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Photo below: SAC Demonstration in Stockholm 2022 (photographer Julia Lindblom).

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This essay was first published on Znetwork under the title "We Need a United Class Not a United Left". A different version was published in Swedish. The author, Rasmus Hästbacka, claims that the very idea of class unions has been either forgotten or seriously confused with labor parties and other left-wing groups. Hästbacka wants to revive the idea and he hopes it will materialize around the world once again. He is a member of the Swedish syndicalist union SAC. A short summary of the essay was published as a standalone article in the Industrial Worker.

I believe the only force capable of improving workers' living conditions – and ultimately the force to abolish class society – are the workers themselves. As a syndicalist, I take the view that workers can get rid of their bosses and run all workplaces in the interest of the population as a whole.

In this article I will argue that the best way to promote working class militancy is to build syndicalist trade unions, that is self-managed and open class unions. More precisely, it

means unions that are controlled by the rank-and-file and welcome workers in general as members.

Syndicalists are not the only builders of class unions. But ever since the 1800s, syndicalists have been the foremost builders together with workers in the union IWW – Industrial Workers of the World. The ambition has been to build One Big Union, as IWW puts it. That means uniting the working class no matter how many different unions workers belong to. This was once the ambition of syndicalism on all continents.

The union veteran Joe Burns uses the concept "class struggle unionism" as a broad umbrella. This includes syndicalist unions, IWW and many other initiatives, such as Labor Notes, Teamsters for a Democratic Union and Black Workers for Justice.

But the heydays of syndicalism and IWW are long gone. In a previous article, I lamented that the Swedish syndicalist union SAC has been marginalized to the point where it is hard for outsiders to distinguish SAC from political factions of the left. It remains to be seen if class unions will be revived again around the world.

A big obstacle for such a revival is that the very idea of class unions has been forgotten – or, to the extent that the idea is still around, it is seriously confused with labor parties and other left-wing groups. Therefore, I want to present the idea in contrast to the left. It takes an effort to clear up the confusion, so bear with me. I also want to give an argument as to why great potential lies in class unions, independent of the left. The article draws from my book Swedish syndicalism – An outline of its ideology and practice.

I will approach the idea of the class union by first making a perhaps surprising acknowledgement: *There are pretty good arguments for labelling syndicalist unions left-wing*. The unions' long-term vision is socialism. On a right-left scale, socialism is placed on the left.

The essay draws from Hästbacka's book (free online) Swedish syndicalism. More articles by the same author can be found in Anarchist Library here.

The problem is that the left-wing label creates misunderstandings that are very destructive in practice. Syndicalist unions are then perceived as organizations only for those who identify with the left, i.e. for workers and bosses who call themselves left-wing but not for workers who vote center or right. But the reality is the exact opposite. Our unions are open to workers in general, including workers who vote on bourgeois parties, while the unions exclude all leftists who are bosses or employers.

A union only for leftists would make no sense. If you are a workplace organizer, you will probably agree that there is no reason to expect more from your leftist co-workers than other co-workers. Some organizers even claim we should expect less from leftists. I don't go that far. I simply find it irrelevant how people vote.

There are actually pretty good arguments for labelling syndicalist unions anti-left. After all, the syndicalist understanding of socialism collides with the two most famous left-wing models: welfare capitalism and totalitarian state socialism.

Syndicalists want economic democracy and federalism to replace the prevailing institutions of capitalism and nation-states. Caught in a single phrase, that means federations of local communities will own the companies while federations of workers will manage them. In that sense, syndicalist unions are indeed anti-left (and of course anti right/center too). But if they are labelled anti-left organizations, it will of course create serious and destructive misunderstandings.

The right-left scale stems from parliaments while labor unions are extra-parliamentary organizations. The fact that SAC and other syndicalist unions can be labelled both left and anti-left shows how useless the word left is. Employers and tycoons in other trade unions are constantly claiming that syndicalist unions are leftist groups and not unions.

My advice is simply this: when we talk about unions, let's use the word *unions*. Or let us be more specific and talk about a *syndicalist* union or *class* union and explain what it means.

Syndicalists emphasize the economic and social interests that unite workers, rather than the religious, political and national affiliations that divide people. We build unions because we have a common interest in improving everyday life for everyone. We do not organize and come together because we have the same opinion on every issue. Union organizing has the potential to unite workers in every workplace, within and across industries.

Common to all workers is a subordinate position in the production of goods and services. Workers are employees, not bosses or employers. This makes workers the largest and potentially strongest social class. The interests of all workers are essentially the same. Therefore, SAC is a class organization for all, not a political organization for this or that set of opinions.

Political organizations have a typical characteristic: they recruit people who all adhere to a certain package of opinions. SAC, on the other hand, welcomes everyone with a subordinate position in production. Members are not required to hold certain opinions.

In old syndicalist texts, syndicalist unions are sometimes called "apolitical" organizations. Nowadays it instead happens that they are labelled "political" organizations. Both labels cause confusion, just like the labels "left" and "anti-left". Again, why not use the word union? I might add that employers are constantly claiming that SAC is a political group and not a union.

The focus of a labor union is on the workplace. Here lies great potential. Our daily work is the foundation of the production of goods and services, and it literally builds our society. Through union organizing, we can develop the power to change our living conditions and the direction in which society should move.

Yet another proposal is to unite a *radical left*, an extra-parliamentary left, to the left of Vänsterpartiet. Once again, this is not the way to organize workers in general.

While the leaders of Social Democracy have become integrated into the state and business world, and to some extent have disarmed the working class, the extra-parliamentary left has marginalized itself from the class. It doesn't get any better when leftists sometimes approach workers as self-appointed leaders to steer workers in some direction. By contrast, rank-and-file unions are about workers listening to and mobilizing fellow workers. Then, workers will act by and for themselves as a collective.

The political left has a tendency to multiply through division. That's nothing to mock or mourn. Anarchists have always made a distinction between so called *affinity groups* and class organizations. Affinity groups are small groups of friends or close anarchist comrades who hold roughly the same views. This is no basis for class organizing and that is not the intention either. Therefore, anarchists are in addition active in syndicalist unions or other popular movements (like tenants' organizations, anti-war coalitions and environmental movements).

The myriad of leftist groups and publications today might serve as affinity groups – for education and analysis, for cultural events and a sense of community. But vehicles for class struggle they are not. If you want social change, then bond with your co-workers and neighbors; that's where it begins. It is time that the entire left realizes what anarchists have always understood.

We need a united class, not a united left, to push the class struggle forward. At least that's my view on the situation in Europe and the USA. If I am mistaken, then I am happy to be enlightened.

Rasmus Hästbacka

not be members. For security reasons alone, nazis cannot join the union. In the case of SAC, our union is officially feminist and anti-racist.

There is much talk these days about the automation of jobs and the supposed irrelevance of syndicalism. But so far, the working class has not disappeared, only moved to new jobs. The global working class is actually bigger than ever before.

As long as the business world and the state depend on the labor of workers, class unions will probably be the foremost tool for improving living conditions and ultimately abolishing class society. But if class organizing is to have a future, it must be made clear how it differs from labor parties and other left-wing groups.

In the USA, it is common to label everything that is not connected to the Republican party "The Left". This left is so broad that it encompasses Wall Street bankers, top Democrat politicians, union bureaucrats and a large part of the working class. A broad left in this sense means class collaboration and a dead end.

Likewise in Sweden, a large part of the working class has voted for the Social Democrats for decades and still belong to the party's approved union: LO. Thus, in both countries, a broad left enables workers to vote for and pay union fees to elites that screw them over. Workers get a light version of neoliberalism instead of the worst version.

A proposed solution to the crisis of the Swedish left is to unite a "real left" to the left of Social Democracy. This is expressed by the Swedish Left-Wing Party (Vänsterpartiet). But again, this proposal is a kind of class collaboration – a coalition of workers and bosses, union bureaucrats and politicians. Such a coalition would repel the large part of the working class that don't see themselves as part of the left (and perhaps never will). It would also repel left-wing workers who want to conduct independent class struggle rather than class collaboration.

The individual worker may be a cog in the machinery, but as a collective we can stop its wheels and dictate new conditions for social development. This is not only about staging strikes (and organizing seldom begins with strikes). Workers' militancy encompasses a rich variety of ways to pressure corporations and public employers.

Political organizations are not built for workplace struggles. They are basically useless for this purpose. This applies to both parliamentary labor parties and extra-parliamentary left-wing groups. Left-wing organizations repel employees who don't see themselves as part of the left. Such organizations can also be open to bosses and employers and be led by people in the political establishment.

Since political organizations are not built for workplace struggles, they are ill-equipped to use the power that the working class has as a producer of goods and services.

SAC's nature as a class organization finds its expression in a double structure. Syndicalist unions rest on two legs: an industrial leg and a geographical leg. On the one hand, all workplace sections in the same industry in one area form an industrial branch. All branches in a single industry form a nationwide federation. On the other hand, a Local (LS) of SAC brings together workers in all industries in the area. All Locals form regional districts and are united through SAC.

The double structure of syndicalist unions is intended to multiply solidarity and strength in the workplaces. This is bolstered by the fact that syndicalists promote cross-union cooperation. We always seek unity with our co-workers in other trade unions, with or without the blessing of those unions. Unity and capacity for collective action is built by patient organizing, not by complaing or impulsive actions.

The process of building capacity for collective action is sometimes called "class formation". The American writer Tom Wetzel describes it as "the more or less protracted process through which the working class overcomes fatalism and

internal divisions (as on lines of race or gender), acquires knowledge about the system, and builds the confidence, organizational capacity and the aspiration for social change."

Syndicalists insist that economic democracy is a project in the interest of the entire working class. Both workers in the narrow sense (i.e. blue-collar workers) and white-collar workers have everything to gain from a democratic transformation of society. In this sense, socialism is a class issue. It is a vision that is realized through class struggle.

At the point of production, we can develop the strength and competence to take over the management of our workplaces. No labor government or left-wing organization outside parliament can do it for us. We can do it through our unions.

The union democracy that syndicalists develop today reflects the forms of management we want to see in the future. In this way, organizing along industrial lines indicates how production can be managed by workers' assemblies at base level and their elected councils. In the same way, geographical organization in Locals, districts and SAC gives an indication of how federations of local communities can be structured.

The idea is to build a popular democracy from below that ultimately dismantles concentrated power in both the business world and the state. Thereby, we claim, all power can be transferred down to the people.

The idea of the class organization has arisen on all continents. The most well-known expression (among the oldest examples) is the International Workingmen's Association. This organization was founded in 1864 and became known as the *First International*. The first class union in the USA, the Knights of Labor, was formed in 1869.

One of the prominent figures of the First International, Michail Bakunin, emphasized the open nature of the class organization: "the International does not ask any new member if he is of a religious or atheistic turn of mind. She does not ask

if he belongs to this or that or no political party. She simply says: Are you a worker?"

The crucial differences between syndicalist unions and the political left can be summed up as follows. A syndicalist union is an interest organization for sellers of labor power. It is open to all employees except bosses. The union also welcomes those parts of the working class who are not wage earners (unemployed, people on sick leave, pensioners, self-employed entrepreneurs with no hired staff, etc.). The condition for becoming a member is not that you identify with the left or hold a set of leftist opinions.

When labor struggle through unions is brought to its peak, the door to workplace democracy and an equal society opens. That's the long-term vision of syndicalism. Every member of SAC does not have to be a convinced supporter of the vision but must have read SAC's Declaration of principles and respect that economic democracy and federalism is SAC's vision.

In SAC's Declaration, the requirements for membership are stated: *that you follow democratic decisions in the union, act in solidarity at work and respect the union's independence from all religious and political organizations.* Democracy, solidarity and independence – those are the basic values of SAC.

In a separate article, I have responded to common objections to building class unions. Here I will just repeat my answer to one frequent objection. The objection is raised by syndicalists who are afraid to let all sorts of a**holes into the union: *Is the union open to homophobes, racists and even nazis?* A class organization cannot control what people think or feel in secret, but there are of course certain behaviors that must be promoted.

As said, the basic values of SAC are solidarity, democracy and independence. If the values of a homophobe or racist is expressed at work, then it's a violation of solidarity. Thus, the person cannot be a member of the union. Likewise, people who don't respect the democracy or independence of the union can-