labor (AFL), whereas their continental counterparts worked within and controlled many established unions (the strategy advocated by American 'syndicalist' supporters). Second, it supported industrial unionism whereas the European syndicalists worked within local craft unions. Third, it had a more centralist form of organization compared with the continental syndicalist tradition of decentralization and local autonomy. In fact, as we shall see, there were significant qualifications to this simplified picture of differential models of revolutionary unionism.

¹¹ M. Dubofsky, 'The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism in the United States', in van der Linden and Thorpe (eds.), *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 207-10. A number of other historians have also used the term 'syndicalism' to describe the IWW, including J. G. Brooks, P. F. Brissendon, P. Renshaw, and F. Shaw.

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: International Publishers, 1965), p. 158.

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

¹⁴ E. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork University Press, 1988), p. xvii.

Introduction

or have subsequently had pinned on them, are of less importance than the essential underlying nature of the movements which 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 Seguí extended from the foundation of the CNT’s parent organization *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 only 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.

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 organizational 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 varied 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 relations to its more diffuse expression outside of formal organizational boundaries, notably within the leadership of the wartime British shop stewards’ movement where most of the attributes of the pre-war syndicalist tradition – notably the repudiation of ‘leadership’ and ‘politics’ and emphasis on workers’ self-activity and industrial unionism – were carried over and displayed.

¹⁵ Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France*, p. 1 [emphasis added].

¹⁶ M. van der Linden, ‘Second Thoughts on Revolutionary Syndicalism’, *Labour History Review*, vol. 63, no. 2, (1998), p. 183.

Existing Literature and Debates

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 much explorative, and leave many questions unanswered or not even 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 to syndicalist movements?
- Did the residual strength of syndicalism lie with artisans, agricultural workers, casual labourers and other groups of economically marginalized, often unskilled and unorganized 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 organization on craft lines?
- To what degree did they reject central leadership in favour of decentralization 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, marginalized 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 Marxism that

¹⁷ Peterson, 'The One Big Union'; W. Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves': Revolutionary Syndicalism and International Labour, 1913-1923*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); van der Linden and Thorpe, 'The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism'; van der Linden, 'Second Thoughts', pp. 182-96; D. Howell, 'Taking Syndicalism Seriously', *Socialist History*, 16, (2000), pp. 27-48.

Introduction

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 often 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. And the overall strengths, as well as notable weaknesses, of the alternative Bolshevik and communist tradition are 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 organizational heritage was critically

Introduction

explored and 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 organization, spontaneity and leadership, centralization and decentralization, 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.

This raises a third limitation of virtually all the existing literature on syndicalism, namely the way it treats the phenomena as if it was merely of historical curiosity, essentially a transitional form of labour movement activity related to an early stage of capitalist development, a unique and desperate response to specific conditions that prevailed briefly in the early twentieth century.¹⁸ However, arguably its ideas and practices have re-emerged in recent years, albeit in somewhat revised form, within sections of the workers' movement across the world. For example, evidence of such 'quasi-syndicalist' trends could be found in the black workers' movement in America in the late 1960s, within the 'workerist' movement in Italy during the early 1970s, the Solidarity trade union movement in Poland between 1980-81, the Congress of South African Trade Unions in South Africa and among sections of the Russian and French workers' movements in the 1990s.

The syndicalist movement's distinctive ideological and political influence can even be seen, albeit in diffuse form, within the contemporary global justice movement of opposition to neo-liberalism in different parts of the world. While this 21st century social movement (or 'movement of movements') might appear at first glance to be worlds away from the challenge mounted by syndicalists at the beginning of the twentieth century there are several real and important parallels that connect these different movements, notably in terms of the ideas and practices advocated by some of the global justice movement's most popular writers.¹⁹ For example, the *issues at stake*: such as anti-capitalism and the demand for popular democratic control over society; *the methods*: the primacy of 'direct action' (outside of mainstream political channels) as a means of changing the world from below; and *organizational forms*: such as decentralization, 'autonomism' from political parties and rejection of leadership.

Therefore, as well as an examination of the high tide of the 'classical' international syndicalist movement the book also briefly considers its more

¹⁸ E. Shorter and C. Tilly, *Strikes in France 1830-1968*, (Cambridge, 1974), p. 75; B. Holton, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism and the British Labour Movement' in J. Mommsen and H. Husang eds, *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany 1880-1914*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 281.

¹⁹ See J. Holloway, *Change the World Without Taking Power* (London, Pluto Press, 2002) and M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Sage of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004). The ideas of these writers are held, for example in Italy within *Tute bianche* and *diobbedienti*, two non-violent autonomist movements that stress direct action.

contemporary variations and the factors that have given rise to such ‘quasi-syndicalist’ developments.

Research Approach

It would be invidious to pretend to offer here a completely impartial evaluation of the revolutionary syndicalist movement’s origins, growth and decline; in reality political judgments cannot be avoided in the writing of history given that the nature of all knowledge is perspectival; ‘a fact is only ever a fact within a specific framework of description’²⁰ Thus it needs to be stated from the outset, the analysis and assessment of syndicalism that is provided here derives from a revolutionary Marxist approach (within the tradition of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg, Gramsci, and the early congresses of the Communist International). On the one hand, such a theoretical and analytical framework inevitably means it is sympathetic to the revolutionary aspirations and militant activities of the syndicalists. On the other hand, 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. Trotsky’s answer to objections of a lack of ‘impartiality’ in his writings on the Russian Revolution is pertinent to my own research:

The serious and critical reader will not want a treacherous impartiality, which offers him a cup of conciliation with a well-settled poison of reactionary hate at the bottom, but a scientific conscientiousness, which for its sympathies and antipathies – open and disguised – seeks support in an honest study of the facts, a determination of their real connections, an exposure of the casual laws of their movement. That is the only possible historic objectivity, and moreover, it is amply sufficient, for it is verified and tested not by the good intentions of the historian, for which only he himself can vouch, but by the natural laws revealed to him of the historic process itself.²¹

Significantly, in recent years there has been a justifiable dismissal of so-called counterfactual history which, often with a right-wing political agenda, engages in a form of imaginary wishful thinking about implausible (but what are seen to be preferable) opposite courses of events to those that actually occurred in the past.²² But this does not necessarily invalidate a methodological form of inquiry that recognizes every historical situation contains potential ‘what-ifs’; that acknowledges that it is possible to conceive of ways in which the actual course of events might have unfolded rather differently, armed with a different set of capacities and ideas, even if their exact effect cannot be predicted. What might be termed *alterfactual* historical inquiry is perfectly legitimate – unlike the

²⁰ S. Berger, ‘Comparative History’ in S. Berger, H. Feldner and K. Passmore (eds.), *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (London: Arnold, 2003), p. 164. See also E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961).

²¹ L. Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 21.

²² For some recent examples of right-wing counterfactual histories see: R. Cowley (ed.), *What If? America: Eminent Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (London: Pan, 2001); N. Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Pan, 2003); A. Roberts (ed.), *What Might Have Been: Imagining History on Twelve ‘What Ifs’* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2004).

Introduction

counterfactual – so long as only those alternative course of action which were actually posed at the time and for which there is some historical evidence are considered.²³ Adopting this approach, the book attempts to avoid the charge of unfairly judging the past through the eyes of some preferred Marxist viewpoint by explicit recognition of the complex dynamic interplay between the choices and opportunities faced by syndicalists and the actual historical material and ideological context in which they found themselves. It will be up to the reader to judge how far this criterion has been met.

The study that is presented here 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 partly, 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 organizations 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 organizational forms (including unions, union confederations and propaganda organizations, as well as syndicalist-influenced leadership within broader movements) and strategic approaches (including 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.²⁴

There is no attempt to narrate detailed chronological histories of each of these respective movements; many such accounts can be found elsewhere. Instead, there is an international comparative analysis of the essential dynamics of the movements,

²³ See R. Darlington, 'There is No Alternative: Exploring the Options in the 1984-5 Miners' Strike', *Capital and Class*, no. 87 (2005), pp. 71-95, and 'In Defence of the *Alterfactual* in Historical Analysis', *Socialist History*, no. 29 (2006), pp. 76-88.

²⁴ 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. Unlike other countries, the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany (which despite a formal Marxist commitment to revolution was preoccupied with pressure for reform within capitalism) was a genuinely mass party. Its vote grew from election to election; it achieved a membership of a million and ran 90 local daily papers. Its network of ancillary organizations (unions, welfare societies, cycling clubs, etc) became part of the fabric of people's lives in many industrial districts. In a country in which the general level of workers' struggle was below the European average, the SPD successfully channeled workers' grievances into political directions (attracting 4.25 million votes in 1912). Powerful union officials with control over union funds ensured the strike weapon was only used in a highly centralized, organized and official basis. Only during the war and immediately afterwards, amidst a revolutionary wave of workers' struggles encouraged by the events in Russia, was German syndicalism transformed into a mass movement. See H. M. Bock, 'Anarchosyndicalism in the German Labour Movement: A Rediscovered Minority Tradition', in van der Linden and Thorpe (eds) *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 59-79 and D. H. Muller, 'Syndicalism and Localism in the German Trade Union Movement', in W. J. Mommsen and H-G. Husung, *The Development of Trade Unionism in Great Britain and Germany, 1880-1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 239-49.

Introduction

concentrating attention on their philosophy, origins, organizational features, influence and demise. Given such a wide-ranging perspective, the study has inevitably primarily drawn from the extensive range of existing secondary literature, including single-country studies on individual syndicalist organizations and the broader labour movements in which they flourished, as well as (where available) comparative overviews on some of the countries concerned. But in addition to providing a synthesis of other historians' work from such a wide range of sources, and often engaging in a critical engagement with the perspectives that have previously been presented, the study is also based on archival research. This includes the writings of syndicalists (and other contemporary commentators) contained in numerous newspapers, pamphlets, and books, as well as other material, such as congress declarations and proceedings. In both cases a good deal of foreign language material has been translated in English.

Methodology

There are inevitably a number of methodological assumptions on which such a wide-ranging study has been pivoted. First, it attempts to be sensitive to the fact that syndicalist trade unions, like all trade unions generally, were *contested* organizations that had conflicting views about underlying purpose, appropriate forms of action and desirable patterns of internal relations. Second, such organizations are not viewed as *fixed entities* but, on the contrary, fluid in character, dynamic by nature and, therefore, complex and (sometimes contradictory) in practice. Third, whilst focused principally on the dynamics of *syndicalist movements* (their organization, leadership, ideas, and activity), there is an attempt to provide (within the inevitable limits of any comparative project) contextualisation in terms of the broader national *working class movements and struggles* from which they arose and developed. Fourth, there is some consideration of the strategies of those actors who were the principal *antagonists* of syndicalism - notably employers, the state, and reformist labour bodies. Fifth, (following from what has already been indicated above) there is an overarching effort to examine the interplay between structure and agency: to integrate the *objective context* (the overall material social, economic and political environmental and the historical contingencies that shaped and contained what could be achieved) with the *subjective experience* of the syndicalist movements themselves (their constructive engagement as actors in the processes of collective mobilisation and strategic choices that were involved). Although such aspirations for a 'total history' may seem like an impossibly tall order, this study makes every effort to take such multidimensional factors into account so far as this is feasible.²⁵

It has long been pointed out that many general histories of trade union and labour organizations have tended to concentrate attention purely on intellectual and ideological debates, the lives of the great political 'leaders', or on 'institutional' developments which appear to be mechanically motivated and controlled by ideology and central-policy

²⁵ A. Callinicos, 'Marxism and the Crisis in Social History', in J. Rees (ed.), *Essays on Historical Materialism* (London: Bookmarks, 1998), pp. 36-7.

Introduction

making administration.²⁶ As a result, the lives and work experience of those who actually formed the rank-and-file membership of such bodies are effectively ignored, with members only appearing as ‘aggregate numbers’ attesting to the significance or insignificance of an institution or the effectiveness of a strike.²⁷ This study attempts, in so far as it is possible, to avoid such pitfalls. In particular it devotes some attention to the role of activist leadership in mobilizing support for syndicalism and to the problematic relationship that sometimes existed between national leaders and sections of the rank-and-file membership. However, the sheer breadth of coverage involved in such an international comparative project, as well as the paucity of empirical evidence available, has necessarily precluded any *detailed* attention to the lives, organization or activities of the ordinary men and (to a much lesser extent) women supporters of syndicalism on the ground (although it draws, where possible, on existing work).

The *comparative* dimension of this study also has its dilemmas.²⁸ As Jürgen Kocka²⁹ has explained, because comparison of two objects of study can only be done effectively when *specific* aspects are compared, rather than each object as a whole, comparative history is even more influenced by the researcher’s standpoint – that is dependent on theory, abstraction, generalization and selection – than is historical research in general. But this easily conflicts with the demand for contextualization, something which historians on the whole prefer to avoid. As a consequence, most comparisons tend to deal with two or at most three cases. Yet even then there is the danger that far from broadening our understanding, national comparisons may simply serve to reinforce well-worn stereotypes, not least because of the artificial image that ‘national aggregates’ can suggest with the potential distortion of local realities (for example, in countries like Spain and Italy where conditions can vary greatly in different geographical regions of the country).³⁰ In addition, as James Cronin³¹ has argued, there is the danger of applying overarching theories about developments, assuming a common set of social and economic processes interacting to produce broadly similar outcomes across countries. Such universalizing assumptions can sometimes neglect entirely certain aspects of the diverse trajectories of national labour movements. But arguably, despite all these formidable dilemmas, the task of cross-national comparison is all the more necessary if we are to attempt to understand the full dimensions and significance of syndicalism as an international phenomenon. All a researcher can do is to recognize the difficulties and dangers involved and attempt to navigate around them as best as possible.

²⁶ D. Geary, *European Labour Politics from 1910 to the Depression* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 4-5.

²⁷ J. R. Conlin (ed.), ‘Introduction’ in *At the Point of Production: The Local History of the IWW* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), pp. 5-6.

²⁸ For one significant contribution to the attributes and dilemmas of comparative, cross-national labour history see M. van der Linden, *Transnational Labour History: Explorations* (London: Ashgate, 2003).

²⁹ J. Kocka, ‘Comparative Historical Research: German Examples’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 38, part 3, (1993), pp. 369-79.

³⁰ J. A. Davies, ‘Socialism and the Working Classes in Italy Before 1914’, in D. Geary (ed.), *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914* (Oxford: Berg, 1989), p. 219.

³¹ J. Cronin, ‘Neither Exceptional nor Peculiar: Towards the Comparative Study of Labor in Advanced Society’, *International Review of Social History*, vol. 38, part 1, (1993), pp. 59-75.

Introduction

Otto Hintze has distinguished two aims for comparative history: 'One can compare to find a general pattern, which underlies the aspects compared; and one can compare to understand one of the aspects more clearly in its individuality and to set it off more sharply from the other'.³² In practice this study attempts to do both simultaneously, although with an emphasis more in the direction of the former than the latter. In other words, it makes the assumption that syndicalist movements in all the countries surveyed were moulded by the impact of capitalist restructuring combined with the inadequacies of existing reformist labour movement organizations the basis for the selected conceptual framework, and seeks to highlight the similarities and general patterns of social protest. But it also looks at the unique national features and variations into which the common base was transformed in relation to the trajectories of the syndicalist movements in different countries. Both concerns - international *similarities* and national *differences* (as well as *internal divisions* within individual countries) - are regarded as complimentary. It should be noted that even though comparative historians sometimes find the differences even more interesting than the similarities, such differences can only be meaningfully and accurately described and, where possible, explained on the basis of clearly identified similarities, which are reflected in the conceptual structure of the comparison. On the other hand, even if conceptual frameworks and generalisation unavoidably oversimplify, such comparison does not necessarily mean equating or levelling.³³ As Richard Hyman has suggested, it is still possible to 'attain a deeper and more sensitive understanding of differences in similarity and similarity in difference'.³⁴

Finally the question arises, given that syndicalism was a world-wide phenomenon with movements as far apart as South America, Scandinavia, and Australia, how far is it possible to generalize from the distinctive experiences of the six syndicalist movements that are featured in this study? Obviously there are important specificities that it would be mistaken to ignore, notably in terms of various material and ideological contextual factors, which would inevitably qualify any general picture on such a broader geographical canvas. Nonetheless, arguably this would not preclude a level of *analytical* generalisation being made about the general contours of syndicalist movements beyond this study. In this respect perhaps the six different movements examined here can serve as an exemplar of some important common dilemmas that were confronted by movements everywhere. In this respect, the overall themes are likely to be of much wider relevance, even if specific national conditions need to be constantly borne in mind.³⁵

³² O. Hintze, 'Soziologische undgeschichtliche Staatsauffassung' in *Soziologie und Geschichte. Gesammelte Abhandlungen* (Collected Works), vol. 2, (Göttingen, 1964), p. 251.

³³ Kocka, 'Comparative Historical Research', p. 377.

³⁴ R. Hyman, 'Trade Union Research and Cross-National Comparison', *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 7, no. 2, (2001), p. 210.

³⁵ By way of example of such common themes in countries not covered in this study, see E. Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1913* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1988), V. Burgmann, *Revolutionary Industrial Unionism: The Industrial Workers of the World in Australia* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), and L. van der Walt, "'The Industrial Union is the Embryo of the Socialist Commonwealth'", *The International Socialist League and Revolutionary Syndicalism in South Africa, 1915-1919*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1999), pp. 5-30. See also van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism* for chapters on syndicalist movements in the Netherlands, Sweden, Portugal, Argentina, Mexico and Canada, amongst other countries.

Book Structure

The book is structured on the following basis. Part One examines the dynamics of the different syndicalist movements, notably, its philosophy of action; the distinctive economic, social and political context in which such movements emerged; their social composition and organizational structure; the extent to which this form of trade union-based anti-capitalist revolt was influential and the reasons for its subsequent demise. Part Two examines the transition from syndicalism to communism made by some of the movement's most prominent figures. It does so in thematic fashion, exploring five specific, although interrelated, areas of tension between the two movements: namely, trade unionism under capitalism; the problem of the trade union bureaucracy; the relationship between economics and politics; the state and revolution; and the role of leadership and the revolutionary party. Finally, there is a brief consideration of more diffuse 'quasi-syndicalist' variations that have emerged in recent years in different labour movements across the world.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful for the assistance I received locating a wide source of material from staff at the Working Class Library in Salford (notably Alain Kahan), National Museum of Labour History in Manchester, British Museum Periodical Library in London, Walther P. Reuther Library in Detroit, and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. The study was financially assisted by small grants from the Lipman-Milliband Trust and British Academy (SG-34667) which enabled a good deal of material to be translated into English. I would also like to extend my thanks to a number of individuals who read various drafts of conference papers, individual book chapters or the whole manuscript and offered their insightful comments, including David Beale, Ian Birchall, John Dobson, Rick Halpern, Helge Hoel, Steve Jefferys, John Kelly, Dave Lyddon, Al Rainnie, Martin Smith and Martin Upchurch.

The book could not have been written without the unstinting love and support of my partner Carol McFarlane and is dedicated to my gorgeous baby daughter Saskia.