

Syndicalism - an introduction



A short explanation of revolutionary syndicalism and industrial unionism as well as some notes on their histories.

Syndicalism refers to the practice of organising workers into unions to fight for their interests. Originally, the term comes from the French work for Trade Unionism (Syndiclisme), but in English the term specifically refers to rank-and-file unionism.

There are two major tendencies: Revolutionary Syndicalism, typified by the French CGT, and Industrial Unionism, typified by the [Industrial Workers of the World \(IWW\)](#). A related tendency is [anarcho-syndicalism](#), but its specifically anarchist politics differentiate it from syndicalism, which is purely economic, or 'non-political'. The idea behind syndicalism is to create an industrial, fighting union movement. Syndicalists therefore advocate decentralised, federated unions that use [direct action](#) to get reforms under capitalism until they are strong enough to overthrow it.

Revolutionary Syndicalism has its roots in the anarchist movement, and can be traced back to the libertarian tendency in the First International Workingmen's Association, when prominent Russian anarchist [Mikhail Bakunin argued](#) that: *"the future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal."* Industrial Unionism has its roots in the Marxist tradition, with the IWW's famous 1905 ['Preamble to the Constitution'](#) quoting Marx's dictum *"instead of the conservative motto, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work,' we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, 'Abolition of the wage system.'"*



The origins of syndicalism - libertarian socialists meet at Basel in 1869

Despite these different origins, Revolutionary Syndicalism and Industrial Unionism converged on a very similar approach. The central idea is that trade unions divide workers by trade, which can (and has) end up in scabbing. In America, industrial disputes would sometimes see violent clashes between workers of different unions who would ignore each other's requests to respect picket lines. The aim of syndicalism is to unite all workers into 'One Big Union' controlled by the members, from the grassroots.

This is obviously in deep contrast to the current reformist unions who are filled with layer upon layer of bureaucrats who can call off industrial action regardless of the wishes of the membership. This kind of union democracy puts control of workers' struggles where it belongs: with the workers themselves.

Both Industrial Unionism (as per the 1905 IWW constitution) and Revolutionary Syndicalism (as per the 1906 Charter of Amiens) are non-political, aiming to build unions for all workers regardless of political persuasions. However, this doesn't mean syndicalists are indifferent to the great social and political issues of the day. Rather [syndicalists argue that](#) only by building democratic, workers' power at the point of production ('industrial democracy') that social ills can be addressed:

When the industry of the world is run by the workers for their own good, we see no chance for the problems of unemployment, war, social conflict, or large scale crime, or any of our serious social problems to continue.

More information

- [Principles of Syndicalism - Tom Brown](#) - Article by the well known activist explaining the how syndicalist unions organise, and the new society they aim to create.
- [Syndicalism: What It Is - Gaylord Wilshire](#) - Brief explanatory article by an editor of The Syndicalist.
- [What is the union? - Emile Pouget](#) - Essay outlining the aims, principles and functions of unions.
- [The General Strike - Ralph Chaplin](#) - Classic IWW text on the concept of the general strike as a tool for change.

- [Syndicalism in South Wales: The Origins of The Miners' Next Step](#) - Article on the development of syndicalism in South Wales.