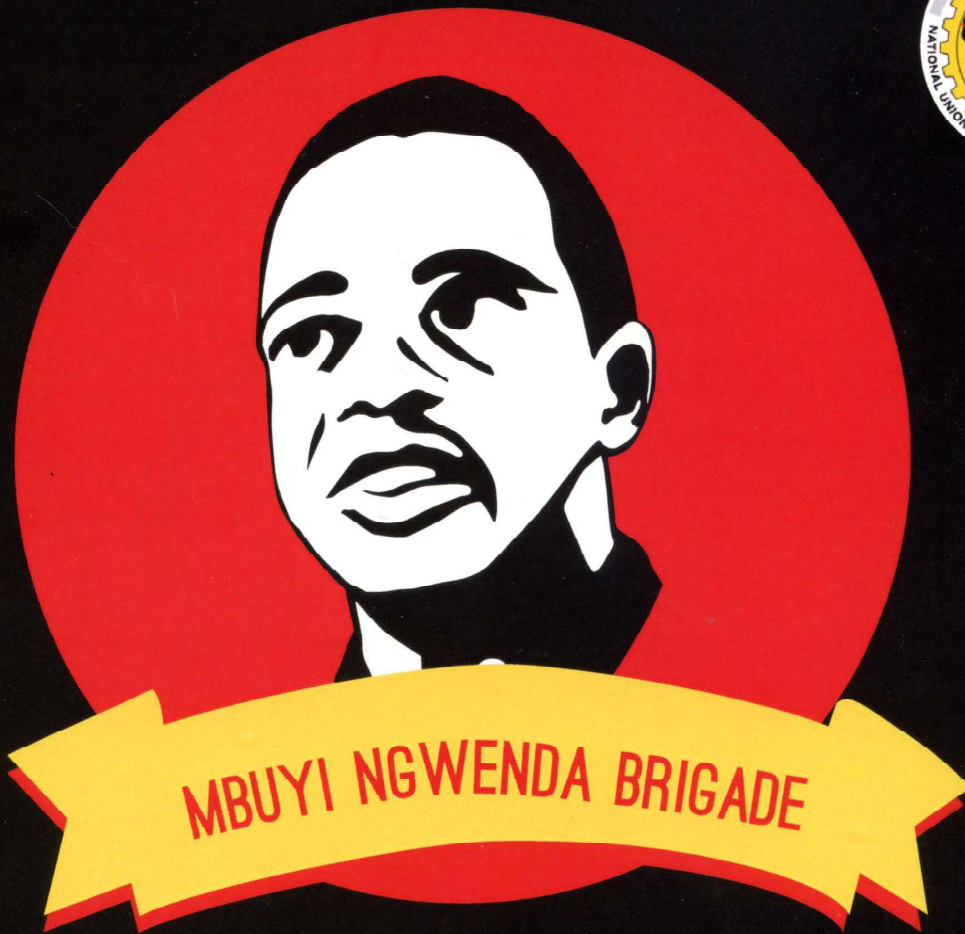


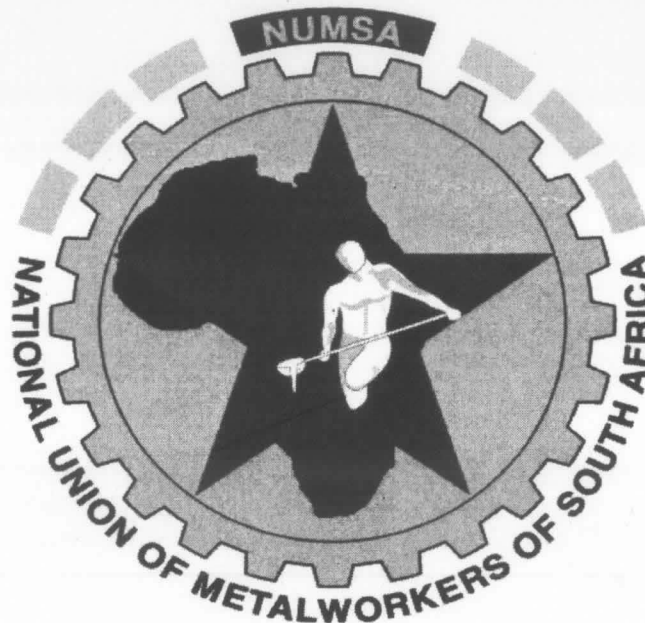
**NUMSA Launch of Marxist-Leninist Political Schools
&
Launch of Mbuyi Ngwenda Brigade**



Friday 13 – Wed 18 Sept 2013

*The Political Role of Trade Unions
in the Struggle for Socialism*

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**Friday 13 – Wed 18 Sept 2013
Kopanong Hotel and Conference Centre, Benoni**

The Political Role of Trade Unions in the Struggle for Socialism

Day 3: Sunday 15 September

Session Convenor: **Andrew Chirwa** (Numsa 1st Vice President)

Time	Activity/Topic	Motivation	Methodology	People
09.00-09.30	Recap of the previous day's activities	To assess whether any learning has taken place.		Process watchers from the Reading Circles
09.30-10.15	From Rustenburg to Ongoye: The Evolution of the SACP's Programmatic Approach	Since its historic 11 th national congress held in July 2002 in Rustenburg, the programmatic approach of the SACP has been evolving. Its recent injunction to the working class is for the proletariat to take responsibility for both the advances and setbacks of the NDR. It is important for participants to understand this evolution.	Lecture	David Masondo (ANC and SACP member & Limpopo MPL)
10.15-10.45	Questions & discussions		Plenary discussions	All participants
Tea break				
11.15-12.30	Marxism and the Sociology of Trade Unions	Marxists of different shades have grappled with the question of the role to be played by union in the struggle for socialism. According to Richard Hyman this debate has divided Marxists into what he calls 'optimists: such as early Marx and Engels who believed that union had a positive role to play and "pessimists" like Lenin who held the view that unions had a limited role to play in the struggle for socialism. With the experience of more than 150-years, where will place unions? Do they have a potential to contribute to the struggle for socialism or are they limited?	6 Reading circles focussing on extracts from the Richard Hyman pamphlet with a help of a worksheet.	Groupwork/Commissions facilitated by Reading Circle Convenor
Lunch				
13.30-15.30	Are unions inherently reformist or can they play a positive role in the struggle for socialism?	Inspired by a reading of Lenin's <i>What Is To Be Done</i> , a strong view has been held on the limitations of unions in the struggle for socialism. How accurate is this reading?	Roundtable and plenary discussion moderated by Oupa Bodibe .	Panellists: *Solly Afrika Mapaila (SACP – 2 nd DGS) * Prof. Lucien van der Walt (Rhodes University)
Tea break				
16.30-17.00	Introducing Joe Slovo's 1988 pamphlet - <i>The South African Working Class and the National Democratic Revolution</i>	This is regarded as a classic on the question of the relationship between the party and trade unions.	Introduction of the pamphlet in plenary	Judi Madumo (Numsa Education Programme Coordinator) & Sian Byrne (Naledi Researcher)

Worksheet and Guide Questions?

1. Is there a difference between Marx/Engels and Lenin on their understanding of the role of unions in the struggle for socialism?
2. In your experience of a union like Cosatu will you adopt an 'optimistic' or 'pessimistic' view of the role of unions in the struggle for socialism?
3. What role does Semudi define for unions in the current period? Do you agree with him?

NUMSA Political School: "The Political Role of Trade Unions in the Struggle for Socialism"

Friday 13 - Wed 18 September 2013

Kopanong Hotel and Conference Centre, Benoni

Professor Lucien van der Walt

Sociology Department, Rhodes University

c: 073 146 0871

e: l.vanderwalt@ru.ac.za

w:

<http://www.ru.ac.za/sociology/staff/academicstaff/professorlucienvanderwalt/>

b: <http://lucienvanderwalt.wordpress.com/>

b: <http://rhodes-za.academia.edu/LucienvanderWalt>

s: <http://za.linkedin.com/pub/lucien-van-der-walt/38/507/685>

Are unions inherently reformist or can they play a positive role in the struggle for socialism?

- A. Do unions have a role in the struggle for socialism?
- B. What is exactly the role of the unions in the struggle for socialism?
- C. What is the difference between a Party and unions?
- D. Is the idea of revolutionary trade unions or Marxist-Leninist unions an anathema given what Lenin said about the limitations of unions?

REFERENCE DETAILS: Lucien van der Walt, 2013, "Are Unions Inherently Reformist or Can they Play a Positive Role in the Struggle for Socialism? A Critique of Classical Marxism and Leninism," in *Reading Kit: National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) 1st Marxist-Leninist Political School: NUMSA Launch of Marxist-Leninist Political Schools & Launch of Mbuyi Ngwenda Brigade - The Political Role of Trade Unions in the Struggle for Socialism*. Kopanong Hotel and Conference Centre, Benoni, 13-18 September 2013.

There are several different issues here:

1. Introduction
2. The Leninist theory
3. Counter-examples
4. Strategy and tactics: syndicalist lines

It seems a bit odd to be discussing the question of whether trade unions can play a revolutionary role, at a gathering such as this - a five day school by the country's most radical union - that is all about debating politics, and seeking to chart a revolutionary road forward. This is a refutation in action of the many claims that have been made about the role of trade unions - of claims that unions can only be "revolutionary" when led by a political party, as a junior partner..

Can unions be revolutionary? Can they be political?

There are many examples that show that unions can be profoundly political, and deeply radical - and often far more radical than the political parties that believe themselves vanguards. Whether this is the *correct* approach is one thing - that is *can* and *does* happen, is a *historical fact*.

The aim of this paper is to draw attention to these traditions in the working class - and especially to the anarcho-syndicalist tradition, which has similarities, but also important difference with classical Marxism, as a contribution to the *historical memory* of the working class and its *many* traditions, and as a contribution to debate on the current struggles and *options* for the working class.

The aim is *not* to prescribe this model, nor to do a complete analysis of its record, but to open a *discussion* that recalls other working class and socialist traditions, besides social democracy and Marxism-Leninism - a discussion in the best traditions of open and critical thinking in the working class movement.

Those options are often presented as *which* party to support - but there are more options than this; working class history is more than just story of workers parties. And the story of workers parties is a very uneven one - and hardly always a glorious one; in fact, it is sometimes a history of heroism and struggle, but often a history, also of degeneration, betrayal and authoritarianism.

Radical trade unions in South Africa have a long-established role as forces that have

- 1) raised political issues and waged political and economic struggles, both within and far beyond the workplace;
- 2) promoted anti-capitalist ideas, including undertaking mass education;
- 3) confronted the state and capital with powerful actions, including armed actions; and
- 4) played a leading role in political activity ... often far in advance of what political parties have suggested.

And there are even more dramatic examples from abroad: the one I stress is that of the Spanish Revolution. This was a revolution that was led by an anarcho-syndicalist union, the CNT (or National Confederation of Labour), which was allied to the Anarchist Federation of Iberia (FAI).

Since the term "syndicalism" keeps getting used, let's be clear on its correct meaning, and from there, you can decide if calling the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) "syndicalist" is an insult - or a true reflection. But what I will tell you about the CNT in Spain will paint a picture of what syndicalism is all about - not syndicalism as an "-ism" label thrown about to confuse people, but as a living historical working class movement.

WHAT IS SYNDICALISM, IN THE CORRECT SENSE?

Syndicalism argues that unions can play a critical role laying the foundations for such a society, by

- 1) building mass democratic organisations, that are self-managed, bottom-up, with any leaders firmly mandated and never privileged i.e. they can build the infrastructure of a *counterpower* that can take power, and help create the new society;
- 2) by building education and consciousness, amongst the widest layer of the masses, that is, of a revolutionary working class *counter-culture*;
- 3) by the syndicalist unions playing a leading role in each and every struggle of the working class, *independent of all political parties that aim at state power, and outside of elections*, stressing direct and extra-parliamentary action and bottom-up struggles; it is not politically "neutral" but political *through the unions*;
- 4) by the syndicalist unions leading, at the correct moment, a *revolutionary general strike*, in which workers take and hold and place under self-management the means of production;
- 5) the creation of a society, in this means, based on production collectives, community and worker control, and a democratically planned economy, free of the political elites and the state, and the economic elites and the corporations

- a society of *anarchist communism, or libertarian communism*.

This is the basic syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist strategy... I say *anarcho-syndicalist*, because it comes from the anarchist tradition of **Mikhail Bakunin**, Marx's rival. This accepts many of the elements of Marxist economic theory, but rejects the classical Marxist strategy of seizing state power, through a revolutionary party, and nationalisation. It aims instead as collectivisation, self-management and a society free of hierarchy including the state.

Syndicalism differs from social democracy and communism in that it considers action by federations of revolutionary trade unions - not action by political parties and the state - as decisive. Parliament is the graveyard of struggles, according to this view. Parties are not accountable to the working class, only to party leaders, and party leaders are, over time, drawn into the ruling class.

This raises issues of the organisational *form of the working class*, and raises questions about whether political advance for the working class requires a "vanguard party" or a "mass workers party" - or can rather take a form similar to - but more democratic than and more radical than - the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) in the 1980s: a broad front of revolutionary classes for self-management.¹

THE ARGUMENT THAT UNIONS ARE REFORMIST

The major problem that exists in most classical Marxist thinking around unions is that it has been structured by a tendency to separate out "political" and "economic" issues, and then to treat political issues as the province of a Marxist Communist party, and "economic" issues as the province of the unions.

Let us, for simplicity sake, call this the classical Leninist theory; note, however, that this basic approach was also shared by all the major theorists of classical Marxism - this includes Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Karl Kautsky, V.I. Lenin, Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong and Fidel

¹ See for historical material and analysis of key issues, Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt, 2009, *Black Flame: the revolutionary class politics of anarchism and syndicalism*. AK Press; Rudolph Rocker, [1938] 1989, *Anarcho-syndicalism*. Pluto Press. These books are online, or contact l.vanderwalt@ru.ac.za for copies.

Castro. Thus theory does not ignore unions; it sees unions as essential, as important and a key site of activism, but as deeply flawed and limited.²

According to this theory, unions are inherently "reformist" and "economistic" bodies. The only way to avoid this, the argument continues, is that the unions must be led by a Marxist political party, which aims to capturing state power. In this theory, unions are only "revolutionary" if they are led by a Marxist party. They are only political, if they are led by a Marxist party.

The party is supposed to be superior, because it is organised on the basis of *common theory*, not common interests (e.g. for higher wages); also, the party can capture the state, which is seen by this tradition as the absolute heart of social revolution: the creation of a *revolutionary state*.

Left to themselves (the theory goes on), unions are by their nature "reformist", meaning that they supposedly only deal in small changes, and lack any larger vision or strategy for change.³ They are trapped in immediate struggles to get a higher price for labour power, and divide workers into

² Perry Anderson, 977, "The Limits and Possibilities of Trade Union Action," in T. Clarke and T. Clements (eds.), *Trade Unions under Capitalism*. London: Fontana; V.I Lenin, ([1902] 1975, "What is to be Done? burning questions of our movement," *n Selected Works in Three Volumes*, Vol. 1; L. Trotsky [1920], 1921, *The Defence of Terrorism (Terrorism and Communism)*. The Labour Publishing Company/ George Allen and Unwin; Comrades in Africa. 1984. "Ideological Struggle on the Trade Union Front." *African Communist*, 99 (fourth quarter): 106-109; Nhere, Ruth. 1984. "The Dangers of 'Legal Marxism' in South Africa." *African Communist*, 99 (fourth quarter): 75-80; Nyawuza. 1985. "New 'Marxist' Tendencies and the Battle of Ideas in South Africa." *African Communist*, 103 (fourth quarter): 45-62; Toussaint. 1983. "A Trade Union is Not a Political Party: A critique of the speech 'Where FOSATU Stands.'" *African Communist*, 93 (second quarter): 35-47; for a recent statement, Jerry Semudi, 2013, "The Status of Trade Unions in Forms and Methods of Struggle," *The Thinker*, pp. 46-47

³ The problem with reformism is *not* that it makes small changes: many of these changes are very valuable, whether they mean higher wages, or better labour law, or more welfare. Such changes, I am sure, would be supported by any serious revolutionary. The problem with reformism is that it never goes *beyond* the programme of small changes. Through collective bargaining, campaigns, elections and the law, reformism has no aim but more small reforms; it has no strategy to fundamentally change society, the deep logic of how society works; it has no real aim of doing so.

innumerable grades, races, jobs and industries etc. They cannot have a common consciousness, because they must recruit every worker regardless of ideology: this is a further reason for division. They always compromise, and they always accept the larger system. This makes it impossible for them to even *imagine*, let alone organise, a *general struggle* by the *whole* working class.

They cannot *make* a revolution, since (the classical Marxist argument continues), they lack the power to really overthrow the existing system: this requires taking control, but (the theory claims), unions have basically a *negative* power. They can *disrupt* and *destroy* production through strikes, but they cannot *restart* and *reconstruct* production. And since their fights are mainly around wages and working conditions, they also suffer from "economism," which means a narrow focus on economic issues, ignoring the larger political situation - and even political issues at the workplace itself.

THE PARTY AS LEADER?

This is the deep position in the mainstream of classical Marxism. Practically and politically, unions should (according to this way of thinking) take their guidance from Marxist parties, provide funds and voters and soldiers, but stop before doing anything else.

So, while there is a division of labour, between the union and the Marxist party, in this way of thinking, it's a division between head (the party) and hands (the unions). Hands do not think; they are only worth something if the head tells them what to do: this is the logic being applied here.

This view underlies what Richard Hyman calls Marx's "optimistic" theory of trade unionism: here trade unions are *schools* that teach basic lessons or *drilling grounds* for new soldiers. However, schools need teachers and armies need generals - here steps in the Communist Party, to lead. What Hyman calls Lenin's "pessimistic" position is basically the same, just stated more bluntly: said Lenin, "the spontaneous working-class movement is *trade-unionism* ... trade unionism means the *ideological enslavement* of the workers *by the bourgeoisie*." ⁴

Only when *led by the party*, which *alone* (as Lenin says) is the bearer of a revolutionary consciousness, are the unions "revolutionary." But their "revolutionary" character comes

⁴ V.I Lenin, ([1902] 1975, "What is to be Done? burning questions of our movement," *n Selected Works in Three Volumes*, Vol. 1

from outside: it is *only* by association with the party, and acceptance of party leadership, that the union is revolutionary: "there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement..."

And if the union is against the party, it is (at best) backward and reformist, and (at worst) counter-revolutionary. Revolution here simply means the party taking state power: "... the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of that class, because in all capitalist countries ... the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts ... It can be exercised only by a vanguard that has absorbed the revolutionary energy of the class."⁵

In such a scenario, the unions continue to play second fiddle: for Lenin, there must be a "a number of "transmission belts" running from the vanguard to the mass of the advanced class," among them unions. In the new satiation, "the role of the trade unions in production" includes "production propaganda... distribution of bonuses ... [and] disciplinary courts..."⁶ And it is the party that runs the show.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS THEORY?

The whole argument for party leadership boils down to the claim that the Marxist party is superior in all cases to the union. But this is not a very convincing claim.

1) The notion that unions are inherently reformist and economistic is not accurate. Because unions *at present* may act this way, does not mean that unions will *always and everywhere* act this way.

On the contrary, unions have often developed revolutionary theories, and undertaken revolutionary actions. An excellent example of this is the syndicalist tradition, which was developed by trade unionists, who disagreed with the

2) The notion that unions can only be revolutionary when led by a Marxist party is also untrue. It is possible to be a

⁵ Lenin, V.I. (1920), *The Trade Unions, The Present Situation And Trotsky's Mistakes*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/dec/30.htm>

⁶ Lenin (1920), "The Trade Unions, The Present Situation And Trotsky's Mistakes"

revolutionary without being a Marxist, and to be a Marxist without being a revolutionary. Unions have been revolutionary without Marxist parties; unions have been more radical than Marxist parties; and unions have been revolutionary, in some cases, despite *opposition* by Marxist parties.

A great deal depends upon the balance of forces in society, and the character of the unions.

3) Not all unions are revolutionary, and it is not *automatic* that unions become revolutionary. However, given the correct ideology and a bottom-up structure, unions can do quite remarkable things. The notion that unions are always fragmented, lacking ideological unity and unable to envisage or undertake revolutionary change, is simply untrue. As I will show below, trade unions like the CNT in Spain were far more revolutionary than the Spanish Communist Party.

4) Next, it is simply not true that all union struggles, even around reforms, end in compromises. On the contrary many struggles, even for reforms, end in outright *victory* for the workers - not compromise. These shift the balance of power and affect the operation of capitalism itself.

5) History shows the state cannot easily be used for making a revolution - the reason that the syndicalists rejected the strategy of parties taking state power is that it pretty much always ends up, either with a reformist betrayal, where an elected party goes over to the capitalist class; or a revolutionary authoritarianism, where a party captures the state and creates a new dictatorship - the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) would be seen by syndicalists as an example: the state became the "sole initiator, organiser, and animator of the whole life of the country". It enforced its power through a centralised administration and network of police terror. Its system was "totalitarian" and "integral state capitalism."⁷

5) There are numerous examples of unions acting in ways that are simply not predicted by classical Marxist theory; there is nothing scientific about claims that unions are inherently reformist.

⁷ Voline (Vsevolod Eichenbaum), [1947] 1990, *The Unknown Revolution 1917-1921*. Black Rose. p. 358

So much has been said about the limitations of trade unions, but there is nothing inherent in unions which prevent them from being profoundly revolutionary and transformative.

A theory is as valuable as its ability to explain reality, and the problem with the classical Marxist approach to unions is that it really does not capture the complex reality and history of unions.

SOME SOUTH AFRICAN EXAMPLES

2013 is the anniversary of a number of major events in our country's history that demonstrate unions' ability, often without any party leadership, to develop in this direction.

In Benoni, in early 1913, white trade unions launched a general strike that escalated into riots and gun battles, which left unions in control of large parts of Johannesburg. At some mines, including New Kleinfontein, the most extreme wing of the unions even tried to draw black workers into the strike. 1923 is the anniversary of the executions for treason of the leaders of the 1922 Rand Revolt of white workers, an armed insurrection that saw workers seize military control of wide areas - including this town, Benoni.

My point here is not that these workers were necessarily correct in their aims - which were often quite sectional - but simply that there is no way to suggest that events like 1913 and 1922 can be explained by theories that posit the inherently limited nature of unions.

1933 is the anniversary of the collapse in South Africa of the Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa: this union had many serious problems, but it seriously intended to occupy farms and hand them over to the workers in 1927. And 2013 is also the anniversary of the real outbreak of the so-called "workerist-populist" debate, where radical unions rejected the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) and South African Communist Party (SACP), on the grounds that these parties were *not revolutionary enough*.

Significantly, there was a deep syndicalist influence on the ICU, which comes from the old Industrial Workers of Africa (a black syndicalist union formed in 1917, which was allied to the revolutionary syndicalist International Socialist League (which later merged into what became the SACP). These structures argued:⁸

Revolutionary Industrial Unionism - that is, the proposition that all wage-workers must come together in ... One Big Union of all wage workers; a big union bent on aggressively forging ahead ... gaining strength from each victory and learning by every temporary set-back - *until the working class is able to take possession and control of the machinery, premises and materials of production right from the capitalists' hands*, and use that control to distribute the product entirely amongst the workers ... a social revolution by shifting the control of production from the capitalists - the non-producers - to the workers - the producers. ... It takes every colour, creed and nation. Revolutionary Industrial Unionism is "organised efficiency". Every worker in every industry; every industry part and parcel of one great whole.

The ICU aimed if in a confused way - at capturing the state, at self-management of production (especially the land), and that did not work with any political party in a formal alliance:⁹

Whereas the interest of the workers and those of the employers are opposed to each other, the former living by selling their labour, receiving for its labour only part of the wealth they produce; and the latter living by exploiting the labour of the workers; depriving the workers of a part of the product of their labour in the form of profit, no peace can be between the two classes, a struggle must always obtain about the division of the products of human labour, *until the workers through their industrial organisations [trade unions - LvdW] take from the capitalist class the means*

⁸ International Socialist League, Johannesburg, 1917, "Revolutionary Industrial Unionism", *The International*, quoted in Lucien van der Walt, (2007), "Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904-1921: rethinking the history of labour and the left," PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 62

⁹ "Revised Constitution of the ICU", Industrial and Commercial Workers Union of Africa, 1925, as quoted in Lucien van der Walt, (2007), "Anarchism and Syndicalism in South Africa, 1904-1921: rethinking the history of labour and the left," PhD, University of the Witwatersrand, p. 627

of production, to be owned and controlled by the workers for the benefit of all, instead of for the profit of a few...

The new unions of the 1970s provided mass challenges to the apartheid regime, and they did this from the 1970s - well before the SACP came into a leading position in the unions. They did this despite intense opposition from the ANC and SACP, which continued for many years. As late as 1987, the ANC in exile campaigned to block NUMSA's *Release Moses Mayekiso* campaign - simply because NUMSA was not under ANC control.¹⁰

The South African Communist Party (SACP) was not a leading force in the main trade unions in South Africa in the 1970s and through much of the 1980s. Before COSATU, the Congress of South African Trade Unions, there was FOSATU, the Federation of South African Trade Unions. And before there was NUMSA, there was the MAWU, the Metal and Allied Workers Union - the most important FOSATU union.

FOSATU and MAWU rejected the leadership of the SACP as well as the African National Congress (ANC). This did not stop them from unionizing the metal, chemical and textile and other industries.

Despite claims by critics that that FOSATU was "economistic," ignoring politics and the national liberation struggle, the FOSATU federation forced major changes in the labour law, educating tens of thousands of workers in radical ideas, including socialist and syndicalist ideas, organizing mass boycotts, campaigning door-door against the Tricameral parliament, and playing a key role in civics, especially in the eastern Cape and parts of Gauteng.¹¹

SPAIN: REVOLUTION 1936-1939¹²

¹⁰ Letter to SACTU from Mike Murphy on behalf of NUMSA, Nov. 10, 1987

¹¹ See *inter alia*, Sian Byrne, 2013, "Rethinking 'Workerism' and the FOSATU Tradition, 1979-1985," Paper presented at the Durban Moment Conference, Rhodes University, 21 - 23 February 2013

¹² There is an extensive literature on this: for an introduction, see Deirdre Hogan, 2003, "Industrial Collectivization During the Spanish Revolution," *Red & Black Revolution: a magazine of libertarian communism*, number 7, pp. 16-21; also Deirdre Hogan, 1999, "The Anarchist Collectives in the Countryside during the Spanish Civil War," *Workers Solidarity*, number 56. A large amount

But an even more dramatic refutation comes from Spain in the late 1930s. At that time in Spain had a population of almost 24 million. Of that number 2 million were members of the revolutionary union, the anarcho-syndicalist CNT. (If this was translated into this today's South African proportions, the CNT would be 4 million strong).

CNT, formed in 1910, had a proud history.

It had built a powerful mass movement with long traditions of constant social struggle, including general strikes, armed uprisings, rent boycotts and other actions. Allied to youth and women's movements, the CNT was also active in neighbourhood struggles. For example, its builders' union was actively involved in organising rent boycotts, and in physically preventing evictions. CNT cells worked inside the army, both for intelligence gathering and propaganda and to enlist soldiers.

It also had an important presence in working class neighbourhoods, where it ran social centres, which provided meeting spaces, classes (including for children), and a range of cultural activities, including music and sports. It placed a great deal of emphasis on education, publishing and distributing millions of books and pamphlets.

With control of around 37 newspapers and magazines, including two dailies, as well as radio, it had an enormous impact on people's consciousness. It continually stresses revolution, which it envisaged as direct working class control of society, including self-management of the workplaces in both town and country through CNT structures.

The CNT had a very strong democratic tradition at its core. Decisions on all local and immediate matters such as wages and conditions were in the hands of the local membership who met regularly in general assembly. Mutual aid and solidarity between workers was encouraged and posed as the central way of winning strikes. The CNT organised all workers irrespective of skill, and emphasis was placed on direct action, rather than the use of industrial courts and arbitration. It aimed to promote self-confidence and self-reliance, and generally discouraged reliance on leaders. As far as possible, the CNT did not employ staff, and those that were employed, got the salary of their previous job.

of contemporary reports can be found in Sam Dolgoff (ed.). 1974, *The Anarchist Collectives: Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution, 1936-1939*, Black Rose.

The most radical CNT militants were also organised into a political organisation, *not a political party*, called the FAI. FAI militants were leading figures in the struggles, and the FAI provided a space for the clarification of perspectives. However, the FAI did not aim at capturing state power; it worked within and alongside the CNT, but did not dictate to the CNT; in many ways, it was a CNT organ, not an external force that ran the CNT.

In general, the CNT was strong but bottom-up, well-organised but decentralised, and very, very militant. Such a union was flatly impossible according to classical Marxist theory nonetheless, it not only existed, but vastly overshadowed the Spanish Communist Party, which struggled to get above 10,000 members. In the early 1930s, the CNT undertook several attempts at armed insurrections, intended to shatter the state and place CNT structures in control of towns.

In July 1936, there was an attempt at a military coup by the rightwing of the ruling class. CNT militants, armed, stopped the coup in most of Spain; sections of the armed forces, amongst which the CNT had long been active, came over to the CNT, as did members of the moderate unions.

In the cities, CNT structures quickly took over large parts of industry. In Catalonia province, workers within hours seized control of 3000 enterprises, including all public transportation, shipping, electric and power companies, gas and water works, engineering and automobile assembly plants, mines, cement works, textile mills and paper factories, electrical and chemical concerns, glass bottle factories and perfumeries, food processing plants and breweries.

Most of these were placed under direct workers self-management through assemblies and committees. Where employers remained at the company, they were either made to report to workers' control commissions, or to join the commission - in which case they were paid the same wage as everyone else, and decisions were made democratically.

The workers control structures emerged directly out of CNT structures: crudely, CNT meetings now ran the factories, and the shopstewards' committees acted as the control committees. Then factories were linked up, first by industry and then by region: so, for example, the CNT metal union provided the means of coordinating the metal industry, and through the CNT, coordinated this with other industries.

In the countryside, perhaps two thirds of farmland came under similar control systems: by some estimates, a further

five to seven million were involved here, besides the one to two million in the urban collectives.

This was not nationalisation, in which the state takes over, but rather *collectivisation*, in which neither state nor capitalist was in charge - only the workers. None of this was a miracle: it reflected long years of preparation, and a consistent attempt to change every day life.

In this revolutionary period, distribution changed: people were "paid" with labour cards, which entitled them to the goods and services they need; in many cases, money was abolished, meaning goods were provided for free. Divorce was made available, and union halls were meanwhile used for weddings - run by the CNT. The CNT's allied, the women's movement *Mujeres Libres* (or "free women") meanwhile ran education campaigns, including for the abolition of prostitution.

The collectives were not "owned" by the workers - they were run by them; they could not be sold or rented out. It was the CNT that really owned them, but it owned them for the working class, and could only change how property was used through congresses and conferences.

The general drive was to restructure work, to make it more pleasant, more healthy and less stressful: as an example, small and unhealthy plants were closed down by large, airy ones, which were cheaper as well as healthier. The unemployed were brought in, with unemployment dramatically reduced while output increased and hours decreased. Private property was removed as a motivation.

Meanwhile, CNT armed forces, in alliance with other progressive forces, defended the new and revolutionary society. It is important to stress here that the CNT unions' revolutionary action was fundamentally opposed by the Spanish Communist Party, which actively sabotaged and eventually played a leading role in destroying the revolution.¹³

"The revolution showed that without the competition bred by capitalism, industry can be run in a much more rational manner. Finally it demonstrated how the organised working

¹³ For a fuller analysis of the fate of the Spanish revolution, see van der Walt and Schmidt, *Black Flame*, also Hogan, 2003, "Industrial Collectivization During the Spanish Revolution"

class inspired by a great ideal have the power to transform society".¹⁴

MORE ON THE CNT

Syndicalism is an anarchist strategy to change the world. That means, it is the anarchist tradition of Mikhail Bakunin, which opposed all forms of social and economic hierarchy and inequality - and wanted, through an international class struggle and revolution, to create a socialist society operated and planned from the grassroots up by the people, through assemblies, councils and federations. In such a society, there would be will be no classes, as the means of production, coercion (violence and force, such as weapons) and administration (of society) will be commonly owned, and democratically controlled - and there would be no state, since there would be no political or economic elite, requiring a state.

Syndicalism, as a strategy, argues that trade unions, built through daily struggles, a radically democratic practice and anarchist education, can through a revolutionary "general strike," occupy and take over the workplaces, including military and administrative workplaces.

This puts the means of administration, coercion and production under the control of a working class, united across race and sex and nation, through these unions. The state is then destroyed, not captured, and replaced by the anarchist society.

Syndicalist unions are highly political, but they reject alliances with mainstream political parties or the use of the state.

WHAT IS A REVOLUTION ANYWAY?

What is also lost in this discussion - but what is being brought to the surface by the contrast between the mainstream of classical Marxism, and the politics of anarcho-syndicalism - is the question of what we mean by terms like "socialism" and "revolution" in the first place.

A good deal depends on what we mean by "socialism," and how we envisage "socialism" coming about - the concrete content of a new society, in which the working class is emancipated, and the concrete strategic tasks that are required to create that society.

¹⁴ Hogan, 2003, "Industrial Collectivization During the Spanish Revolution," p. 21

A discussion that moves in vague generalities - "socialism," "revolutionary" and even "unions" can generate more heat than light; we might seem to agree where we disagree, and we might seem to disagree when we do, in fact, agree.

So, unless we have some clarity on the meaning of these terms, it can be quite an unproductive discussion.

So, let us first think about what "revolution" means.

If a revolution means removing special oppressions (like national oppression), social and economic inequality (like poverty), and removing capitalist exploitation (including by state corporations), then it means creating a society based

- 1) a participatory and democratic economy and society, extending into direct control of the workplace through self-management;

- 2) the removal of all forms of social and economic inequality, including by the creation of a bottom-up planned economy, that is run from below; and

- 3) the socialisation of the means of production (that is, economic resources) and of means of coercion and administration (that is, resources like the military).

It means, also, 4) removing any structures that allow a privileged minority to rule over a majority, whether that is an economic elite (such as the owners of large companies) or a political elite (such as the politicians and generals - which we can dub the "state managers"). These two groups - capitalists and state managers - jointly comprise an interlinked ruling class.

So, the new society - and let's call this socialism, *socialism as it was always meant to be*, not the nightmares seen in the old Soviet Union and similar systems - It means, quite literally, placing the mass of the people - the working class and the poor and other oppressed classes - in power.

It means dethroning the ruling class, removing class altogether, and preventing it from ever re-emerging. This cannot be done by replacing one party with another, one capitalist with another, one state manager with another; it means moving away from parliaments, capitalism and politicians altogether.

It means the creation of a society without hierarchy, based on equality and participation, decentralised as much as possible and allowing a large degree of individual freedom along with community obligation, and a high degree of self-

determination, including culturally, within the framework of universal rights and principles.

Let's make this more concrete: South Africa has major social problems, among them

- 1) a lop-sided economy that is wasteful, cannot create enough jobs and enough useful jobs, but that serves instead a small elite;
- 2) enormous levels of poverty and inequality, despite the decline in numbers living in absolute poverty;
- 3) an unresolved national question, at least for the black, Coloured and Indian working class, which requires a massive programme of urban and rural reconstruction and redress, removing the legacy of apartheid; and
- 4) a largely disempowered population, which may complain, protest and vote, but which has no real control over the politicians or the capitalists or the generals, no real say over the major economic and political decisions in society either.

None of this can be resolved by nationalisation, which simply replaces a private elite, and private capitalists, with the political elite and state capitalists. Before someone responds that nationalisation provides benefits, consider the lived experience of state industries and services, among them the schools, the municipalities and last but not least, ESKOM...

Privatisation is no better, and it shares with nationalisation a basic feature: rule by and for a small elite, over the broad working class. Nor do elections solve the problem since these basically involve a rotation of political elites, not a break with the basically top-down, exploitative, unaccountable logic of a society run by a small elite.

ELEMENTS OF STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Can unions be revolutionary? Can they be political? Without a doubt they can play a critical role laying the foundations for such a society, by

- 1) building mass democratic organisations, that are self-managed, bottom-up, with any leaders firmly mandated and never privileged i.e. they can build the infrastructure of a *counterpower* that can take power, and help create the new society; and
- 2) by building education and consciousness, amongst the widest layer of the masses, that is, of a revolutionary working class *counter-culture*.

This is the basic syndicalist strategy, to which we alluded at the first.

There are three main roles a union can play, three different strategies - 1) the union adopts "economism" and "reformism"; this is not inevitable, it is a *political* choice; 2) the union makes an *alliance* with a political party, such as the ANC and SACP, and takes its leadership from the party, on the grounds that the party can do something special that the union cannot; and 3) *syndicalism*, which insists that the union can be profoundly political, even revolutionary, covering both political and economic issues and building revolutionary counterpower and counterculture to make a revolution of the sort seen in Spain in 1936 ...

Syndicalism shows a profound example of unions acting in an extremely revolutionary manner. It provides nothing less than an example of a union taking the role that parties claim that they alone can undertake: it insists that the parliamentary road, and the revolutionary dictatorship of a single party, are equally flawed and reactionary.

There is, as the example of the FAI shows, a valuable role for *syndicalist or anarchist political organisations* - this must be distinguished from the notion of a vanguard party, which aims to control unions and capture the state, and a reformist party, bent on elections. However, this is not a role of *authoritarian* leadership, or a drive to capture state power, but a situation where the political organisation seeks to maximise counterpower and counterculture, in order to *abolish* the state as well as capitalism - in order to facilitate the *self-emancipation* of the working class.

Here, revolutionary struggle does not start and end with a political party, or state power: it ends in the creation of a self-managed libertarian communist society.

This tradition has historically played a very important role in the history of the working class movement, not just in Spain, but elsewhere; it is the tradition that influenced the Industrial Workers of Africa, and to a lesser extent the ICU; it is a tradition with historical roots and track records in Argentina, China Cuba, Egypt, Mexico, Portugal, Japan, Uruguay, and in Britain and the United States ... and a tradition that is today reviving, not just in the anti-globalisation movement but also in sectors of international labour.

To "recall anarchism," and anarcho-syndicalism, "which Leninist Marxism suppressed", is, Arif Dirlik argues, to rethink the meaning and possibilities of the socialist tradition, and "recall the democratic ideals for which anarchism ... served as a repository".¹⁵ And rejecting the "frequent assumption that revolutionary Socialism is by and large covered by the term 'Marxism-Leninism'", it becomes possible to rediscover alternative, libertarian socialist traditions like anarchism, syndicalism and Council Communism,¹⁶ which all parts of the larger working class tradition.

¹⁵Arif Dirlik , 1991, *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution*. University of California Press.pp. 3-4, also see pp. 7-8

¹⁶ Schechter David, 1994, *Radical Theories: paths beyond Marxism and social democracy*. Manchester University Press., pp. 1-2