

## **Syndicalism and the Influence of Anarchism in France, Italy and Spain**

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### **Abstract**

Following the Leninist line, a commonly held assumption is that anarchism as a revolutionary movement tends to emerge in politically, socially and economically underdeveloped regions and that its appeal lies with the economically marginalised lumpenproletariat and landless peasantry. This article critically explores this assumption through a comparative analysis of the development and influence of anarchist ideology and organisation in syndicalist movements in France, Spain and Italy and its legacy in discourses surrounding the nature of political authority and accountability.

**Keywords:** syndicalism, anarcho-syndicalism, revolution, unionism, France, Spain, Italy.

### **Introduction**

Many historians have emphasised the extent to which revolutionary syndicalism was indebted to anarchist philosophy in general and to Bakunin in particular, with some

even using the term ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ to describe the movement.<sup>1</sup> Certainly within the French, Italian and Spanish syndicalist movements anarchists or so-called ‘anarcho-syndicalists’ were able to gain significant, albeit variable, influence. They were to be responsible in part for the respective movements’ rejection of political parties, elections and parliament in favour of direct action by the unions, as well as their conception of a future society in which, instead of a political state apparatus, the only form of government would be the economic administration of industry exercised directly by the workers themselves. Other features of the syndicalist movements in these three countries, such as federalism, anti-clericalism and anti-militarism, were also profoundly influenced by specifically anarchist ideas and organisation.<sup>2</sup> However if Marxism was a convergence of German philosophy, British political economy and French socialism,<sup>3</sup> the traditional assumption, by contrast, that syndicalism was simply an outgrowth of anarchism would be an over-simplification even though the two were certainly directly related inside the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) in France, the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (USI) in Italy and the *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT) in Spain. But in many other countries where syndicalist movements also flourished (for example, Britain, Ireland or America), anarchist influence was only of marginal consequence.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see L.L. Levine, *The Labour Movement in France* (Columbia University Press, 1912) and R. Hunter, *Violence and the Labour Movement* (Arno Press, 1969).

<sup>2</sup> Other countries in which anarchists exercised real influence within syndicalist movements included Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Holland and Portugal, but these countries fall outside the remit of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> See V. I. Lenin, ‘The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism’, *Selected Works, Vol. 1* (Moscow, 1970), pp. 66-67.

After a brief clarification of the terms ‘syndicalism’ and ‘anarcho-syndicalism’, this article outlines the development of anarchist ideological and organisational influence within the syndicalist movements in France, Italy and Spain, and considers some of the factors that encouraged the development of syndicalist movements and anarchist influence within them. It re-examines two common assumptions made about the relationship between syndicalism and anarchism, including: (a) the widely favoured explanation for the success of a distinctive ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ movement in Spain and Italy, and to a lesser extent France - namely that it was a logical consequence of these countries’ social and economic backwardness; and (b) the common perception that the residual strength of syndicalism (including its anarcho-syndicalist forms) lay not with the industrial working class, but with economically marginalised, often unskilled and unorganised, workers. Finally the article provides evidence to suggest that if the development of revolutionary syndicalism was directly related to anarchist ideas and organisation, it was far from simply being an anarchist invention and it is important not to conflate the one into the other.<sup>4</sup>

### **Defining Terms**

There is often a great deal of misunderstanding about the meaning of the terms ‘syndicalism’ and ‘anarcho-syndicalism’, with both terms often used interchangeably

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<sup>4</sup> The paper draws extensively, but further develops, arguments outlined in R. Darlington, *Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism: An International Comparative Analysis* (Aldershot, 2008) and ‘Revolutionary Syndicalist Opposition to the First World War: A Comparative Reassessment’, *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire*, 84:4 (2006), pp. 983-1003.

by some commentators. One useful description of the term 'syndicalism' has been provided by Wayne Thorpe:

[It]...refers to those trade union organisations that shared a number of characteristics: they viewed class conflict as inevitable under capitalism; they espoused not only short-term goals but also long-term revolutionary objectives, especially the inauguration of a collectivised, worker-managed socio-economic order. They differed from their social democratic counterparts above all in that they considered the decisive agency of workers' action to be the revolutionary trade union, which united workers as workers, unlike political parties, which grouped multi-class supporters only as voters. They were extra-parliamentary, advocating direct action by organised unions over indirect, mediated action through the political process, and they deemed the general strike to be the ultimate revolutionary weapon as well as labour's most effective means of combating capitalist wars.<sup>5</sup>

But arguably we can define syndicalism in a rather simpler and broader 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

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<sup>5</sup> W. Thorpe, 'The European Syndicalists and War, 1914-1918', *Contemporary European History*, vol. 10, 2001, p. 2.

establishing a society based upon unions.<sup>6</sup> 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 collectivised worker-managed socio-economic order to be run by unions (as opposed to political parties or the state).

Of course, it is true that despite formal *revolutionary* declarations by the CGT during the first decade of the century, a minority of union members (organised 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 *Confédération*. Nonetheless, despite the existence of such internal tensions and variations in emphasis over time within specific movements in France as in other countries, the term ‘syndicalism’ can generally be understood to refer to movements, organisations and/or minority groups that were committed to *revolutionary* objectives.<sup>7</sup>

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 Peterson 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

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<sup>6</sup> F. F. Ridley, *Revolutionary Syndicalism in France: The Direct Action of Its Time* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> ‘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.

revolutionary industrial unionism.<sup>8</sup> 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’ (America) and ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ (Spain and Italy). Although it was an *international* phenomenon that 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.

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. For example, few of the leaders of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in America called themselves ‘syndicalists’; in fact most preferred the term ‘industrial unionist’. But as Melvyn Dubofsky has persuasively argued, an examination of the language used in IWW newspapers, pamphlets, books, and speeches, 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.<sup>9</sup> In other words the specific strategic approach and organisational forms adopted by individual syndicalist movements, and the variety of labels which they used to describe themselves, or have subsequently had pinned on them, are of less importance than the essential underlying

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<sup>8</sup> 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, 1983), pp. 64-6.

<sup>9</sup> M. Dubofsky, ‘The Rise and Fall of Revolutionary Syndicalism in the United States’, in van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 207-10. A number of other historians have also used the term ‘syndicalism’ to describe the IWW, including John Graham Brooks, Paul F. Brissendon, David J. Saposs and Patrick Renshaw.

nature of the movements that they had in common. We should also note that any one of the supposedly more nationally-specific terms, such as ‘anarcho-syndicalism’, are themselves somewhat problematic given the changes in leadership and direction that tended to occur over time within individual movements. Thus any attempt to substitute the broad term ‘syndicalism’ with a more defined term, by no means necessarily clarifies our understanding (at least outside of context and time period) 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’.<sup>10</sup> 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 organisational and shopfloor levels.<sup>11</sup> However, whilst the broad term ‘syndicalism’ is used in this article to refer to the varied movements that existed in France, Italy and Spain, there is also an attempt to remain sensitive not only to the considerable variations that existed between (and within) such individual movements at any one time, but also to the fact that all three movements, were undoubtedly, compared with some other syndicalist movements in other countries, significantly influenced by *anarchist* philosophy and practice, and contained more or less distinct groups of anarchists or ‘anarcho-syndicalists’ who struggled for ideological and organisational control of the movements as a whole (with varying degrees of success).

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<sup>10</sup> Ridley, p. 1 [emphasis added].

<sup>11</sup> M. van der Linden, ‘Second Thoughts on Revolutionary Syndicalism’, *Labour History Review*, 63:2 (1998), p. 183.

In this sense ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ can be defined as syndicalist ideas and activity infused with a heavy dose of anarchist colouration.

Even so it should be noted the ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ label to describe the syndicalist movement as a whole on an *international* scale was not actually widely used until the early 1920s. As Dave Berry has pointed out: ‘The term “anarcho-syndicalism” only came into wide use in 1921-1922 when it was applied polemically as a pejorative term by communists to any syndicalists ... who opposed increased control of syndicalism by the communist parties’.<sup>12</sup> Indeed the original statement of aims and principles of the International Working Men’s Association, set up as a syndicalist alternative to both the reformist International Federation of Trade unions and the communist-dominated Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), referred not to anarcho-syndicalism, but to revolutionary unionism or revolutionary syndicalism, depending on the translation. During the period prior to the First World War and the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, ‘revolutionary syndicalism’, as a broad ideological heading, had grouped different left-wing tendencies (of which anarchists were merely one element) together on a class basis around the principle of political neutrality and absolute independence from political parties (codified in France within the *Chartre d’Amiens*). But during 1920-22, amidst what became a conscious and determined attempt to win over the syndicalist movement *en masse* to the Bolshevik conception of the revolutionary process, via the Communist International and its trade union arm RILU, the term ‘anarcho-syndicalism’ tended to be increasingly deployed. It was a reflection of the increasing gap that was to emerge between communists and their sympathizers inside the syndicalist movement and the new communist parties who were loyal to Moscow, on the one hand, and those revolutionary unionists who

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<sup>12</sup> D. Berry, *A History of the French Anarchist Movement 1917-1945* (Greenwood, 2008) [page reference](#)



shifted towards a more politically doctrinaire and anarchist-influenced version of syndicalism, on the other.

Significantly, during the early 1920s ‘anarcho-syndicalists’ within the syndicalist movement internationally took the lead in rejecting the primacy of the party over the unions and the Comintern over RILU implied by Leninism. They viewed the new communist parties that had emerged on the Bolshevik model not as an alternative to reformist socialist party politics but an extreme version of the political socialists’ stress on centralised political organisation and leadership; and they insisted on the need for local spontaneity and autonomy within a federalist structure. As a consequence ‘anarcho-syndicalists’ came out in full opposition to what they regarded as being a ‘Bolshevik dictatorship’ after learning of the persecution of Russian anarchists, the suppression of the soviets, and the rise of a new bureaucratic one-party state.

Therefore the CGT, USI and CNT can be understood to have been in all essentials revolutionary syndicalist movements, akin to the movements that sprang up in many other parts of the world. Nonetheless each of these three movements was also subject to significant anarchist influence, more so than in many other countries. As a result the syndicalist movements in which they operated helped to transform anarchism, for a time at least, from a tiny minority current into a cause with considerable mass support (even if many so-called ‘anarcho-syndicalists’ were probably sympathizers and fellow travellers rather than committed anarchists as such). This begs the question why did specifically ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ trends become influential in France, Italy and Spain, what were the underlying economic, social and political factors that contributed to such a development? But before considering this

question it is first necessary to trace the development of anarchist influence within each of the three syndicalist movements.

### **Anarchist Influence**

In France Fernand Pelloutier, who advocated an anarchist doctrine very similar to Proudhon's, was appointed secretary general of the *Fédération des Bourses du Travail* in 1895 and inspired the movement with a particular kind of anarchist idealism. He aimed to make the *Bourses* federation the embryo of a future reorganisation of society based on workers' control of industry, in the process replacing political forms of government. Such ideas laid the foundation stone of the CGT that subsequently emerged.<sup>13</sup> Such developments were encouraged by the way anarchists increasingly rejected the ineffective tactic of 'propaganda by the deed' – acts of assassination of political leaders and terrorism of the bourgeoisie – and began to look instead to the trade unions as a potential base for support. Thus Pelloutier advocated anarchists penetrated the trade unions so that they could be transformed into revolutionary organisations which could counter-balance and destroy the evil influence of the social-democratic politicians. He linked the trade unions to the libertarian communist society which remained the ultimate objective of the anarchists.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Emile Pouget, editor of the most famous of the French

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<sup>13</sup> See Ridley; B. Mitchell, 'French Syndicalism: An Experiment in Practical Anarchism', in van der Linden and Thorpe (eds) *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 25-43; J. Jennings, *Syndicalism in France: A Study of Ideas*, (London, 1990), pp. 25-43.

<sup>14</sup> D. Guérin, *Anarchism: from theory to practice*, (London, 1970) [page reference](#), A. *The Spanish Civil War*, (Stanford, Ca., 1974), p. 78.

anarchist papers published in Paris, called on French anarchists to enter and revolutionise the *syndicats*.

At the International Anarchist Congress of 1907 Pierre Monatte made the connection between anarchism and the new syndicalism explicit: ‘Syndicalism...opens to anarchism, which for too long has been turned in on itself, new perspectives and experiences’. On the one hand syndicalism ‘has recalled anarchism to the awareness of its working class origins; on the other hand, the anarchists have contributed not a little towards putting the working class movement onto the path of revolution and to popularising the idea of direct action’.<sup>15</sup> After a lively debate, this congress adopted a compromise resolution which opened with the following statement of principle: ‘This International Anarchist Congress sees the trade unions both as combat unions in the class struggle for better working conditions, and as associations of producers which can serve to transform capitalist society into an anarcho-communist society’.<sup>16</sup>

Many French anarchists joined the unions and were quick to see the new possibilities for the spread of their ideas. Pouget later became assistant secretary of the CGT, the main editor of the union’s paper *La Voix du peuple* and one of the leading theoreticians of the syndicalist movement. Other anarchists also took leading positions within the Confédération, including Georges Yvetot (secretary of the *Bourses* section from 1901-18) and Paul Delesalle (*Bourses* assistant secretary from 1898-1918). It was the anarchists who led the attack on the Socialist Party and political action in the CGT, and who were largely responsible for its rejection of parties, elections and parliament in favour of direct action by the unions. They

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<sup>15</sup> James Joll, *The Anarchists*, (London, 1964), p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> *op. cit.*, p. 79. which citation? – if Joll *ibid.*

reached the peak of their influence in the years during 1902 to 1908 (although always a minority element in the organisation as a whole), and remained an important minority faction opposed to the moderate leadership of the union until 1925.

Anarchists in other countries also entered the labour movement in increasing numbers, with even more success than in France. In Italy anarcho-syndicalism became a potent force after the Russian anarchist Bakunin had arrived in the country in the late 1860s and won support amongst all but two of the three hundred branches of the First International.<sup>17</sup> The acknowledged leader of Italian anarchism was Errico Malatesta, who became an almost legendary figure for his advocacy of revolutionary action by the trade unions to establish a 'society without authority'.<sup>18</sup> Such ideas quickly gained a mass following and when the USI was founded in 1912 by dissident syndicalists who had broken with the socialist CGL **CGIL?** the anarchists agreed to join the new organisation and seized the opportunity to build a base for the revolution.

Despite its acknowledged influence in Italy, as a movement of dues-paying members anarchism was fairly modest in size. At its peak of pre-war activity, on the eve of the 'Red Week' general strike of June 1914, the anarchists numbered no more than 8,000, and in 1919-20 the most generous estimate would place membership between 20,000 and 30,000. But after the foundation of the *Unione Sindicale* in 1912 and the victory of the anti-war faction inside the USI in 1916, the anarchist Armando Borghi took over the leadership of the *Unione* and anarchists played a leading role as organisers at the base.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> D. L. Horowitz, *The Italian Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 129.

<sup>18</sup> See V. Richards (ed.), *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, (London, 1977) **p. ref**

<sup>19</sup> See C. Levy, 'Italian Anarchism, 1870-1926', in D. Goodway (ed.), *For Anarchism: History, Theory and Practice* (London, 1989), pp. 25-78; C.L. Bertrand, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism in Italy', in van der Linden and

But the connection between anarchism and syndicalism was undoubtedly most complete and most successful in Spain, where for a long time the anarchists remained the most numerous and powerful in the world.<sup>20</sup> In 1868 an Italian disciple of Bakunin, Giuseppe Fanelli, had visited Barcelona and Madrid, where he established branches of the Bakuninist wing of the First International. By 1877 there were 60,000 members, organised mainly in working men's associations. Although the anarchist movement was driven underground in 1874, it continued to flourish amongst both factory workers in the Catalan region and landless labourers in the south who became involved in spontaneous, violent and insurrectionary general strikes and rural revolts. As in France, Spanish anarchists recommended their supporters to join trade unions and take a forceful role in their activities and direction: 'It was in this way that the "trabazón", the close connection between the labour union and the "specific anarchist" group – as the leading force of the former – came into being'.<sup>21</sup>

The CNT's establishment in 1911 and organisation's subsequent development combined *syndicalist* principles of revolutionary unionism with the more traditional Spanish *anarchist* principles, of federalism, anti-clericalism, anti-militarism and a deep hostility to all political parties and governments. The decentralised structure of CNT organisation provided the context for a Bakunin-type semi-secret society of

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Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 139-53; G. Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth, 1979).

<sup>20</sup> See Meaker, M. Bookchin, *To Remember Spain: The Anarchist and Syndicalist Revolution of 1936*, (Edinburgh, 1994); S. Dolgoff (ed.), *Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in Spain 1936-9*, (Montreal, 1990); Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years 1868-1936*, (Edinburgh, 1998); Durgan, pp. 93-112; A. Bar, 'The CNT: The Glory and Tragedy of Spanish Anarchosyndicalism', in van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 119-38; R. Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War: Vols. 1 and 2*, (London, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> Bar, p. 124.

‘invisible pilots’ who aimed to direct the revolution. Thus, in 1927 when the anarchists thought they might lose control of the CNT to a reformist trend, they established the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), determined to ‘keep an anarchist soul in a syndicalist body’.<sup>22</sup> Although by no means a politically homogeneous organisation, the FAI was united in the pursuit of a set of common goals to inspire and guide the CNT and the affinity groups were viewed as the basis for a vanguard movement avowedly dedicated to the achievement of ‘libertarian communism’.

Most writers on the Spanish labour movement seem to concur in the view that, with the departure of the moderate syndicalists in the early 1930s, the CNT fell under the complete domination of the FAI, effectively becoming an *anarcho-syndicalist* body. Certainly the FAI quickly established an ascendancy over the CNT so that a very small anarchist minority held all its important posts and dominated its bureaux and committees. While it was never able to completely rid the CNT of reformist elements, it gained a considerable following within the *Confederación*. It has been estimated that from 1934 to 1936 membership was around 10,000 and at its height in the Civil War about 30,000.<sup>23</sup> As David Miller has commented: ‘We can see in Spain the unique spectacle of a mass trade union movement being led along the revolutionary path by a minority of conscious anarchists – the original anarcho-syndicalist strategy came to fruition’.<sup>24</sup> The CNT became one of the few mass syndicalist organisations to survive the First World War and Russian Revolution, and with the fall of the monarchy and advent of the Second Republic in 1931 the more radical anarchist militants from the FAI saw their influence grow rapidly. By 1933

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<sup>22</sup> R. Carr, *The Civil War in Spain 1936-39* (London, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>23</sup> First figure from G. Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 184; second figure from Bookchin, *To Remember Spain*, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> D. Miller, *Anarchism*, (London, 1984), p. 137.

the anarcho-syndicalists effectively controlled the CNT and were subsequently to be put to a decisive test during the Civil War.

Before examining the limits of, and tensions between, the relationship between syndicalism and anarchism, it is important to consider the contextual factors that contributed to the growth and development of such movements and trends.

### **Context of Development**

Whilst it is commonly assumed the origins of syndicalism (and its distinctive anarcho-syndicalist-influenced forms in Spain and Italy and to a lesser extent France) lay in the birth pangs of a locally weak capitalism at the beginning of its industrial development,<sup>25</sup> there are conflicting interpretations of the way in which this impacted and its significance relative to other factors. Certainly in France the CGT emerged in a country in which economic modernisation had proceeded only slowly and large-scale industrialisation had lagged behind that of Britain, Germany or America. Despite the fact the pace of change quickened from 1871 to 1914, small and medium sized workshops continued to play a prominent role in production and to exist alongside rarer, geographically concentrated, more highly-industrialized enterprises. As late as 1906, workshops employing less than ten workers still employed one third of the industrial labour force; 59 per cent of all industrial workers worked in

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<sup>25</sup> For example see E. J. Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels, Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Manchester, 1972), pp. 74-92.

establishments of fewer than 100 employees, with only 12 per cent employed in plants of more than 1,000.<sup>26</sup>

Bernard Moss has argued that it was this 'exceptional' French economic development which created the conditions under which important sections of the relatively large semi-artisanal skilled workforce, faced with the growing threat of mechanisation, de-skilling and the absorption into the factory system, were encouraged towards distinctive syndicalist forms of 'trade socialism' based upon decentralisation and producers' control.<sup>27</sup> Likewise the relative absence of large powerful unions encouraged the endorsement of the methods of militant direct action extolled and embraced in syndicalist doctrine.<sup>28</sup>

However, there are a number of studies that counter the view that the origins of French syndicalism lie mainly with the backwardness of capitalist economic development.<sup>29</sup> From this alternative perspective, the primary focus on 'artisanal'

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<sup>26</sup> W. Kendall, *The Labour Movement in Europe* (London, 1975), p. 36; R. Magraw, *France 1814-1915: The Bourgeois Century* (Oxford, 1983), p. 233.

<sup>27</sup> B. Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement, 1830-1914: The Socialism of Skilled Workers*, (Berkeley, Calif., 1976), pp. 25-8.

<sup>28</sup> W. Thorpe, *The Workers Themselves: revolutionary syndicalism and international labour* (Dordrecht, 1990), p. 24; See also R. Magraw, 'Socialism, Syndicalism and French Labour Before 1914', in D. Geary (ed.), *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914*, (Oxford, 1989), pp. 48-100; R. Magraw, *A History of the French Working Class, Vol. 2: Workers and the Bourgeois Republic*, (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> See L. Berlanstein, *Big Business and Industrial Conflict in Nineteenth Century France: A Social History of the Parisian Gas Company*, (Berkeley, Calif., 1991) and 'The Distinctiveness of the Nineteenth Century French Labour Movement', *The Journal of Modern History*, 64: 4 (December 1992), pp. 660-685. See also A. Cotterau, 'The Distinctiveness of Working Class Cultures in France, 1848-1900', in I. Katznelson and A. Zolberg (eds.), *Working Class Formation: Nineteenth Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States* (Princeton, N.J., 1986), pp. 111-54 and T. Judt, *The French Labour Movement in the Nineteenth Century, Marxism and the French Left* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 24-114.



direct action on the shopfloor is misplaced given that French industry was not especially small in scale compared with some other European countries such as Spain and Italy. Although marked by uneven development, growth was particularly rapid in the decade after 1905, with the size of the industrial workforce increasing significantly. In practice, it is argued, French workers' predilection for direct action and syndicalism was encouraged less by their work experience or skill level than by their profound distrust of the reactionary bourgeois state and parliamentary democracy of the Third Republic, and the existing political organisations. Such distrust occurred within the context of a French revolutionary political tradition, grounded on the experience of the 1789 revolution, 1830 and 1848 revolts, and 1871 Paris Commune, which established a popular culture of change from below. It was as a consequence of this *political* situation that sections of workers (particularly but not exclusively the skilled), who were relatively powerful in the sphere of the relations of production but powerless in the political arena, were encouraged to rely primarily on their relative bargaining power resources on the job and their own informal co-operation as the essential means by which to develop class-based action.

Likewise in Spain, whilst syndicalist (particularly anarcho-syndicalist) ideas and methods of struggle appeared to fit the prevailing backward economic and industrial conditions, they were also encouraged by broader social and political factors. By the turn of the twentieth century Spain was still predominately an agricultural country at the beginning of its capitalist industrial development. For over a hundred years the country had been torn by civil war in the long and unsuccessful struggle to overthrow a semi-feudalist absolutist regime and consolidate a modern capitalist bourgeois state. Centrifugal tendencies were reinforced by the advance of industrial development in the north and north-eastern seaboard, which coincided with

a growth of local Basque and Catalan nationalism directed against an agrarian and centralist ruling class in Madrid. The country was effectively saddled with a politically weak commercial and manufacturing bourgeoisie and an absolute monarchy that relied on the twin pillars of the Catholic Church and aristocratic army officers to maintain itself in power. Chronic political instability, state repression and fierce employer opposition did not create suitable conditions for the development of 'normal' trade union practices. Instead, *syndicalist* principles of revolutionary unionism combined with *anarchist* notions (of federalism, regional autonomy and independence, anti-clericalism, anti-militarism and a deep hostility to all political parties) and fell on fertile soil during the key formative years of the trade union movement, in a context where the socialist movement was relatively very weak and where indigenous Marxist theory was undeveloped.

In Italy, another predominately agricultural country, an important underlying explanation for the appeal of syndicalism (and anarchism) has often assumed to have been the profound differences between north and south, between the highly capitalised modern industrial plant with its new factory proletariat in the so-called 'industrial triangle' formed by the northern cities of Milan, Genoa and Turin, on the one hand, and the semi-stagnant peasant and artisan economy in the agricultural south, on the other.<sup>30</sup> The appalling poverty of the south, perhaps the most terribly exploited industrial area in all Europe, involved conditions in which no stable trade union or socialist organisation could possibly exist. Labour revolts tended, to a great extent, to take the form of spontaneous hunger movements, which were more easily captured by

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<sup>30</sup> See J. A. Davies, 'Socialism and the Working Classes in Italy before 1914', in Geary, *Labour and Socialist Movements*, pp. 182-230; D. L. Horowitz, *The Italian Labor Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

anarchists than directed into the channels of organised reformist socialist agitation.<sup>31</sup> Nonetheless the subsequent development of a revolutionary syndicalist movement which (adopted part of the anarchist tradition, but linked it to a highly localised trade unionism with direct action tactics) pulled towards it a wide layer of agricultural labourers and artisan groups, as well as some industrial workers primarily from the north of the country not the south. Therefore again, as in other countries, socio-economic factors underpinning syndicalism's appeal can be seen to have combined with a variety of other factors, such as widespread alienation from existing political channels for redress and the perceived inadequate moderate methods of struggle of the Socialist Party-dominated trade unions.

By contrast, although it is beyond the scope of this article, we can note that the influence of anarchism within syndicalist movements was effectively absent in the equally less developed Ireland, and played a negligible role in the much more economically advanced Britain and America with their more firmly established and politically conservative labour movement organisations.<sup>32</sup> But although syndicalism as an international phenomenon was an expression of specific national circumstances there was one important common feature which created the propensity for syndicalist action and organisation on an international scale. Crucially during this period there was the weakness of firmly established institutionalised channels or organisational mechanisms that could encourage the attainment of social reform through more gradualist means. Such political mechanisms existed, but often were in embryonic stage and under the impact of profound social change and economic crisis were found

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<sup>31</sup> G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought: The Second International, 1889-1914: Part 1*, (London:, 1974), pp. 732-33.

<sup>32</sup> In Britain the one notable leading anarcho-syndicalist figure was Guy Bowman. See A. Meltzer, *First Flight: The Origins of Anarcho-Syndicalism in Britain* (Berkeley, Calif., 2004).

inadequate to satisfy the growing aspirations of many sections of newly radicalised workers. In other words, a precondition of growth, in all of these countries, was disillusionment with the ability of prevailing approaches to social and political struggle to defend working class living standards. In this sense, syndicalism was ‘spawned out of a crisis’ of reformist and socialist politics, as well as the inadequacies of the prevailing deterministic Marxist alternative.<sup>33</sup> The more ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ tendencies of the movements in the less developed countries of France, Italy and Spain was merely one, uneven, varied, but influential expression of this phenomenon.

### **Occupational Composition**

Another common perception is that the residual strength of syndicalism (including its distinctive anarcho-syndicalist forms) lay not with the industrial working class, but with artisans, agricultural workers, casual labourers and other groups of economically marginalised, often unskilled and unorganized, workers.<sup>34</sup> For example, it is assumed the CGT had only limited support amongst the ‘genuine’ factory workers of the new large-scale heavy industries that developed in the early twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, there is a widespread belief that the USI attracted mainly landless labourers, as opposed to the engineering workers concentrated in the giant plants located in the industrial cities of Milan and Turin; and that the CNT also appealed primarily to rural labourers with only limited support from industrial workers in one or two urban

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<sup>33</sup> E. O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1988), p. 182.

<sup>34</sup> For example, see E. O’Connor, ‘What Caused the 1913 Lockout? Industrial Relations in Ireland, 1907-13’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 19 (2005), p. 120,

<sup>35</sup> B. Moss, *The Origins of the French Labor Movement: The Socialism of Skilled Workers, 1830-1914* (Berkeley, Calif., 1976).

geographical areas of small-scale production and anarchist influence such as Barcelona.

By contrast, it is often assumed it was the mass reformist labour and socialist parties, with their affiliated trade unions, that were able to sink genuine roots amongst the rapidly expanding industrial proletariat. In other words, syndicalist bodies attracted only marginal support on the fringes of the existing labour movement, were usually reliant on the recruitment of workers neglected by the established trade unions, and were anyway to be rapidly superseded with the development of mass-production industries. Hence syndicalism's apparent 'irrelevance to the maturing corporate system of the twentieth century'.<sup>36</sup> In reality the situation was nowhere near as clear cut as these simplified images would suggest. Despite attempts by historians to link various forms of labour politics to different occupational or skill groupings within the working class, syndicalism appealed, in varying degrees, to relatively *diverse* groups of workers - skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled - depending on the context.

In France syndicalism proved to be particularly attractive to skilled craftsmen engaged as wage earners in small-scale capitalist production in Paris and elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless after 1900 such skilled workers were increasingly joined in the CGT by new sections of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers from a variety of different large-scale industries.<sup>38</sup> These included miners (Pas-de-Calais and Loire Valley), railway workers, notably footplatemen and drivers (nationally); construction workers, notably carpenters and joiners (Paris and elsewhere); dockers and shipyard workers (Nantes and Saint Nazaire); metal/engineering workers in small and medium-sized

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<sup>36</sup> R. H. Zieger, Book Review of 'Bread and Roses Too: Studies of the Wobblies', *Labor History*, 11:4 (1970), p. 568.

<sup>37</sup> Moss, pp. 13-19.

<sup>38</sup> A. Kriegel and Jean-Jacques Becker, *1914: La Guerre et le mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris 1964), pp. 280-85.

factories (Paris, Saint Etienne and Saint Nazaire); food industry workers, such as pastry cooks, chefs, bakers, waiters, grocery assistants in chain stores, and factory sugar and cake workers (Paris and elsewhere); and school teachers (nationally). In addition, the CGT won support from France's vast pool of agricultural labour, notably vineyard workers in the south of the country (Midi). Certainly by 1909 the CGT had added nearly half a million new adherents, most of who were not members of the craft unions that had previously dominated the *Confédération*.<sup>39</sup>

In Italy the USI was comprised first and foremost of agricultural workers (landless farm labourers) who constituted over one-third of the membership, with construction workers (including masons, carpenters, and brick makers) forming the second largest group. Although trade unionism in most European countries was almost exclusively an urban industrial phenomenon, by contrast the Italian labour movement was strongly rooted in both town and country, a development related to the existence of a large group of people displaced by modernisation in agriculture, but who remained in agriculture and were not absorbed by the new industries.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless syndicalist membership geographically by the end of 1914 came almost exclusively from northern Italy, with almost a total absence of USI groups in any area south of Tuscany. Strength was concentrated in the Po Valley, in the areas of Emilia-Romagna and Lombardy.<sup>41</sup> During the 1920 factory occupations that swept the country, although the socialist-led metal workers' federation (FIOM) controlled the main industrial cities, the USI controlled Verona, Savona, and Spezia, as well as

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<sup>39</sup> B. Vandervort, *Victor Griffuelhes and French Syndicalism, 1895-1922* (Baton Rouge, 1996), p. 247.

<sup>40</sup> S. J. Surace, *Ideology, Economic Change and the Working Classes: The Case of Italy* (Berkeley, Calif., 1966), p. 68.

<sup>41</sup> C. L. Bertrand, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism in Italy, 1912-1922', PhD, University of Wisconsin, 1970, pp. 141-142.

enjoying extensive backing amongst metal-working and shipbuilding workers in Sestri Ponente, Cornigliano, and Campi.<sup>42</sup> While it is true that Italian syndicalism never succeeded in capturing a mass following from the large industrial centres of Milan, Turin and Rome, immediately before and during the 1920 factory occupations, amidst a huge increase in membership generally, the syndicalists' *were* able to gain an important foothold among some engineering workers in both cities.

In Spain the CNT exercised influence amongst agricultural workers in the south (Andalucia), east (the area of the Levant around Valencia), and in north-east Aragon (around Saragossa). Many rural areas were characterised by the widespread use of *latifunda*, absentee-owned massive estates which relied upon the systematic exploitation of an underclass of landless labourers who were badly-paid, often hired on a daily basis, and liable to lay-offs and victimization, as well as subject to food shortages and long periods of unemployment. The appalling hardships of their daily existence made Andalucia's peasants in particular receptive to the CNT's seemingly straightforward promise to break the stranglehold of the *latifundistas* through seizure of the land followed by the destruction of state power.<sup>43</sup>

However, Antonio Bar has provided evidence to suggest that contrary to the commonly expressed view, the CNT was from its beginning (and even more so in the 1930s) a labour movement of an *industrial* character. Thus, it was concentrated in the urban and more or less industrialised areas of the country, such as Barcelona, Valencia, Seville and Saragossa. It won significant influence in such sectors as construction, fisheries, leather and footwear, textiles, printing and a wide variety of

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<sup>42</sup> T. Abse, 'Italy', in S. Berger and D. Broughton (eds.), *The Force of Labour: The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1995), p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> P. Heywood, 'The Labour Movement in Spain Before 1914' in D. Geary (ed.), *Labour and Socialist Movements in Europe Before 1914* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 235-6

other trades. The typical profile of the *Confederación* member was a manual worker in a workshop of medium to small size. By contrast, the CNT was always conspicuously weak (in terms of formal organisation at least) in the important rural areas of Spain. Even though in Andalucía, Aragon or Castille, anarchist and ‘libertarian communist’ uprisings were quite significant, the CNT as such never managed to establish an important and stable organic structure in these areas.<sup>44</sup> Whilst it built considerable support in the cities of the south during the early 1930s, especially in Cádiz, Málaga, Córdoba and Seville, as well as in a number of Andalusian villages, ties between the cities and the villages were extremely weak and the *Confederación* tended to concentrate most of its efforts in the larger cities among industrialised workers.<sup>45</sup>

A particularly important stronghold of the CNT in both the period around the First World War and the 1930s was the industrial and factory workers of Barcelona and other Catalan towns. There is considerable debate among historians as to why anarchists generally and the CNT specifically found such a responsive audience in this north-eastern province.<sup>46</sup> Some have suggested that arising from the stagnation and poverty of the agricultural sector there was a significant change in the composition of the labour force in Barcelona during the First World War, with the arrival of large numbers of rootless peasant migrants from the south (which itself possessed a long history of violent social conflict and anarchist allegiance) who were

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<sup>44</sup> A. Bar, ‘The CNT: The Glory and Tragedy of Spanish Anarchosyndicalism’, in van der Linden and Thorpe, *Revolutionary Syndicalism*, pp. 133-4.

<sup>45</sup> M. Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists: The Heroic Years, 1868-1936* (Edinburgh, 1998) p. 203.

<sup>46</sup> See A. Smith, ‘Anarchism, the General Strike and the Barcelona Labour Movement, 1899-1914’, *European History Quarterly*, 27: 1 (1997).



more susceptible to anarchist appeals than other groups.<sup>47</sup> Indeed by 1930, when migrants from elsewhere in Spain formed 35 per cent of the city's population, workers of non-Catalan origin were even more prominent in the CNT.<sup>48</sup>

Other historians have drawn attention to the way in which the concentration of industry in small factories and the survival of artisanal concerns may have favoured anarchist penetration.<sup>49</sup> However it should be noted that Madrid, the epitome of a highly skilled artisanal labour force, was a bastion of the Socialist Party, and in the Basque region where industry was also small-unit based there was a lack of CNT implantation. In addition, in Barcelona the *Confederación* recruited among a wide variety of industrial workers, including those in the metalworking, construction (bricklayers and their labourers) and woodworking (carpenters) industries, as well as among textile workers, dockers and carters.

A different potential factor was the way in which, in the adverse Catalan economic climate, the major employers' federations adopted an intensely anti-union stance which made it impossible for workers to establish stable collective bargaining relations, thereby encouraging them to embrace the CNT's emphasis on combativity and solidarity.<sup>50</sup> In addition, Chris Earlam has convincingly located Barcelona's anarchist movement within the context of the city's working class communities, showing how shared hardship and poverty interrelated with the collective experience

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<sup>47</sup> See G. H. Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left in Spain, 1914-1923*, (Stanford, Calif., 1974), pp. 2-9; 147; Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists*, pp. 69-71.

<sup>48</sup> See C. Earlam, *Class, Culture and Conflict in Barcelona, 1898-1937*, (London, 2004).

<sup>49</sup> For example see A. Balcells, *El arraigo del anarquismo en Cataluña: Textos de 1926-1934* (Madrid: Júcar, 1980), p. 18; M. Tuñón de Lara, *El movimiento obrero en la historia de España: Vol. I* (Madrid, 1977), p. 281; 307-8.

<sup>50</sup> A. Smith, *Anarchism, Revolution and Reaction: Catalan Labour and Crisis of the Spanish State 1898-1923* (Berghahn, 2007).

of struggle in both the factory and the streets.<sup>51</sup> This shared ‘culture of resistance’ engendered a conscious rejection of the priorities of capitalism, be it respect for private property, police or religion, and a profound sense of solidarity. Finally, other historians have paid greater attention to the overall context of social and political relations, notably frustration at the failure of democratic reforms, as well as the national, historical and linguistic differences which separated Catalans from Castilians and which made the former highly suspicious of any form of central Spanish state apparatus.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, although it is true the syndicalist movements in France, Italy and Spain did not implant itself as deeply and as broadly as the reformist trade unions amongst traditionally unionised workers in large industrial factory settings, it nonetheless appealed, in varying degrees and in different contexts, to diverse groups of workers, skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. Moreover compared to the labour and socialist labour parties, its social composition was virtually exclusively working class. We can now turn to the nature of the relationship between syndicalism and anarchism.

### **Relationship between Syndicalism and Anarchism**

If the development of revolutionary syndicalism on an international scale was directly related to anarchist ideas and organisation, it was far from simply being an anarchist invention and it is important not to conflate the one into the other. It is true that, with reference to France, Yvetot claimed:

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<sup>51</sup> Earham, *Class Culture and Conflict in Barcelona*.

<sup>52</sup> For example see Heywood, pp. 231-65; B. Martin, *The Agony of Modernisation: Labour and Industrialisation in Spain* (Ithaca, NY, 1990); A. Smith, ‘Spain’, in Berger and Broughton, pp. 171-209.

I am reproached with confusing syndicalism and anarchism. It is not my fault if anarchism and syndicalism have the same ends in view. The former pursues the integral emancipation of the individual, the latter the integral emancipation of the working man. I find the whole of syndicalism in anarchism. When we leave the theories of syndicalism to study its methods, we find them identical with those of the anarchists.<sup>53</sup>

Yet anarchists generally were internally split in the extent of their enthusiasm for syndicalist methods and some were vehemently opposed. Thus, syndicalism received extensive and lively attention at the 1907 International Anarchist Congress held in Amsterdam where Monatte took the lead in defending its principles, whilst the Italian anarchist and veteran insurrectionist Errico Malatesta challenged them for not being sufficiently ‘revolutionary’, for having a too simple conception of the class struggle and for placing too much confidence in the general strike.<sup>54</sup> ‘One must not be blind’, Monatte stated, ‘not to see what anarchism and syndicalism have in common. Both aim at the complete destruction of capitalism and the wage system by means of social revolution. Syndicalism is the reawakening of the labour movement: it has recalled anarchism to its working class origins’.<sup>ref</sup> In reply Malatesta portrayed syndicalism as inevitably conservative, working within the established economic system for legal ends. It could not, he argued, be revolutionary since trade unions were not even agreed among themselves but defended their sectional economic interests against each other. Anarchists should join trade unions, he said, but for

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<sup>53</sup> Cited in R. Hunter, *Violence and the Labor Movement* (New York, 1914), p. 247.

<sup>54</sup> Woodcock, *Anarchism*, pp. 220-25.

propaganda purposes, and to prepare for the collective control of production when the revolution arrived <sup>55</sup>

Moreover, the core of syndicalist philosophy was not explicitly anarchist in character despite the fact that anarchists were influential in some countries. It is true, as we have seen, that syndicalism revealed a certain affinity with the ideas of anarchism, notably its hostility to political organisation and activity and its principles of federalism and decentralisation. But the connections should not be exaggerated. In Italy the anarchists were much less trade union orientated than the syndicalists. Alceste DeAmbris, one of the USI's leading figures until 1914, shared the anarchists' conception of the overthrow of the Italian regime by a spontaneous rising of the people, but believed a viable new order could not be created through barricades and violent insurrection, but only through a long, gradual process of industrial development and proletarian maturation. Anarchist tactics, it was argued, produced merely pointless revolts, which only appealed to peasants and declining bourgeois groups.<sup>56</sup> The 'pure' syndicalists did not expect a general strike to overthrow the capitalist system in the foreseeable future and did not consider any of the strikes of the pre-war period (including the 'Red Week' general strike of 1914) to be definitive revolutionary episodes.<sup>57</sup> By contrast, the anarchists, such as Borghi, placed the emphasis on the need to prevent the formation of a labour elite and promoted political strikes rather than economic ones, with a greater concern to build revolutionary

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<sup>55</sup> E. Malatesta, 'Syndicalism: An Anarchist Critique', in G. Woodcock, *The Anarchist Reader* (Fontana/Collins, 1980), p. 225. See also V. Richards (ed.) *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* Freedom Press, 1977), pp. 113-36.

<sup>56</sup> D. D. Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism* (Manchester, 1979), p. 74; Bertrand, 'Revolutionary Syndicalism in Italy', p. 145.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in B. Riguzzi, *Sindacalismo e riformismo nel Parmense* (Bari, 1974), p. 129.

consciousness than in negotiating better conditions of employment.<sup>58</sup> Despite the fact Borghi took over the helm of an increasingly anarchist-influenced USI from 1916, relations between ‘pure’ syndicalists and openly declared anarchists were rarely untroubled by disputes over doctrine and tactics. As a result ‘even when the USI was dominated by anarchists after 1916, it never became an anarcho-syndicalist organisation’.<sup>59</sup>

The influence of the anarchists in all three countries was also of a limited form and by no means uniform. Thus although anarchist figures exercised an influential leadership position within the CGT in the 10-15 years up to 1914, they formed a perpetually uneasy left-wing obliged to compete with some powerful *Confédération* forces who favoured a form of reformist trade unionism that concentrated on collective bargaining for immediate gains, whilst others such as Victor Griffuelhes (the CGT’s secretary general during 1901-9) merely believed in direct action for its own sake irrespective of social theories. After 1914, with the collapse of the CGT’s revolutionary opposition to the outbreak of war, anarchist influence was pushed decisively to the margins, compounded by deep tensions within the revolutionary wing of the by now moderate-led CGT, between ‘pure’ syndicalist, ‘syndicalist-communist’ and ‘anarcho-syndicalist’ factions. Internal feuding inside the French labour movement in the post-war years, in the wake of the impasse of reformist politics, massive radicalisation and the Bolshevik revolution, culminated in a 1921 schism inside the CGT, when a sizeable revolutionary minority (including anarcho-syndicalists) left to form an alternative confederation, the *Confédération Générale du*

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<sup>58</sup> A. Borghi, *Anarchismo e sindacalismo. Conferenza tenuta il 3 aprile 1922 a Roma del Fascio Sindacale d’Azione Diretta* (Rome, n.d.), pp. 45-8.

<sup>59</sup> C. Levy, ‘Currents of Italian Syndicalism before 1926’, *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), p. 243.

*Travail Unitaire* (CGTU). But many French anarcho-syndicalists (and ‘pure’ revolutionary syndicalists) unable to accept increasing communist party influence inside the CGTU, formed another breakaway. Not surprisingly such schisms drove many thousands away from union activity within all three groupings, and further undermined the strength of the French labour movement generally and anarchism specifically.

In Spain, the leadership of the Spanish CNT was likewise divided on a permanent basis, in this case between more moderate syndicalist elements on the one hand, and more revolutionary syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist (and anarchist) elements on the other. Initially the CNT adopted a ‘pure’ form of revolutionary syndicalism which extended from the (1907) foundation of the CNT’s parent organisation *Solidaridad Obrera* to 1919. But this approach, personified by Salvador Seguí, became increasingly focused on obtaining immediate material and organisational gains, and suggested much more preparation was necessary before a revolutionary overthrow could be contemplated. In attempting to promote a more moderate trade union policy within the CNT, Seguí controversially cut short a Barcelona general strike in 1919 and followed a policy of collaboration with the socialist *Unión General de Trabajadores* (UGT). By contrast the anarcho-syndicalists, who resented the placing of ‘bread and butter’ issues ahead of opportunities to strike a blow at the bourgeois order, advocated revolutionary insurrectionism. At the CNT’s 1919 congress there was an attempted synthesis of the strategic and tactical principles of revolutionary syndicalism on the one hand, and anarchism on the other, with the adoption of ‘libertarian communism’ as the *Confederación* main goal. Over the next four years, amidst economic and political crisis, a revolutionary wave of struggles across Europe, the impact of the Russian Revolution, and widespread industrial unrest

at home, the anarcho-syndicalists successfully took control of the CNT, backed by many of the new, radical elements who had emigrated from rural areas to Barcelona.

However, after the CNT's banning in 1924 the leadership fell back into the hands of more moderate syndicalist figures. It was only with the formation of the FAI in 1927, that the anarchists (including insurrectionary leaders like Buenaventura Durrutti and Juan Garcia Oliver) were to come back to the fore with the advent of the Second Republic in 1931 and the renewal of high levels of class struggle that followed. There then occurred a split between the syndicalists, some of whom were expelled or left the CNT to form Oppositionist Unions and the Liberation Syndicalist Federation in 1932-3, and the more radical anarcho-syndicalist groups belonging to the FAI who controlled the official CNT apparatus. Finally all the groups re-united with the onset of the Civil War in May 1936, primarily under anarchist influence.<sup>60</sup>

In reality syndicalism was always an alliance between at least three core ideological elements. First, there was *anarchism*, from which it took anti-state, anti-political action, and anti-militarist ideas, as well as the notions of federalism, decentralisation, direct action and sabotage. Second, *Marxism* also influenced it significantly to varying degrees. Of course it is true that in France, Italy and Spain syndicalism represented a reaction against the deterministic conception of Marxism as practiced by most of the socialist parties of the Second International (which combined a theory of the economic inevitability of socialism with reformist and bureaucratic practice). Yet despite the fact syndicalist movement leaders might denounce socialist politicians, it seems unlikely many individual members voted other than socialist in parliamentary elections. And despite their advocacy of 'political autonomy' from

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<sup>60</sup> A. Bar, *Syndicalism and Revolution in Spain: The Ideology and Syndical Practice of the CNT in the Period 1915-1919* (New York, 1981); G. H. Meaker, *The Revolutionary Left in Spain, 1914-1923* (Stanford, Calif., 1974).

political parties this did not necessarily preclude informal links with socialist parties on matters of common interest. For example, in France in 1912 the CGT and Socialist Party worked closely together in a campaign against the Three-Year Draft Law which proposed to extend military service from two to three years, and in Spain despite traditional rivalry with the Socialist Party, rank-and-file pressure for co-operation between the CNT and the much larger socialist-led union confederation, the UGT, resulted in the Pact of Saragossa and nationally co-ordinated general strike action.

Moreover, whilst many syndicalists dismissed ‘political action’ they were (by adopting a narrow definition of political action) basically rejecting or minimising what they saw as the dead-end of electoral and parliamentary politics advocated by the dominant wing of the socialist parties. This did not mean collaboration was necessarily ruled out between syndicalists and *revolutionary* socialist/Marxist elements operating inside the reformist socialist parties who themselves rejected the emphasis on parliamentarism at the expense of the direct action of the workers. Thus the CGT was set up through the active participation of revolutionary socialists alongside radical trade unionists.<sup>61</sup> In Italy there was a distinctive situation in which the pioneer syndicalists, who had emerged from amongst revolutionary elements inside the Socialist Party, were prepared to remain inside the party for a few years (where they succeeded in influencing mainstream socialist political debate via their oppositional propaganda and activity), even though they insisted (until their wholesale expulsion in 1908) that industrial struggle was the primary method of achieving revolutionary change.<sup>62</sup> In addition in all three countries a number of syndicalist movement leaders inherited some central components of the Marxist tradition, in however a diffuse form. This included the Marxist conception of the necessity and

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<sup>61</sup> B. Moss, ‘Socialism and the Republic in France’, *Socialist History*, 18, (2000) pp. 146-7.

<sup>62</sup> Levy, ‘Currents of Italian Syndicalism’, p. 213.



desirability of class struggle (of which strikes were the primary expression) as a means of collective resistance to capitalism that could develop the confidence, organisation and class consciousness of workers; the utter primacy of the working class as the sole agency of revolution that could liberate the whole of society; and a conception of socialism arising from the need for workers to take power *themselves* rather than relying on the enlightened actions of parliamentary and trade union leaders who would reform capitalism *on behalf of* workers.

Third, syndicalism was influenced by the ideas of *revolutionary trade unionism*, the notion that the unions should go beyond merely attempting to improve workers' terms and conditions of employment within the framework of capitalist society, to become the instrument through which workers could overthrow capitalism and establish a new society. In every country the origin and development of syndicalist organisation was clearly rooted in the deep hostility often displayed by employers towards any form of independent trade unionism. In the relatively less developed Spain and Italy, whilst the land-owning classes were prodigiously reactionary and exploited the agricultural workforce, the rising class of industrialists was hardly less determined to vigorously resist any attempt to organize in unions. But the ferocity of employers' resistance to the CNT and USI was more than matched by what happened in the more developed French context where the backdrop to the formation of the CGT was stark class warfare. In every country, in varying degrees, workers found they had to fight for the most basic of rights to organise, strike, and picket. Many who tried to organise were sacked, blacklisted, imprisoned and sometimes killed. In such circumstances, the appeal of syndicalism's willingness to 'fight fire with fire' by mounting direct, often violent, methods of industrial action proved attractive and helped to encourage revolutionary trade union aspirations

among a significant layer of workers who felt they had no other realistic means of attempting to redress their grievances.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, syndicalism represented a synthesis of these three different ideological influences, all overlaid with a singular pattern in each respective country. Moreover, we should note some additional distinct *national* ideological influences on each of the different syndicalist movements. For example there was a rich revolutionary tradition within which the French labour movement which exhibited a variety of ideological trends of a revolutionary kind apart from syndicalism, namely Proudhonism, Bakuninism, Blanquism, Marxism, and Allemanism. All of these were reflected in some way amongst the elements that went on to form the CGT.<sup>64</sup> Italian syndicalism thrived in a broader libertarian-tinged ‘second culture’, a ‘bundle of cultural practices and organisational activities associated with localism, anti-statism, anti-clericalism, republicanism and *operaismo* (workerism)’.<sup>65</sup> In fact, one of the reasons why anarchism was able to prosper in countries with strong religious traditions, such as Catholic Italy and Spain, was that it helped to articulate already existing anti-clerical sentiments, with the tendency for agrarian radicalism to be directed against the landowners and their protectors, the monarchy and, in particularly the Catholic Church.<sup>66</sup>

Finally, we should note the heyday of syndicalism was maintained for only a brief period of twenty years or so. 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

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<sup>63</sup> Dubofsky, pp. 36-8.

<sup>64</sup> See Ridley, pp. 25-52.

<sup>65</sup> Levy, ‘Currents of Italian Syndicalism’, p. 228.

<sup>66</sup> G. Lichtheim, *A Short History of Socialism* (Glasgow, p. 223.

immediate aftermath of the First World War, which was followed by employers' and state directed counter-mobilization 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 Comintern and 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 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 organisations in most countries. Spain was the only important exception. 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'.<sup>67</sup>

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 organisation, 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-

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<sup>67</sup> J. White, *Tom Mann* (Manchester, 1991), p. 170.

ranging debate.<sup>68</sup> 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.<sup>69</sup> As we have seen, the contribution of the anarchists and/or anarcho-syndicalists to this was undoubtedly significant in France, Italy and Spain.

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<sup>68</sup> R. Price, 'Contextualising British Syndicalism c.1907-c.1920', *Labour History Review*, 63:3 (1998), pp. 261-76;

D. Howell, 'Taking Syndicalism Seriously', *Socialist History*, 16 (2000). pp. 27-48.

<sup>69</sup> E. O'Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1988), p. 1.