

THE STANDPOINT OF SYNDICALISM

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The standpoint of Syndicalism is clear and definite. Syndicalism expressly denies the possibility of industrial peace under existing conditions, frankly proclaims its determination to carry on industrial warfare as long as the present economic system exists, and firmly believes that only the realization of its own program will establish industrial peace on a permanent and secure basis.

Syndicalism arrives at its first conclusion by an analysis of existing economic conditions. The fact which is untiringly emphasized in the Syndicalist analysis is the objective antagonistic position of those engaged in modern industry. The owners of the means of production directly or indirectly running their business for their private ends are interested in ever-increasing profits and in higher returns. The workingmen, on the other hand, who passively carry on productive operations are anxious to obtain the highest possible price for their labor-power which is their only source of livelihood. Between these two economic categories friction is inevitable, because profits ever feed on wages, while wages incessantly encroach upon profits, and because the passive wage earners shake off now and then their submissiveness and reach out for more control over industrial conditions, while the owners and directors of industry resent the interference of the workers.

From this twofold antagonism, rooted in the structure of modern economic society, struggle must ever spring anew, and this is the reason why all schemes and plans to avoid industrial conflicts fail so lamentably. Even the conservative trades unions, based on the idea that the interests of labor and capital are identical, are forced by circumstances to act contrary to their own profession of faith. Organizations, like the Civic Federation, are doomed to impotency. Boards of conciliation and arbitration work most unsatisfactorily and can show but few and insignificant results. If arbitration is once in a while successfully resorted to, it is only when the menace of a great and dangerous industrial conflict stares the community in the face.



But the threat of a strike is as much a manifestation of industrial peace, as the mobilization of troops on the frontier is a manifestation of international peace.

It is preposterous—argue the Syndicalists—to attribute the acute character of our industrial conflicts to “pernicious agitators,” socialists, anarchists, and “turbulent” individuals generally. Would a miracle still be possible in our sceptical age, and should all these “undesirable” elements be rushed to Heaven on a fiery chariot, our world would still remain a battleground of opposed interests. One must ignore the elementary facts of human psychology to believe that a few individuals, however gifted and energetic, could move large masses of men to action unless the conditions in which these masses lived prompted them to follow these leaders. And one must be blinded by hopeless optimism to believe that all the employers will one day become benevolent and “inspired” and will joyfully hand out to the workers all that the latter may demand, thus removing all occasions for mutual ill feeling and conflict.

The most that can be achieved by benevolent effort as long as the basis of modern economic life remains unchanged is to mitigate now and then the violent character of the industrial struggle and to ward off a conflict here and there. But the result is hardly commensurate with the energy spent, while the principal aim of these efforts—industrial security and peace—is not attained. As is shown by experience, conflict mitigated once becomes more violent the next time, and warded off at one point breaks out at ten other points. All efforts, therefore, to establish industrial peace under existing conditions result at best in the most miserable kind of social patchwork which but reveals in more striking nudity the irreconcilable contradictions inherent in modern economic organization.

There is but one logical conclusion from the point of view of Syndicalism. If industrial peace is made impossible by modern economic institutions, the latter must be done away with and industrial peace must be secured by a fundamental change in social organization. At the root of the struggle between capital and labor is the private ownership of the means of production which results in the autocratic or oligarchic direction of industry and in inequality of distribution. The way to secure industrial peace is to remove the fundamental cause of industrial war, that is, to make the means of production common property, to put the management of industry on a truly democratic basis and to equalize distribution.

In general terms the program of Syndicalism may not seem to differ in any respect from that of socialism, and, in fact, socialism and Syndicalism have many points in common. Yet there is an essential difference. The Syndicalist analysis of modern society emphasizes a point which is not prominent in socialism and which leads to important differences in their constructive programs. That point is the question of control. While the socialist lays emphasis on what he considers the exploitation-features of capitalistic society, the Syndicalist lays no less emphasis on the relations of authority and freedom in economic life, on the aspect of direction and management in industry. The Syndicalist finds that this is one of the sources of industrial troubles in the present, and he is convinced that a proper solution of this aspect of the social problem is essential for industrial peace. He can not agree with the socialist that the concentration of the economic functions of society in the hands of the state represented by a government elected on the basis of territorial representation is the proper and adequate solution of the problem. The Syndicalist distrusts the state and believes that political forms and institutions have outlived their usefulness and can not be adapted to new social relations. The Syndicalist program for the future, in so far as it is definite and clear, contains the outlines of an industrial society—the basis of which is the industrial union and the subdivisions of which are federations of unions and federations of federations. The direction of industry, in this ideal system, is decentralized in such a manner that each industrial part of society has the control only of those economic functions for the intelligent performance of which it is especially fitted by experience, training, and industrial position.

The Syndicalist is convinced that until his program is carried out, industrial peace is impossible. To one who believes in the eternal character of existing economic institutions such a pessimistic conclusion could not but be a source of grief and regret. But the Syndicalist, guided by the idea of social revolution, feels differently. While he may regret the suffering and social disturbance which follow in the train of industrial struggles, he sees in the latter another aspect which is to him a source of gratification and hope. This other aspect is what he considers the organizing and constructive power of the industrial struggle—its creative force.

The creative force of the industrial struggle, according to the

Syndicalist, manifests itself in a series of economic and moral phenomena which, taken together, must have far-reaching results. In the struggle for higher wages and better conditions of work the workmen are led to see the important part they play in the mechanism of production and to resent more bitterly the opposition to their demands on the part of employers. With the intensification of the struggle, the feeling of resentment develops into a desire for emancipation from the conditions which make oppression possible; in other words, it grows into complete class consciousness which consists not merely in the recognition of the struggle of classes but also in the determination to abolish the class-character of society. At the same time the struggle necessarily leads the workmen to effect a higher degree of solidarity among themselves, to develop their moral qualities, and to fortify and consolidate their organizations. The stronger the latter become, the more do they assert themselves in the economic struggle, and the more evident does it become to the workers that their organizations could readily supplant the organizations of the capitalists and assume the control of the economic life of society.

It is evident that unless the Syndicalist could theoretically connect the struggles of the present with his ideal of the future, the latter would remain a beautiful but idle dream even in theory. For the Syndicalist, as has been said, does not believe in the efficacy of benevolent intentions, nor does he think the power of mere abstract ideas sufficient for transforming society. He is bound, therefore, to find concrete social forces working for the realization of his ideal. His position forces him to prove that his ideal is the expression of the interests of a definite class, that it is gradually being accepted by that class under the pressure of circumstances, and that the social destinies of the "revolutionary" class are more and more identified with the Syndicalist ideal. In the theory above outlined the Syndicalist believes he has solved his problem and has found the connecting link between his analysis of the present and his outlook for the future.

Having thus defined the significance of the industrial struggle, the Syndicalist is led to lay down rules of practical activity in accordance with his theory. He cheerfully accepts the conclusion that if industrial strife is creating social harmony his task is to intensify the struggle, to widen its scope, and to perfect its methods—in order that the creative force of the struggle may manifest itself as thoroughly

and on as large a scale as possible. He, therefore, logically, assumes a hostile attitude towards all efforts tending to mitigate the industrial struggle, such as conciliation and arbitration, and definitely enters the economic arena for the purpose of stirring up strife and of accentuating the struggle as much as is in his power.

To those who are anxious to bring about peace between labor and capital on the basis of existing economic and legal institutions, the Syndicalist must necessarily appear as a disturbing factor in the situation. The Syndicalist will not deny this nor will he be forced to change his attitude either by denunciation or by persecution. From his own standpoint, the Syndicalist believes that he is merely sincere in looking facts in the face, logical in drawing the proper conclusions from them, and rationally optimistic in seeing through the mist of the contradictory present the rising sun of a socially harmonious future.