

Is syndicalism outdated?

Book Review

Paul Buhle

2012

a review of

Ours to Master and to Own: Workers' Control from the Commune to the Present Edited by Immanuel Ness and Dario Azzellini. Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2011, 417pp, \$19

Syndicalism, the love child of socialism (or Marxism) and anarchism, seems to be badly outdated, or is it?

The idea that the working class could overthrow capitalism and the state through a general strike, and administer a new society through workers councils reached a peak popularity shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, but sunk rapidly thereafter. It was sometimes criticized as the propensity of highly skilled workers, but actually it was the faith of the lower levels (especially in the Industrial Workers of the World, if rarely called syndicalism by them).

Perhaps the repression of Italian workers by forces around Mussolini was decisive, perhaps the defection of so many leading syndicalists to pseudo-patriotism, or to the mainstream unions and to Communist movements, was decisive. The moment that passed did not return, even when American workers took over cities for a few days, or staged vast sit-ins, sweeping across whole regions in the 1930s.

But somehow, the spirit survived, no doubt in part because the political parties of the Left were such a disappointment, unwilling and unable to lead surges of workers' initiatives.

The New Left proudly called itself "Student Syndicalist," and during the steady retreat from the social rebelliousness of the 1960s and early 1970s, hints of syndicalism could often be heard, and not only in the US.

Does it have a future in societies where industrial capitalism has apparently been replaced by service-and-swindle economies? Two notable scholars, both of them with a global reach, have made an invaluable contribution to answering this vital question.

The first essay, by Victor Wallis (a longtime editor of *Socialism and Democracy* journal) sets the tone, with seriousness and good writing. The idea of "workers' control" sounds so simple, but is so revolutionary, whether posed as a socialist, anarchist, or some other kind of demand. It is an essence of democracy, what a section of the US New Left called "participatory democracy." And, still unrealized.

Donny Gluckstein supplies a lucid overview of European efforts across the generations, and others chime in with a wide variety of perspectives on related themes. We revisit Anton Pannekoek, for instance, and the "Left Communism" so condemned by Lenin. We see the Shop Stewards of Germany and the UK, the factory committees (Soviets) of old Russia, under other names in Italy and Spain, but not so different.

We move through the postwar decades, finding ourselves in Yugoslavia, Indonesia, Latin America, with surprisingly similar results.

Closer to the present, factory councils respond to the austerity that the ruling classes seek to impose, and the dilemmas of factory councils under purportedly democratic left-wing governments (most notably in Brazil). So far, though, no escape from capitalism.

Still, the game is far from over and the lessons to be learned will be found here in abundance.

Dig in, reader.

Paul Buhle, founder of the journal *Radical America* in 1967, is now retired from academic life, engaged in radical comics, and prone to join the demonstrators in Wisconsin seeking something akin to syndicalist revival. His latest volume, *It Started in Wisconsin*, reflects the latter proclivity. Also, his recently released book from PM Press, *Robin Hood: People's Outlaw and Forest Hero, A Graphic Guide*, illustrated by Chris Hutchinson. pmpress.org

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