



CAPITALISM

Program for October 30, 2008

TOM WETZEL

of the Workers Solidarity Alliance, on

The Struggle Against Capitalism

Next month's program

The theme of next month's program will be class struggle. Barry Pateman will speak.



What is anarchism?

Anarchism began as what it remains today: a direct challenge by the underprivileged to their oppression and exploitation. It opposes both the insidious growth of state power and the pernicious ethos of possessive individualism, which, together or separately, ultimately serve only the interests of the few at the expense of the rest.

Michael Bakunin, the man whose writings and example over a century ago did most to transform anarchism from an abstract critique of political power into a theory of practical social action, defined its fundamental tenet thus: "In a word, we reject all privileged, licensed, official, and legal legislation and authority, even though it arise from universal suffrage, convinced that it could only turn to the benefit of a dominant and exploiting minority, and against the interests of the vast enslaved majority."

If anarchists have one article of unshakable faith then it is that, once the habit of deferring to politicians or ideologues is lost, and that of resistance to domination and exploitation acquired, then ordinary people have a capacity to organize every aspect of their lives in their own interests, anywhere and at any time, both freely and fairly.



About us

The Alexander Berkman Social Club is a group of anarchists who want to talk about what anarchism is, how anarchists see things, and what anarchy could look like. Named for the irrepressible anarchist author, editor and fighter Alexander Berkman, we hope to have continual monthly meeting that are open to all. Meetings include music, entertainment, speeches, raffles, quizzes, refreshments, and more!



Notes from our last meeting

Last month's speakers were devoted to anarchist alternatives to traditional education. Audrey Goodfriend spoke about her experience founding and working at the Walden School in Berkeley and Andrej Grubacic gave a great overview of anarchism and education in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thank you to all who attended and especially to Audrey and Andrej for their thoughtful and information packed talks.



A call for speakers

Are you working on a project that you think would be interesting to ABSC members? Let us know and we will provide you with time to speak at a meeting. We would love to hear how ABSC members are active in the community. Email us at absocialclub@gmail.com or introduce yourself to an organizer at a meeting.

Alexander Berkman Social Club funds

All money made from ABSC meetings is donated to an anarchist cause. Last month's funds went to the Kate Sharpley Library. The funds from this month's event will benefit the Long Haul Infoshop, recently raided by the police.



Thank you from the Anarchist Black Cross

Our August meeting raised \$243 which was sent to the Los Angeles chapter of the ABC. They wanted us to give this message to our members:

It is with the deepest gratitude that we thank you all for your generosity. Your actions will provide much needed funds to our imprisoned comrades who receive little to no funds. As I am sure you may know, Berkman was a participant in the Anarchist Red Cross and the support for political prisoners around the world. You are continuing the spirit of a great man and hero to the anarchist movement. Thank you for carrying the torch of human liberation and liberty. Together we will break the chains of oppression and slavery.

For Love and Anarchy,
Matthew Hart
LA ABCF



Future meetings

All of our meetings are held at 7 p.m. at 522 Valencia St. (between 16th & 17th Sts.) in San Francisco, but please check the website the most up-to-date information.

- ◆ December 4, 2008: Class Struggle.
- ◆ January 20, 2009: Shelia Rowbotham, on Edward Carpenter.

The program will continue through 2009. If you have ideas for topics or for speakers which you feel will make a welcome addition to the program, please let us know.



The San Francisco Community Land Trust

SFCLT is a membership-based organization whose mission is to create permanently affordable, resident-controlled housing for low- to moderate-income people in San

Francisco through community ownership of the land.

In 2006 SFCLT acquired its first project – 53 Columbus Avenue (formerly the Fong Building) in Chinatown, a mixed-use property that is home to 21 households, all of whom are Chinese-American families earning less than 80% AMI (Area Mean Income). SFCLT collaborates with other community organizations to achieve its goals, and in this case the 53 Columbus project is a collaboration with Chinatown Community Development Corporation, Asian Law Caucus, and Asian Neighborhood Design. The building's resident association is the final partner in the project, as resident participation is core to the Land Trust's homeownership model. After rehabilitation is complete the Asian Law Caucus will move into the ground floor commercial space, thereby bringing this valuable community services resource back into the Chinatown neighborhood. Currently, the building is under renovation and we are working with the residents to create their housing cooperative.

To get involved with the SFCLT contact them at:

SF Community Land Trust
PO Box 420982
San Francisco, CA 94142
<http://sfclt.org/>



What is anarcho-syndicalism?

Tom Wetzel

For anarchists, anti-capitalism follows directly from our belief that people ought to have autonomy in every aspect of their lives. Although the production of the necessities of life is in no way the only place that we struggle for freedom, it has been for a long time played a major role in anarchist activity. In this essay, Tom Wetzel outlines the role of anarchism in some worker's struggles in the past two centuries.

The subordination of the working class to dominating classes under capitalism is itself a form of class oppression. Anarcho-syndicalism, or libertarian syndicalism, is a strategy for liberation of the working class from oppression. Libertarian syndicalists aim to create a society based on workers' self-management of social production. By production I don't just mean manufactur-

ing. Cooking meals in a restaurant, repairing computer servers, or moving people around in city buses are all work in the system of social production.

Libertarian syndicalism interprets liberty as self-management or control over one's life, and believes that freedom for the working class requires the elimination of working class subordination to capitalist or state bosses.

Self-management of an industry would mean that the decisions that govern work in that industry would be controlled by the workers there. If there were a hierarchy governing an industry, as there is under capitalism, this would deny the human birth right to control the decisions that affect one's life. Most decisions in work have a collective or social impact, from what technology to use, to when to start work, to how the work is to be coordinated. Self-management presupposes that there are face-to-face assemblies of workers that would have the ultimate power of control, through discussion and vote of the participants.

Most libertarian syndicalists also believe that self-management should be applied to all forms of decision-making in society, not just to social production. Thus residents of dwellings should be able to self-manage the decisions regarding the places where they live.

The English word syndicalism derives from the word for unionism in the Latin languages (syndicalisme in French, sindicalismo in Spanish). At the beginning of the 20th century, the labor movement in many Latin countries had been strongly influenced by the libertarian Left and had a strong emphasis upon mass direct action and a revolutionary conception of the aims of worker unionism. This is how the English word syndicalism came to refer to a revolutionary conception of the potential of the labor movement.

When Karl Marx wrote up a draft of the principles of the first International Workers Association in 1864 he borrowed from Flora Tristan y Moscoso – a Spanish-French printer, writer, and pioneer socialist-feminist – the slogan “The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves.” Libertarian syndicalists take this principle

literally. Although the word syndicalism did not come into common use til the beginning of the 20th century, the libertarian syndicalist political tendency can trace its lineage back to the Left-libertarians in that first International Workers Association.

Libertarian syndicalists do not accept a strategy for achieving a post-capitalist economy through electoral or parliamentary politics or through the building up of a political party to gain control of a state, with the aim of implementing its program top-down through the state. Some syndicalists may believe that voting for pro-labor candidates is acceptable as a tactic, to gain concessions, but not as a strategy for transforming the society. In the early 1900s, for example, "Big Bill" Haywood – an organizer with the Industrial Workers of the World before World War 1 – supported the efforts of the American Socialist Party to gain control of local governments.

The state itself is organized as a hierarchical structure, with work of public employees controlled by managers and top professionals, much as in the private corporations. The existence of the state as an apparatus apart from real control by the people is needed to enable the state to defend the interests of the dominating classes. This hierarchical, class nature of the state means it can't be used to create a new social arrangement in which the working class are in control. Subordination of workers to such a hierarchical apparatus would imply continued subordination and exploitation of the working class.

Libertarian syndicalists propose a strategy for social transformation based on the development of large-scale worker solidarity and mass actions. Actions of this sort help to develop in working people a sense of power and class consciousness – a sense of "us versus them." The massive national general strike in Russia in 1905 encouraged the development of this strategic vision for social change in the world labor movement in the period between 1906 and World War I. Syndicalists believe that a revolution in which the working class would gain control of society presupposes a process of development of class consciousness, capacity for self-organization and self-confidence within the working class.

Most anarcho-syndicalists advocate

ownership of the means of production by the entire society, with a system of grassroots social planning, not a system of privately owned collectives competing in a market economy.

Unionism historically has "two souls." In periods of struggle workers have at times developed forms of organization of workers themselves, based on things like general meetings of the people in workplaces and elected shop steward committees. At other times, after larger union organizations are formed and gain recognition and contracts with employers, unions have developed hierarchies of paid officials and staff whose conditions of life are not the same as people still working the job, and whose position depends on the continued safety and existence of the union as an institution. This can lead to conflicts between the rank and file of the union and the hierarchy, as the latter act to maintain their longstanding relationships with employers and avoid risks to the union institution.

Worker strength in dealing with the dominating classes grows through wider solidarity and spreading struggles whereas the more bureaucratic, routinized form of unionism tends to limit struggles to particular sectors or unions.

Libertarian syndicalism favors a strategy of broadening struggles, and direct control of struggles and mass organizations by the workers, without subordination to a hierarchical apparatus of paid officials. If the working class is to create a set of new social institutions through which the mass of the people control their own lives, and through which workers run the industries where they work, the process of self-management – collective control by the rank and file – must first emerge in the self-management of struggles in the existing society. The self-managed mass organizations prefigure self-management of social production by workers and the direct self-governance of society by the mass of the people.

In the early 1900s, syndicalism usually was based on organization at the point of production. Later on, extensions of the syndicalist idea have been proposed, such as the "student syndicalism" advocated in the USA in the early '60s, or extension of

the concept to self-organized mass organizations in struggles arising in working class communities outside the workplace, such as struggles of tenants.

Syndicalism in the USA emerged as a labor tendency in opposition to the "business union" ideology and practice of the American Federation of Labor. Labor radicals in the late 19th century USA had begun to talk about building class-wide solidarity of workers. This radical labor vision was opposed by the founders of the AFL. Seeing entrenched racism in the USA, and a flood of immigrants from Europe speaking many languages, the organizers of the AFL viewed the radical strategy of class-wide solidarity as "unrealistic." The AFL focused on organizing groups of workers in particular occupations that had some element of special leverage, such as the skilled trades, or workers in transportation industries that are choke point in the economy. The idea was to use their superior leverage to obtain a better deal with employers. A layer of paid officials emerged, running AFL unions like a "business," not a movement inspired by a vision of workers' liberation. Although the AFL membership quadrupled in the economic boom after 1898, the anti-union "open shop" drive of the employers in 1903 brought this union growth to a halt, and exposed the limits of the AFL approach.

Worker unrest and strikes in the USA between the 1890s and World War I led a number of groups of workers to seek a different form of labor organization that could be more effective as a challenge to employers in the USA than the AFL. The idea was to seek power in numbers, based on the solidarity of all workers, irrespective of craft or race or nationality or gender. This led to the formation in 1905 of the Industrial Workers of the World (called Wobblies), an important expression of syndicalism in the USA in the early 20th century. The IWW developed a significant following among lumber workers in Louisiana and the Pacific Northwest, longshoremen in Philadelphia and maritime workers on the west coast, and farm workers and miners in the western part of the USA. World War I and the anti-radical hysteria after the war led to severe repression of the IWW, including fascist-style vigilante violence,

mass arrests for speech against the war, and the passage of “criminal syndicalism” laws by many state legislatures. A failed attempt by the Communist Party to capture control of the IWW in 1924 further depleted the organization.

Syndicalism also took other forms in the USA in the period after 1900, including militant, grassroots unions like the first Auto Workers Union, formed by syndicalist-influenced socialists in 1918. There was also the Syndicalist League, formed as a political syndicalist group in 1912 with the aim of organizing activists for efforts at broader solidarity in the AFL unions.

Italy also saw various approaches by anarcho-syndicalists in the World War I era. Anarchists had formed rank-and-file direct action committees in the Italian labor movement by the early 1900s. In 1910 this movement formed the *Unione Sindacale Italiana* (Italian Syndicalist Union) on the basis of the IWW platform. At the same time, there were also some anarcho-syndicalist political groups. The Turin Libertarian Group worked with Marxian-syndicalists in the Turin branch of the Italian Socialist Party to develop a shop assembly and stewards’ council movement, independent of the union bureaucracy of the CGL (the Socialist Party-controlled union federation). With the Turin councils’ emphasis upon workers’ management of production and direct democracy of workplace assemblies, the council model was embraced by the USI also. During the mass occupation of the factories by over 600,000 workers in Italy in September, 1920, the anarcho-syndicalists tried to influence the workers movement to transform the occupation into a revolutionary re-organization of Italian society.

The high point of anarcho-syndicalism, thus far, was achieved in the workers’ revolution in Spain in 1936. With the defeat of a repressive right-wing government in elections in February 1936, workers in Spain felt they had an opening to push forward in the development of their movement and pressing for their aims. In the months after February, there were dozens of partial and city-wide general strikes in Spain, many of them initiated by the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (CNT). With about 1.7 million members, the CNT

was the majority labor organization in Spain. There were also tens of thousands of farm workers, mostly organized by the Socialist Party’s UGT union federation, participating in mass takeovers of large agricultural operations, creating worker co-operatives to run them. The intense class polarization and politicization of Spain culminated in an attempted military takeover on July 18, 1936.

The military takeover attempt had been anticipated by the CNT, which had armed many of its members and set up a Workers Defense Committee to coordinate the fightback. In street fighting in Barcelona on July 19-20, the defense groups of the CNT defeated the Spanish army, with the aid of rank-and-file police and air force pilots. The CNT union federation then seized the arms and army bases of the Spanish army in the Barcelona area and built its own union militia. Each of the military divisions within the militia was self-managing, with assemblies and election of the commanding officer (chief delegate) of that division. The CNT set up a militia committee to run its army. The CNT metal workers union seized the Spanish motor vehicle manufacturing industry to convert it to the manufacture of armored vehicles for the union army.

With armed power in the hands of the CNT in Catalonia, the CNT unions began seizing the means of production, with the UGT unions coming along in many cases. Initially the union itself took over management of an industry. In the summer of 1936 more than 18,000 enterprises, 14 million acres of farm land, and thousands of urban buildings in Spain were expropriated by the unions. In Catalonia this included hairdressing shops, lumber mills, furniture manufacturing, the plate glass industry, dairies, bakeries, the national telephone system, railroads, public transit, the motor freight and maritime shipping industries, theaters and film-making. A socialized health care system was created for the first time in Spain, self-managed by people working in health care.

The assets were seized in the name of

the people of Spain. The CNT had never advocated that facilities be the collective private property of the workers working there. The CNT’s ultimate aim was to create, “from below,” a democratically planned, socially-owned economy.

In addition to industrial federations to manage the industries, the CNT also proposed the formation of general meetings of residents in villages and neighborhoods, forming “free municipalities.” These would provide the local governance system and provide for input for consumption goods and public services to regional and national planning. Regional and national worker congresses, bringing together delegates from the self-managing industries, would be another part of the planning system.

To counter the efforts of the Communists to rebuild the Republican state, and replace the labor militia with a conventional top-down army, the CNT in early September 1936 proposed replacing the existing Spanish state with a working class government – a system of regional and national Defense Councils and worker congresses, and a unified militia controlled jointly by the two big labor federations in Spain, the CNT and the UGT. After this proposal was rejected by the head of the UGT, who was then prime minister in the Popular Front government, differences emerged over direction inside the CNT and eventually the CNT opted to join the Popular Front government.

With the failure of the CNT to build a union-controlled political power, the armed forces fighting the fascists were re-organized by the Popular Front government into a conventional, hierarchical military. The Communist Party ultimately gained most of the officer positions in the new army. The increasing power of the Communists led to attacks on agricultural and industrial self-management, and demoralization of CNT members who made up a majority of the rank and file in the anti-fascist army. Writers such as George Orwell and Jose Peirats viewed this as a cause of the defeat of the anti-fascist side in the Spanish civil war.

Visit us on the web for the latest information on ABSC events, photos & audio from our previous events, links to important resources, and more.

<http://alexanderberkmansocialclub.blogspot.com/>