

# On Syndicalism

Errico Malatesta

1925–1926

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## Syndicalism and Anarchism

The relationship between the labour movement and the progressive parties is an old and worn theme. But it is an ever topical one, and so it will remain while there are, on one hand, a mass of people plagued by urgent needs and driven by aspirations — at times passionate but always vague and indeterminate — to a better life, and on the other individuals and parties who have a specific view of the future and of the means to attain it, but whose plans and hopes are doomed to remain utopias ever out of reach unless they can win over the masses. And the subject is all the more important now that, after the catastrophes of war and of the post-war period, all are preparing, if only mentally, for a resumption of the activity which must follow upon the fall of the tyrannies that still rant and rage [across Europe] but are beginning to tremble. For this reason I shall try to clarify what, in my view, should be the anarchists' attitude to labour organisations.

Today, I believe, there is no-one, or almost no-one amongst us who would deny the usefulness of and the need for the labour movement as a mass means of material and moral advancement, as a fertile ground for propaganda and as an indispensable force for the social transformation that is our goal. There is no longer anyone who does not understand what the workers' organisation means, to us anarchists more than to anyone, believing as we do that the new social organisation must not and cannot be imposed by a new government by force but must result from the free cooperation of all. Moreover, the labour movement is now an important and universal institution. To oppose it would be to become the oppressors' accomplices; to ignore it would be to put us out of reach of people's everyday lives and condemn us to perpetual powerlessness. Yet, while everyone, or almost everyone, is in agreement on the usefulness and the need for the anarchists to take an active part in the labour movement and to be its supporters and promoters, we often disagree among ourselves on the methods, conditions and limitations of such involvement.

Many comrades would like the labour movement and anarchist movement to be one and the same thing and, where they are able for instance, in Spain and Argentina, and even to a certain extent in Italy, France, Germany, etc. — try to confer on the workers' organisations a clearly anarchist programme. These comrades are known as 'anarcho-syndicalists', or, if they get mixed up with others who really are not anarchists, call themselves 'revolutionary syndicalists'. There needs to be some explanation of the meaning of 'syndicalism' If it is a question of what one wants from the future, if, that is, by syndicalism is meant the form of social organisation that should replace capitalism and state organisation, then either it is the same thing as anarchy and is therefore a word that serves only to confuse or it is something different from anarchy and cannot therefore be accepted by anarchists. In fact, among the ideas and the proposals on the future which some syndicalists have put forward, there are some that are genuinely anarchist. But there are others which, under other names and other forms, reproduce the authoritarian structure which underlies the cause of the ills about which we are now protesting, and which, therefore, have nothing to do with anarchy. But it is not syndicalism as a social system which I mean to deal with, because it is not this which can determine the current actions of the anarchists with regard to the labour movement.

I am dealing here with the labour movement under a capitalist and state regime and the name syndicalism includes all the workers' organisations, all the various unions set up to resist the oppression of the bosses and to lessen or altogether wipe out the exploitation of human labour by the owners of the raw materials and means of production. Now I say that these organisations cannot be anarchist and that it does no good to claim that they are, because if they were they

would be failing in their purpose and would not serve the ends that those anarchists who are involved in them propose. A Union is set up to defend the day to day interests of the workers and to improve their conditions as much as possible before they can be in any position to make the revolution and by it change today's wage-earners into free workers, freely associating for the benefit of all

For a union to serve its own ends and at the same time act as a means of education and ground for propaganda aimed at radical social change, it needs to gather together all workers — or at least those workers who look to an improvement of their conditions — and to be able to put up some resistance to the bosses. Can it possibly wait for all the workers to become anarchists before inviting them to organise themselves and before admitting them into the organisation, thereby reversing the natural order of propaganda and psychological development and forming the resistance organisation when there is no longer any need, since the masses would already be capable of making the revolution? In such a case the union would be a duplicate of the anarchist grouping and would be powerless either to obtain improvements or to make revolution. Or would it content itself with committing the anarchist programme to paper and with formal, unthought-out support, and bringing together people who, sheeplike, follow the organisers, only then to scatter and pass over to the enemy on the first occasion they are called upon to show themselves to be serious anarchists?

Syndicalism (by which I mean the practical variety and not the theoretical sort, which everyone tailors to their own shape) is by nature reformist. All that can be expected of it is that the reforms it fights for and achieves are of a kind and obtained in such a way that they serve revolutionary education and propaganda and leave the way open for the making of ever greater demands. Any fusion or confusion between the anarchist and revolutionary movement and the syndicalist movement ends either by rendering the union helpless as regards its specific aims or with toning down, falsifying and extinguishing the anarchist spirit. A union can spring up with a socialist, revolutionary or anarchist programme and it is, indeed, with programmes of this sort that the various workers' programmes originate. But it is while they are weak and impotent that they are faithful to the programme — while, that is, they remain propaganda groups set up and run by a few zealous and committed men, rather than organisations ready for effective action. Later, as they manage to attract the masses and acquire the strength to claim and impose improvements, the original programme becomes an empty formula, to which no-one pays any more attention. Tactics adapt to the needs of the moment and the enthusiasts of the early days either themselves adapt or cede their place to 'practical' men concerned with today, and with no thought for tomorrow.

There are, of course, comrades who, though in the first ranks of the union movement, remain sincerely and enthusiastically anarchist, as there are workers' groupings inspired by anarchist ideas. But it would be too easy a work of criticism to seek out the thousands of cases in which, in everyday practice, these men and these groupings contradict anarchist ideas. Hard necessity? I agree. Pure anarchism cannot be a practical solution while people are forced to deal with bosses and with authority. The mass of the people cannot be left to their own devices when they refuse to do so and ask for, demand, leaders. But why confuse anarchism with what anarchism is not and take upon ourselves, as anarchists, responsibility for the various transactions and agreements that need to be made on the very grounds that the masses are not anarchist, even where they belong to an organisation that has written an anarchist programme into its constitution? In my opinion the anarchists should not want the unions to be anarchist. The anarchists must work

among themselves for anarchist ends, as individuals, groups and federations of groups. In the same way as there are, or should be, study and discussion groups, groups for written or spoken propaganda in public, cooperative groups, groups working within factories and workshops, fields, barracks, schools, etc., so they should form groups within the various organisations that wage class war. Naturally the ideal would be for everyone to be anarchist and for all organisations to work anarchically. But it is clear that if that were the case, there would be no need to organise for the struggle against the bosses, because the bosses would no longer exist.

In present circumstances, given the degree of development of the mass of the people amongst which they work, the anarchist groups should not demand that these organisations be anarchist, but try to draw them as close as possible to anarchist tactics. If the survival of the organisation and the needs and wishes of the organised make it really necessary to compromise and enter into muddled negotiations with authority and the employers, so be it. But let it be the responsibility of others, not the anarchists, whose mission is to point to the inadequacy and fragility of all improvements that are made within a capitalist society and to drive the struggle on toward ever more radical solutions. The anarchists within the unions should strive to ensure that they remain open to all workers of whatever opinion or party on the sole condition that there is solidarity in the struggle against the bosses. They should oppose the corporatist spirit and any attempt to monopolise labour or organisation. They should prevent the Unions from becoming the tools of the politicians for electoral or other authoritarian ends; they should preach and practice direct action, decentralisation, autonomy and free initiative. They should strive to help members learn how to participate directly in the life of the organisation and to do without leaders and permanent officials. They must, in short, remain anarchists, remain always in close touch with anarchists and remember that the workers' organisation is not the end but just one of the means, however important, of preparing the way for the achievement of anarchism.

April-May 1925

## **The Labour Movement and Anarchism**

Dear comrades<sup>1</sup>

In your journal I came across the following sentence: 'If we must choose between Malatesta, who calls for class unity, and Rocker, who stands for a labour movement with anarchist aims, we choose our German comrade.' This is not the first time that our Spanish language press has attributed to me ideas and intentions I do not have, and although those who wish to know what I really think can find it clearly set out in what I myself have written, I have decided to ask you to publish the following explanation of my position.

Firstly, if things were really as you present them, I too would opt for Rocker against your 'Malatesta', whose ideas on the labour movement bear little resemblance to my own. Let's get one thing clear: a labour movement with anarchist objectives is not the same thing as an anarchist labour movement. Naturally everyone desires the former. It is obvious that in their activities anarchists look to the final triumph of anarchy — the more so when such activities are carried out within the labour movement, which is of such great importance in the struggle for human progress and emancipation. But the latter, a labour movement which is not only involved in

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<sup>1</sup>Open letter addressed to the editors of *El Productor*, an anarchist journal published in Barcelona — Editor.

propaganda and the gradual winning over of terrain to anarchism, but which is already avowedly anarchist, seems to me to be impossible and would in every way lack the purpose which we wish to give to the movement.

What matters to me is not 'class unity' but the triumph of anarchy, which concerns everybody; and in the labour movement I see only a means of raising the morale of the workers, accustom them to free initiative and solidarity in a struggle for the good of everyone and render them capable of imagining, desiring and putting into practice an anarchist life. Thus, the difference there may be between us concerns not the ends but the tactics we believe most appropriate for reaching our common goals.

Some believe anarchists must assemble the anarchist workers, or at the least those with anarchist sympathies, in separate associations. But I, on the contrary, would like all wage-earners, whatever their social, political or religious opinions — or non-opinions — bound only in solidarity and in struggle against the bosses, to belong to the same organisations, and I would like the anarchists to remain indistinguishable from the rest even while seeking to inspire them with their ideas and example. It could be that specific circumstances involving personalities, environment or occasion would advise, or dictate the breaking up of the mass of organised workers into various different tendencies, according to their social and political views. But it seems to me in general that there should be a striving towards unity, which brings workers together in comradeship and accustoms them to solidarity, gives them greater strength for today's struggles or prepares them better for the final struggle and the harmony we shall need in the aftermath of victory.

Clearly, the unity we have to fight for must not mean suppression of free initiative, forced uniformity or imposed discipline, which would put a brake on or altogether extinguish the movement of liberation. But it is only our support for a unified movement that can safeguard freedom in unity. Other wise unity comes about through force and to the detriment of freedom. The labour movement is not the artificial creation of ideologists designed to support and put into effect a given social and political programme, whether anarchist or not, and which can therefore, in the attitudes it strikes and the actions it takes, follow the line laid down by that programme. The labour movement springs from the desire and urgent need of the workers to improve their conditions of life or at least to prevent them getting worse. It must, therefore, live and develop within the environment as it is now, and necessarily tends to limit its claims to what seems possible at the time.

It can happen — indeed, it often happens — that the founders of workers' associations are men of ideas about radical social change and who profit from the needs felt by the mass of the people to arouse a desire for change that would suit their own goals. They gather round them comrades of like mind: activists determined to fight for the interests of others even at the expense of their own, and form workers' associations that are in reality political groups, revolutionary groups, for which questions of wages, hours, internal workplace regulations, are a side issue and serve rather as a pretext for attracting the majority to their own ideas and plans. But before long, as the number of members grows, short-term interests gain the upper hand, revolutionary aspirations become an obstacle and a danger, 'pragmatic' men, conservatives, reformists, eager and willing to enter into any agreement and accommodation arising from the circumstances of the moment, clash with the idealists and hardliners, and the workers' organisation becomes what it perforce must be in a capitalist society — a means not for refusing to recognise and overthrowing the bosses, but simply for hedging round and limiting the bosses' power.

This is what always has happened and could not happen otherwise since the masses, before taking on board the idea and acquiring the strength to transform the whole of society from the bottom up, feel the need for modest improvements, and for an organisation that will defend their immediate interests while they prepare for the ideal life of the future. So what should the anarchists do when the workers' organisation, faced with the inflow of a majority driven to it by their economic needs alone, ceases to be a revolutionary force and becomes involved in a balancing act between capital and labour and possibly even a factor in preserving the status quo?

There are comrades who say — and have done so when this question is raised — that the anarchists should withdraw and form minority groupings. But this, to me, means condemning ourselves to going back to the beginning. The new grouping, if it is not to remain a mere affinity group with no influence in the workers' struggle, will describe the same parabola as the organisation it left behind. In the meantime the seeds of bitterness will be sown among the workers and its best efforts will be squandered in competition with the majority organisation. Then, in a spirit of solidarity, in order not to fall into the trap of playing the bosses' game and in order to pursue the interests of their own members, it will come to terms with the majority and bow to its leadership.

A labour organisation that were to style itself anarchist, that was and remained genuinely anarchist and was made up exclusively of dyed-in-the-wool anarchists could be a form — in some circumstances an extremely useful one — of anarchist grouping; but it would not be the labour movement and it would lack the purpose of such a movement, which is to attract the mass of the workers into the struggle, and, especially for us, to create a vast field for propaganda and to make new anarchists. For these reasons I believe that anarchists must remain — and where possible, naturally, with dignity and independence — within those organisations as they are, to work within them and seek to push them forward to the best of their ability, ready to avail themselves, in critical moments of history, of the influence they may have gained, and to transform them swiftly from modest weapons of defence to powerful tools of attack. Meanwhile, of course, the movement itself, the movement of ideas, must not be neglected, for this provides the essential base for which all the rest provides the means and tools. Yours for anarchy

December 1925

Errico Malatesta

## Further Thoughts on Anarchism and the Labour Movement

Obviously I am unable to make myself understood to the Spanish speaking comrades, at least as regards my ideas on the labour movement and on the role of anarchists within it. I tried to explain these ideas in an article that was published in *El Productor* on 8<sup>th</sup> January (an article whose heading, 'The Labour Movement and Anarchism' was wrongly translated as 'Syndicalism and Anarchism'). But from the response that I saw in those issues of *El Productor* that reached me I see I haven't managed to make myself understood. I will therefore return to the subject in the hope of greater success this time.

The question is this: I agree with the Spanish and South American comrades on the anarchist goals that must guide and inform all our activity. But I disagree with some as to whether

the anarchist programme, or rather, label, should be imposed on workers' unions, and whether, should such a programme fail to meet with the approval of the majority, the anarchists should remain within the wider organisation, continuing from within to make propaganda and opposing the authoritarian, monopolist and collaborationist tendencies that are a feature of all workers' organisations, or to separate from them and set up minority organisations.

I maintain that as the mass of workers are not anarchist a labour organisation that calls itself by that name must either be made up exclusively of anarchists — and therefore be no more than a simple and useless duplicate of the anarchist groups — or remain open to workers of all opinions. In which case the anarchist label is pure gloss, useful only for helping to commit anarchists to the thousand and one transactions which a union is obliged to carry out in the present day reality of life if it wishes to protect the immediate interests of its members. I have come across an article by D. Abad de Santillan<sup>2</sup> which opposes this view... Santillan believes that I confuse syndicalism with the labour movement, while the fact is that I have always opposed syndicalism and have been a warm supporter of the labour movement.

I am against syndicalism, both as a doctrine and a practice, because it strikes me as a hybrid creature that puts its faith, not necessarily in reformism as Santillan sees it, but in classist exclusiveness and authoritarianism. I favour the labour movement because I believe it to be the most effective way of raising the morale of the workers and because, too, it is a grand and universal enterprise that can be ignored only by those who have lost their grip on real life. At the same time I am well aware that, setting out as it does to protect the short-term interests of the workers, it tends naturally to reformism and cannot, therefore, be confused with the anarchist movement itself.

Santillan insists on arguing that my ideal is 'a pure labour movement, independent of any social tendency, and which holds its own goals within itself' When have I ever said such a thing? Short of going back — which I could easily do — to what Santillan calls the prehistoric time of my earlier activities, I recall that as far back as 1907, at the Anarchist Congress of Amsterdam, I found myself crossing swords with the 'Charter of Amiens' syndicalists and expressing my total distrust of the miraculous virtues of a 'syndicalism that sufficed unto itself'

Santillan says that a pure labour movement has never existed, does not exist and cannot exist without the influence of external ideologies and challenges me to give a single example to the contrary. But what I'm saying is the same thing! From the time of the First International and before, the parties — and I use the term in the general sense of people who share the same ideas and aims — have invariably sought to use the labour movement for their own ends. It is natural and right that this is so, and I should like the anarchists, as I think Santillan would too, not to neglect the power of the labour movement as a means of action. The whole point at issue is whether it suits our aims, in terms of action and propaganda, for the labour organisations to be open to all workers, irrespective of philosophical or social creed, or whether they should be split into different political and social tendencies. This is a matter not of principle but of tactics, and involves different solutions according to time and place. But in general to me it seems better that the anarchists remain, when they can, within the largest possible groupings.

I wrote: 'A labour organisation that styles itself anarchist, that was and is genuinely anarchist and is made up exclusively of dyed-in-the-wool anarchists, could be a form — in some circumstances an extremely useful one — of anarchist grouping; but it would not be the labour move-

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<sup>2</sup>Diego Abad de Santillan (1897–1983), Argentinean by birth. Active in the Spanish Civil War. Journalist and editor.



ment and it would lack the purpose of such a movement.' This statement, which seems simple and obvious to me, dumbfounds Santillan. He throws himself at it in transcendental terms, concluding that 'if anarchism is the idea of liberty it can never work against the ends of the labour movement as all other factions do.'

Let's keep our feet firmly on the ground. What is the aim of the labour movement? For the vast majority, who are not anarchist, and who, save at exceptional times of exalted heroism, think more of the present moment than of the future, the aim of the labour movement is the protection and improvement of the conditions of the workers now and is not effective if its ranks are not swelled with the greatest possible number of wage earners, united in solidarity against their bosses. For us, and in general all people of ideas, the main reason for our interest in the labour movement is the opportunities it affords for propaganda and preparation for the future — and even this aim is lost if we gather together solely with like-minded people.

Santillan says that if the Italian anarchists had managed to destroy the General Confederation of Labour there would perhaps be no fascism today. This is possible. But how to destroy the General Confederation if the overwhelming majority of the workers are not anarchist and look to wherever there is least danger and the greatest chance of obtaining some small benefit in the short term? I do not wish to venture into that kind of hindsight that consists in saying what would have happened if this or that had been done, because once in this realm anyone can say what they like without fear of being proved wrong. But I will allow myself one question. Since the General Confederation could not be destroyed and replaced with another equally powerful organisation, would it not have been better to have avoided schism and remain within the organisation to warn members against the somnolence of its leaders? We can learn something from the constant efforts made by those leaders to frustrate any proposal for unification and keep the dissidents at bay.

A final proof of the mistaken way in which certain Spanish comrades interpret my ideas on the labour movement: In the periodical from San Feliu de Guixol, *Accion Obrera* is an article by Vittorio Aurelio in which he states:

'I believe that my mission is to act within the unions, seeking to open from within the labour organisations an ever upward path towards the full realisation of our ideals. And whether we achieve that depends on our work, our morale and our behaviour. But we must act through persuasion, not imposition. For this reason I disagree that the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) in Spain should directly call itself anarchist, when, unfortunately, the immense majority of its members do not know what this means, what libertarian ideology is about. I wonder, if the defenders of this argument know that the members of the workers' organisation do not think or act anarchically, why is there this anxiety to impose a name, when we know full well that names alone mean nothing?'

This is precisely my point. And I wonder why, in saying this, Vittorio Aurelio finds it necessary to declare that he does not agree with Malatesta! Either my style of writing is getting too obscure or my writings are being regularly distorted by the Spanish translators.

March 1926

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Errico Malatesta  
On Syndicalism  
1925–1926

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From the Freedom Press publication “The anarchist revolution: Polemical articles 1924–1931:  
Errico Malatesta”. Some paragraph breaks have been added to improve readability

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