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TAKING SYNDICALISM SERIOUSLY

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"It is not the Sorels...and such figures who count the most - it is the obscure Bill Jones on the firing line, with stink in his clothes, rebellion in his brain, hope in his heart, determination in his eye, and direct action in his gnarled fist."

Industrial Worker 8th May 1913

"they burned his big broken bulk of a body and buried the ashes under the Kremlin wall."

John Dos Passos on 'Big Bill Haywood' in The 42nd Parallel (1930)

Interpretations of the labour unrest which affected many capitalist societies from the 1900s through to the early 1920s have differed widely and illuminate the methodological and ideological dispositions of individual historians. There are those who seek to reduce revolts to basic economic concerns; workers act collectively to improve working conditions when labour market conditions favour such activities. In such accounts actors are reduced to the fundamental economic priorities favoured by many economists; wider social agendas are simply ruled out (1). In contrast, some scholars would argue that such reductionism offers inadequate explanation and social conservatism. Workers' revolts must be understood within the values and standards of their communities; programmes for social change, however fragmentary, should be taken seriously. Once this perspective is applied, then these mobilisations offer a rich reservoir of options on labour movement strategy and democratic alternatives.

One key problem concerns the relevance or irrelevance of syndicalist ideas for these events. Obviously, it would be difficult to argue that vast numbers of workers were inspired to mass action by syndicalist literature. Yet two counterprevailing points can be made. At a more popular level, amongst some sections of the working class in a range of societies, 'Direct Action' sentiments were powerful. And the debates engendered by these struggles left a significant legacy that included critiques of established forms of democratic politics. This inheritance has often been obscured and deserves to be reassessed - for both its strengths and its weaknesses.

Critical assessment can begin with radical images which can recover something of the quality of these movements. Some of the most evocative are provided by the International Workers of the World founded in Chicago in 1905 - the songs, the martyrs, the free-speech fights, the strikes against despotic employers. If the resonance of these images has been international, their

roots were specifically American. Some lay in the frontier conditions that produced the radical Western Federation of Miners, others in the craft and ethnic exclusions that characterised the American Federation of Labor. The 'Wobblies' organised amongst the miners and lumber men of the far West, and amongst Eastern factory workers drawn often from ethnic groups excluded by older unions(2). Few American trade union leaders could have been more expressive of a radical variant on national identity than 'Big Bill' Haywood miner and WFM organiser who became perhaps the Wobblies' most symbolic figure(3). The IWW achieved a brief early flowering in the newly-established Nevada mining town of Goldfield, where Wobblies organised not just in the miners - but also in the service sector, the bars, the restaurants, the brothels. The zenith came in January 1907 with a mass parade to commemorate the massacre of St. Petersburg demonstrators in 1905, and to support Haywood and two colleagues awaiting trial in Idaho on a murder charge. "Down with capitalism! Long live the International working class republic" - was the theme. But this was a climax, not a prelude(4).

The radical moment in the malleable conditions of a boom town, where the class structure had not solidified was shattered as mineowners allied with the local middle class, with the State Government, and through deceit with the Federal Administration. Yet the IWW despite internal schisms continued to have moments of achievement, not least in the East Coast, in the Lowell and Paterson textile strikes. The latter produced a pageant in Maddison Square Gardens, a brief alliance between Wobbly activists, and New York City's radical intelligentsia(5).

The influence of the Wobblies soon spread beyond the United States, most predictably perhaps to Western Canada where railroad construction workers in British Columbia and miners on Vancouver Island were influenced by radical union sentiments from across the 49th parallel(6). Similar sentiments

affected sections of the Australian labour movement. In the summer of 1909, men at the Broken Hill lead miners in western New South Wales fought a long and ultimately unsuccessful strike over wage reductions. Their mistrust of Labour politicians and of the conciliation and arbitration system deepened. One of their leaders was Tom Mann, a time-served craftsman and parliamentary socialist. He had left Britain for Australasia in 1902; shortly after the Broken Hill dispute, he returned to Britain via South Africa with, a strong commitment to syndicalism(7). Sentiments supportive of 'Direct Action' were also strong amongst the coalminers of New South Wales. The union President on the State's northern coalfield had been in contact with the Western Federation of Miners(8). The miners embarked on a long and ultimately failed strike late in 1909. The State Government's response was coercive and effective; the setback hindered the development of radical industrial sentiment. There were promising electoral prospects for the Labour Party at both Federal and State levels; but as radicals began to indict Labour administrations for non-delivery, so the plausibility of 'Direct Action' revived.

When Tom Mann returned to Britain he rapidly found himself in an industrial situation marked by widespread strikes of both organised and unorganised workers; by violence on picket lines and against individuals seen as transgressing appropriate codes of conduct(9). 1911 saw the first national rail strike as rank and file action pressurised cautious leaders; 1912 the first national coal stoppage. Union membership rocketed. Much more was at stake than attempts to restore real wage levels in conditions of relatively high employment. Workers opposed new managerial practices, criticised the caution of their own officials and attempted to redefine their own communities as places run by workers for workers. When South Wales miners employed in the Cumbrian Combine entered a year long and ultimately abortive strike over price

lists, one of their guest speakers was 'Big Bill' Haywood(10).

Perhaps the most dramatic episode within the British Isles occurred in Ireland. Outside the industrial economy of the North East, trade unionism developed slowly and was limited largely to small craft societies. But in 1908, a Liverpoolian Irishman, James Larkin founded the Irish Transport and General Workers Union(11). This sought to organise the so-called 'unskilled' and the casually employed, seeking to construct an effective solidarity through the doctrine of 'tainted goods'. In August 1913, there began that great se-piece battle, the Dublin Lockout as employers combined to combat Larkin's union. The conflict ended over five months later in defeat. Larkin's attempts to secure sympathetic action by British unions had failed, collapsing into bitter recriminations as he attacked British leaders for their caution(12).

Larkin was an Irish counterpart to Haywood. A contemporary portrait by a sympathiser can stand as a representation of the movement's style:-

"He is one of those born revolutionaries who know not diplomacy, but who believe that the kingdom of Heaven must be taken by violence to-day and tomorrow and the day after ... His utopia ... would be a world where a general strike was going on all the time. Big and black and fierce, he is a Syndicalist of the street corners ... He calls to the surface the very depth of unrest. His theory seems to be that a city should never be allowed a moment's peace so long as there remains a single poor man whose wrongs have not been righted. His genius ... is inflammatory. He preaches turmoil".(13)

His second in command, James Connolly, was no gifted platform orator, but a thoughtful exponent of this new trade unionism, and of much else besides. His years in the United States had included involvement with the 'Wobblies'; and he had begun to reason through the premise and problems of the organisation as an instrument for Socialism(14). In the aftermath of the Lockout Larkin left Ireland for an American lecture tour. A planned brief visit to the United States lasted over eight and a half years. His sojourn

on the American Left ended with incarceration in Sing-Sing as one casualty in the post-war purge of Radicals. Prior to this devastating onslaught, one moment captured the style and the internationalism of this radical movement. In November 1915 the funeral of the executed 'Wobbly' Joe Hill was held in Chicago. Larkin and Heywood spoke from the same platform. The tragedy brought Larkin closer to the I.W.W. which he eulogised as displaying "more real revolutionary spirit, greater self-sacrifice, than any other movement the world of labour has produced."(15)

Beyond the imagery, the romance, the myths, here was a significant radical movement which has been buried under subsequent defeats and political orthodoxies. It was not of course restricted to English-speaking labour movements although the network that emerges from these examples is a significant one. Syndicalist sentiments were strong in Southern Europe and developed a significant presence on the left of established parties such as the German Social Democrats. The radicals expressed in their varied contexts a deep antipathy not just to capitalism but to all forms of bureaucratic elitism, not least to that represented by trade union officialdom. The resource that mattered was neither ballot nor parliament, but the power of the workers at the point of production. As one Welsh syndicalist put it - 'Why cross the river to fill the pail?'(16)

Such sentiments appealed to diverse groups. One early and sympathetic Australian critic noted the similarities between the workers attracted to the I.W.W. in the American West and migrant Australian workers - cane cutters, the casual workers in the shearing sheds and slaughter houses(17). They had no network of institutions binding them to the established order, they knew all too well the vagaries of casual employment; their life style could incorporate a rampant individualism but it could produce also an appreciation of the benefits of solidarity. Yet this radicalism appealed also to these

excluded from ethnically privileged and craft based unions and to workers who felt threatened by new techniques of managerial control which imposed onerous new hierarchies and challenged old customs(18). Railway workers accustomed often to some autonomy at work felt oppressed by new supervisory methods; the appeal of 'Direct Action' linked readily to an agenda for 'Worker's Control'. There was also the pressure from an increasingly interventionist state which offered short-term advantages to some workers but set these in the context of a modernising drive towards a rationalised capitalism. Exemplars could be found in Britain's Edwardian Liberalism, in United States' Progressivism, and perhaps above all in Australian 'New Protectionism'. This extended to Labour administration and the domination of industrial relations by conciliation and arbitration procedures. Whether this framework counted as a relative empowerment of the labour movement has been keenly debated; what is clear is that pre-1914 Australian radicals could see the arbitration system as a powerful mechanism for integrating and disabling the trade union movement.

Syndicalism and 'Direct Action' became the spectre haunting polite bourgeois society. During the British coal strike of 1912 a bishop condemned the doctrine as "wicked, cruel, criminal"(19). For many Second International Socialists, syndicalism and 'Direct Action' were tainted with anarchism, the anathema of the 1890s. Self-consciously ethical Socialists such as Ramsay MacDonald and Philip Snowden argued that syndicalism was the antithesis of the constructive community based socialist project of their rhetorical dreams(20). Similarly in the United States Haywood's alleged position on violence led to a critical onslaught within the Socialist Party(21).

Whatever the limited visions of such critics, obviously the syndicalist agenda had clear limitations. An emphasis on workplace struggle meant that radical hopes could collapse into or indeed never transcend militant sectionalism. Indeed the focus on workplace issues and struggles represents

a privileging that has distorted both labour movement strategies and historical explanations. The politics of production has dominated the politics of consumption; attention has been placed on one public sphere to the detriment of others. Some actors have been placed centre; stage; others have been relegated to the audience. Syndicalism and Direct Action in this respect shared certain preconceptions with the conventional trade union strategies and Labour and Social Democratic politics that they so vigorously denounced. Their core constituency was unionised or about to be unionised workers, usually male. The rhetoric of struggle in the workplace and on the picket line celebrated (allegedly) male (supposed) virtues. Many Direct Actionists were not anti-women in an overt sense. No doubt many shared the conventional prejudices of their time; predictably so in an economy like the South Wales coalfield where paid women's work was scarce, and most women carried out intensive unpaid labour to service successive shifts of male family members. Some syndicalists had credible record in the organisation of women workers; for examples the Wobblies in textile disputes in the eastern United States. But they shared the viewpoint of most progressive contemporaries. The exploitation of women could be ended only through class-based action. For working class women that meant entry into the paid workforce, trade union experience and political mobilisation(22). That these supposed instruments of emancipation might themselves be sexually inequalitarian in their internal practices seems to have been rarely discussed.

Despite such limitations there are two basic reasons why this tradition should be re-examined. One centre around the expression - or non-expression - of working-class interests within capitalist societies, an issue which remains a central concern through debates over corporatism, social contracts and the desirability and feasibility of a distinctive worker's party. These radicals firmly rejected collaboration and integration; their experiences

allow some assessment of the feasibility and value of such a response. Secondly, significant issues are raised about democratic theory and practice, about the openness of allegedly democratic societies and about the democratic credentials of supposedly emancipatory institutions. These issues can be approached through the location of Syndicalism and Direct Action within a broader socialist controversy, and through the analysis of an example.

Syndicalism can be situated within the context of Second International Socialism, its adherents' assumptions and expectations - and their dilemmas. At the end of his life in 1895 Frederick Engels wrote a new introduction to The Class Struggles in France. He acknowledged that, in the optimism of 1848, he and Marx had been wrong about the imminence of proletarian revolution and had been influenced excessively by an image of revolution that owed much to perceptions of late 18th century France. Indeed Engels emphasised that a revolution to end capitalism could not resemble earlier revolutions. In part this was because changes in military technology, communications and city street patterns had meant an end to the era of the barricade. More fundamentally Engels believed that the anticipated socialist revolution could not be an action by a minority:-

"The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses is past. When it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake ..." (23)

Engels believed that there existed already a potentially powerful instrument for such a transformation - the Social Democratic Party. In Germany it had already survived attempts to cripple it by legislation; its encouraging growth showed how Socialists could utilise the space provided even by a relatively illiberal state to propagandise, to widen support, to strengthen confidence. But Engels' optimism in 1895 went further. Existing political institutions could be employed to pose a real alternative to the

established order:-

"And so it happened that the bourgeoisie and the government came to be much more afraid of the legal than of the illegal action of the workers' party, of the results of elections rather than of those of rebellion".(24)

In the last months of his life Engels saw the SPD's progress as inexorable. Its electoral support would expand beyond the industrial working-class; a prospect that should not be put at hazard in quixotic demonstrations. Engels believed that the Social Democrats would remain a revolutionary party, but this need not entail a commitment to early confrontation:-

"To keep this growth going without interruption until it of itself gets beyond the control of the prevailing governmental system, not to fritter away the daily increasing shock force in unguarded skirmishes, but to keep intact until the decisive day, this is our main task".(25)

The Wilhelmine State continued to subject Socialists to a variety of harassments and penalties, but to a considerable degree Engels' expectations about Party growth were fulfilled.

In the early 1890s the SPD vote was approaching 1,800,000 and by 1912 it had topped four million; the SPD had become the largest party group in the Reichstag. Party organisation flourished, - the celebrated State within a State - The SPD provided an exemplar for similar developments across much of Europe. Yet the forward march of Social Democracy had its limitations. Even in 1914, only a minority of industrial workers backed the Party; electoral growth had not been a smooth upward progression. The irresponsible character of the German political system meant that progress brought the SPD no nearer to effective power(26).

Most fundamentally Socialist and Labour Parties had become increasingly fractious forums. The SPD had its celebrated battles between Bernstein, Luxemburg and Kautsky; French Socialists split over the propriety of joining a Coalition; for a while many Italian Socialists seemed bewitched by the great liberal conjuror Giolitti, a liaison which provoked thorough criticism from

the PSIs Left-wing including Benito Mussolini(27).

The tactic of building the party, pursuing electoral success, awaiting the decisive day seemed to some to mean the suffocation of radicalism. The process was portrayed sardonically by Max Weber in 1906:-

"Among the masses, the 'respectable' Social Democrats drill the spiritual parade ... They accustom their pupils to a submissive attitude towards dogmas and party authorities, or to indulgence in the fruitless play acting of mass strikes or the idle enjoyment of the enervating howls of their hired journalists which are as harmless as they are in the end, laughable in the eyes of their enemies. In short, they accustom them to an 'hysterical wallowing in emotion' which replaces and inhibits economic and political thought and action".(28)

Weber, a liberal in a society where liberalism was at a discount, understood better than many of his contemporaries, the limited character of the SPD's challenge. The decisive day was not that anticipated by Engels, but the Party vote in August 1914 for the War Credits.

Those Socialists who perceived a problem of deradicalisation began within their theoretical assumptions to search for answers. One avenue for investigation was clearly economic. One classic and early instance had been Engels' thesis in the 1880s that the weakness of British Socialism could be explained by reference to early industrialisation and consequential monopoly. But by 1886 Engels acknowledged that the monopoly was ending, and it was broadly agreed amongst pre-1914 Socialists that the British case was unique(29). It needed the trauma of 1914 for Lenin to develop an explanation of socialist degeneration that depended on a conception of monopoly capitalism; in contrast before the War, Kautsky and Hilferding had suggested that the development of monopoly capitalism could advantage Social Democracy(30).

In contrast, the syndicalists offered a powerful pre-1914 response. Their diagnoses and strategies raised fundamental questions of Socialist and democratic politics. The indictment was thorough - the root of the malaise

lay in the agenda of constructing mass Socialist parties. Such bodies had to triumph on terrain that was stacked against them. The quest for votes inevitably meant the dilution of principled class-conscious arguments; parliamentarianism meant acquiescence in bourgeois conventions and thereby a deeper consent to bourgeois ideology. Such priorities distorted the procedure of Socialist parties. Not least a bourgeois intelligentsia came to play a preponderant and conservative role within socialist organisations. After all they had the techniques and self-confidence needed for effective parliamentary performances, often complemented by the crafts of the journalist(31). Thus syndicalists saw the hierarchy of the wider society replicated within socialist parties; as these parties attempted to succeed under conditions which favoured their opponents.

Some syndicalists acknowledged that the role of bourgeois socialists could not be so straightforward and negative. Thus Robert Michels - a syndicalist before his encounter with and acceptance of élite theory - suggested that de-radicalisation was not just a consequence of middle-class contamination(32). Socialist and trade union organisations offered full-time and relatively well-paid posts to individual workers who were unlikely to put their new-found security and status at risk in any quixotic venture. Such functionaries would see the preservation of party organisation as their objective; any concern with social transformation would become merely a rhetorical means to the organisational goal.

Beatrice and Sidney Webb - intellectually and emotionally antipathetic to syndicalism - had recognised in the 1890s that trade union imperatives generated a leadership stratum with its own interests. As the frequency of collective bargaining grew, so trade union officials required not just developed negotiating skills, but technical knowledge. British cotton textile unions appointed officials only after formal examination which included

complex arithmetical calculations(33). Such divisions based on attributions of expertise weakened any control exercised over officials by members. The Webbs viewed this as a tendency central to the growth of a stable and effective trade unionism; any element of democratic practice had to be accommodated within the rule of the expert.

This emphasis is a necessary backdrop to syndicalist debates over the appropriate response given their diagnosis. A thorough syndicalist agenda involved the development of organisations that were democratic in structure and practice, and radical in policy. They should be industrial in character thereby avoiding the corrupting compromises of electoral and parliamentary politics, and also perhaps the isolation of some socialist groups. Moreover such organisations would be thoroughly proletarian in character. Yet the broad agenda raised one obvious difficulty. The actually-existing trade unions that syndicalists were familiar with hardly seemed potential vehicles for radical change. Within the SPD trade unions typically adopted cautious positions that were the despair of the Left. The American Federation of Labor under Samuel Gompers was the despair of socialists and radicals of diverse persuasions. By 1910 the character of the Australian labour movement had been significantly influenced by the arbitration system.

The critics' response varied. In the United States syndicalists went it alone through the Industrial Workers of the World and ignored the affiliates of the AFL. The strategy was plausible given the class and ethnic exclusivities practised by many AFL unions. British syndicalists usually rejected dual unionism and argued for the radical reform of existing organisations. With the formation and wartime expansion of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, the labour movement in Nationalist Ireland became heavily influenced by ideas of direct action and the One Big Union. Whatever choice radicals made on the question of dual unionism they

faced the major problem of devising democratic structures for their organisations.

The central themes and problems emerge with particular force in a vibrant piece of political theory written in 1911-1912, not by a great name but by a group of young talented South Wales miners - the pamphlet entitled The Miners' Next Step (34). It was produced within an environment which might have been deliberately designed to radicalise. The South Wales coalfield had continued to expand its output, basically through increasing the workforce but this meant declining productivity. With many firms dependent on export markets this meant that employers became increasingly concerned to cut wage costs; they attacked the problem through the erosion of customs and the holding-down of piece rates. One storm centre developed over the custom of compensation for work in "abnormal places" where geological problems made it difficult to earn an adequate wage. The issue was a window on a question of principle - should wage levels be determined by profitability or by notions of justice and of need? Some capitalists responded to the changing world by amalgamations linked to new systems of managerial control. It was perhaps significant that a year long stoppage in 1910-1911 involved the miners of the Cambrian Combine, one of the largest amalgamations(35). The search for additional labour led to massive immigration into South Wales from rural Southern England; demographic change sapped the consensual power of pre-existing cultural institutions such as the Nonconformist chapels. Instead of community identities founded on shared interests and values expressed perhaps through the Welsh language, class divisions were heightened, a development facilitated by the region's dominance by one industry. Superficially the coalfield could be portrayed as buoyant down to 1914, - its boosters spoke of 'American Wales', but from 1910 onwards the tensions within the coalfield were expressed in stoppages, in increasingly radical rhetoric and by the emergence

of a significant Left within the South Wales Miners Federation.

Within this turbulent world the conciliatory policies and style of established miners' leaders were subject to increasing criticism. The industry's conciliation system worked ponderously and only produced meagre economic gains. This is the starting point of The Miners' Next Step; it leads directly to a critique not of specific leaders, but of a particular tradition of leadership. One aspect of leaders de-radicalisation links with the contention that such positions serve as means of individual social mobility - "They, the leaders, become 'gentlemen', they become MPs and have considerable social prestige because of this power". But beneath the social ethos, there is the logic of the system of wage bargaining.

"The policy of conciliation gives the real power of the men into the hands of a few leaders ... The conference or ballot is only a referee ... The workmen for a time look up to these men and when things are going well they idolise them. The employers respect them. Why? Because they have the men, the real power in the hollow of their hands".

So for the critics the policy and the leadership strategy are linked:-

"What is really blameworthy is the conciliation policy which demands leaders of this description ... they are 'trade unionists by trade' and their profession demands certain privileges. The greatest of all these are plenary powers ... every inroad the rank and file makes on this privilege lessens the power and prestige of the leader... The leader then has an interest - a vested interest - in stopping progress. They have ... in some things an antagonism of interests with the rank and file".(36)

There follows a balance-sheet on the qualities of trade-union leadership. On the positive side of the ledger, leadership has a potential for efficiency and system, and for responsibility; but against this, leadership implies an unequal power relationship which corrupts the leaders and degrades the led. The leader protects himself by bestowing patronage on the pliable; the autonomy and creativity of the membership are frustrated. "Sheep cannot be said to have solidarity"(37). The animosity between officials and rank and file achieved sharp expression after four months of the

Cambrian Combine Strike. Two officials sent to South Wales by the Miners Federation of Great Britain were met at the strike storm-centre of Tonypany by a hostile crowd suggesting that they "go back to England". One of the officials saw the breakdown of ordered trade unionism - "Anything is better than the state of anarchy and red riot such as prevails at Tonypany today"(38).

The negative portrait has similarities with Weber's dismissal of the SPD's pretensions. Positive alternatives can be found in socialist literature; for instance in Marx's insistence that working-class emancipation must be the achievement of the workers; there are also images within John Stuart Mills' discussion of decentralised socialism, and his insistence that such a reformed society requires agents technically and morally capable of its achievements(39).

Such images were rejected not just by Weber, but also by his one-time syndicalist correspondent Michels - once the latter had imbibed élite theory. For such sceptics domination by the few was inevitable; all that could be debated was the identity of the few and the very limited checks on their experiences. The authors of The Miners' Next Step in denying such pessimism contribute not just to debates about trade union democracy, but also to a much broader pre-1914 argument about oligarchy and democracy.

Thus the pamphlet's proposals commence with the aspiration - "Workmen the 'Boses', 'Leaders' the Servants"(40). The proposed constitution is constructed around two principles. The priority given to rank and file democracy requires decentralisation and incentives for mass participation. Power must be taken from the full-time officials and given to the membership. They should determine policy through lodge and ballot votes; the union executive should be composed of lay members and would be responsible to a delegate conference. Officials should be subject to the control of this

democratised structure. The authors were optimistic that the reforms would facilitate increased and more informed participation. This would result from a growing awareness that "the lodge meetings are the place where things are really done". The scenario has a resemblance to Mill's developmental view of democracy.

"It will raise the Status of the Workers. By giving them real powers in the lodge room. It will stimulate every available ounce of intellect to work full pressure. There the workers will learn to legislate for themselves on matters which touch them most closely"(41).

This decentralised participatory vision has to confront the problem of effectiveness. If there is to be "decentralisation for negotiating", there must be "Centralisation for Fighting". If local negotiations produce no solution, then the decision on whether to widen the issue would be taken by the executive in consultation with a delegate conference. The decisive criterion for widening a dispute is that of principle as opposed to sectionalism:-

"The effect of the constitution would abolish sectional strikes. All questions become, under this system, either questions of principle which we are prepared to fight with the whole strength of our organisation, or questions which should be fought locally ... Grievances are not questions with us so much of numbers as of principles. It might, and probably would be, deemed advisable to have a strike of the whole organisation to defend one man from victimisation ..."(42)

The constitutional agenda is linked thoroughly to the espousal of a militant industrial policy. Conciliation is rejected in favour of a bald assertion of conflicting interests:-

"The old policy of identity of interest between employers & ourselves be abolished, and a policy of open hostility installed".(43)

Informed by this antagonism, the tactic is to gain as many benefits as possible within the existing order:-

"a continual agitation be carried in favour of increasing the minimum wage, and shortening the hours of work, until we have extracted the whole of the employers' profits"(44).

This strategy has as its ultimate objective the construction of an organisation that would take over the coal industry "and carry it on in the interest of the workers". Such a vision involves a rejection of state ownership - "a National Trust with all the force of the Government behind it". Instead there must be workplace democracy. Instead of private capitalists controlling the coal industry, decisions should be taken by those most affected:-

"To have a vote in determining who shall be your fireman, manager, inspector, etc is to have a vote in determining the conditions which rule your working life"(45).

The ultimate vision is of industries organised around a principle of workers control responding in ways determined by workforces to the requirements of a co-ordinator - a Central Production Board. The authors declare - "Any other form of democracy is a delusion and a snare". Yet they acknowledge the vision can be realised only slowly. It can occur only on an economy wide basis. All industries have to be organised in the same fashion. "Their rate of progress conditions ours, all we can do is to set an example and the pace"(46).

The strategic conception is influenced heavily by syndicalism. Yet the pamphleteers envisage a limited place for political action. Parliamentarians would be subject to control by the delegate conference; they should express members' views on legislation relevant to working conditions, and they can oppose governmental tendencies to act on behalf of employers(47). Nevertheless, the authors clearly feel that the industrial struggle was decisive and that it is there that questions of procedure, institutions and strategy must be conclusively settled.

Scepticism about the blueprint is all too easy. Whatever the formal constitution, full-time officials would retain distinctive and significant resources - knowledge, presentational skills and time for example.

Accordingly 'control' by the membership would be a matter of form not substance. When some British railway unions amalgamated in 1913 to form the National Union of Railwaymen, the new organisation's structure was influenced by contemporary debate about trade union democracy(48). The Executive was composed of lay members and subject to the authority of the Annual Delegate Meeting, - yet the principal full-time officers generally dominated policy-making. Such a pattern of decision-making cannot be separated from the content of policy debates, yet the expertise and status of the full-time officials was clearly important. Moreover, even an 'unofficial' Executive set up to control the officials could develop distinctive interests and resources; not least that some Executive members hope to become full-time officers. Most fundamentally, the achieved levels of participation and of competence by members would perhaps be insufficient to achieve a significant rank and file control. Indeed in the South Wales coalfield where many miners lived in a pit village next to their workplace, there was at least the credible prospect of significant levels of participation at least on issues of fundamental concern. Amongst workers in many other industries - and indeed amongst miners in some other coalfields - the same umbilical link between workplace and residence did not exist. Accordingly the prospects of effective control through high levels of participation could seem dim.

The criticisms are familiar and are so perhaps because experience suggests that they have some validity. Yet two responses to the sceptic are perhaps significant. One is provoked by Michels' rejection of his earlier syndicalism, in Political Parties - with its uneasy synthesis of élite theory and Marxist vocabulary, its fidgety oscillations between an insistence on an iron law of oligarchy, and the noting of widespread oligarchic tendencies. Amidst so much uncertainty of discourse and conclusion, Michels is adamant about one thing; the details of formal institutions are irrelevant. Any

syndicalist who honestly applies his analysis to his own organisation becomes an élite theorist. Yet Michels' brief chapter on the syndicalist alternative is notably weak and lacks any proper consideration of syndicalist proposals for constitutional reform(49). From Michels' standpoint their content is irrelevant. All Socialists and syndicalist cats are grey. Yet arguably any organisation where full-time officials are banned from the executive and where ballots are frequent has the potential to operate in a fashion different from one where full-time - and perhaps permanent - officers dominate discussion and references to the membership are rare. The outcome may not be the mass participatory organisation desired by the syndicalists let alone the Rousseauesque democracy sometime used by Michels as a misleading measuring stick. Yet if divergent union constitutions can be assessed for their capacity to engender more mass involvement and influence, then the Michels of Political Parties was thoroughly mistaken whilst these South Wales miners at least were posing a meaningful question. If the sceptic's admonitions are taken too far, then they threaten not simply traditions of socialist democracy, but also that liberal tradition associated with Mill which claimed that with appropriate resources and incentives individuals would develop their political capacities through action, most notably through decentralised structures.

For the pamphleteers, consideration of organisational structures and practices cannot be divorced from policy:-

- "no constitution, however admirable in its structure, can be of any avail unless the whole is quickened and animated by that which will give it the breadth of life - a militant, aggressive policy"(50).

The feasibility of this prospect links back to the hope that some issues can be generalised across the whole workforce and generate a united response. This expectation arguably made more sense in the South Wales coalfield than it could amongst many other groups of workers. In 1912 approaching 200,000

worked in the South Wales mines offering a density and a regional homogeneity of occupation that had few parallels. But amongst South Wales miners there were diverse interests. There were divisions produced by skill and by working conditions; the physical structure of the coalfield with its deep valleys produced a sense of place that could lead to both immediate solidarity and parochialism. If shared perceptions and commitment were needed to produce an effective radical union then arguably even in South Wales, the obstacles loomed larger than the syndicalists implied.

The pamphlet's longer-term vision of a flowering of equivalent radical and democratic unions in other industries raises another fundamental question. What would be the character of the consciousness generated within such organisations, especially given the author's insistence that one core element in any democratic society must be the democratisation of the work place? Perhaps analysts have assumed too readily that such an agenda would be likely to promote a radical class consciousness. Perhaps it is more plausible to claim that the outcome would be a strong occupational consciousness, with miners keenly aware of miners interests, and transport workers of their own priorities. Indeed far beyond the problematic of syndicalism, arguably historians and activists have all too often read occupational solidarities in class terms.

The connection within the pamphlet between internal democracy and radical policies is paralleled by a continuing concern of Michels both in his syndicalist and élite theory phases. Yet why should the linkage be readily assumed? There have been trade unions where the leadership have been more radical on policy than many of their members. The British National Union of Mineworkers since 1982 is an obvious case. The syndicalist assumption surely has apparent validity if there is a definitional sleight of hand, whereby radical policies are restricted to those espoused by organisations with

genuinely democratic procedures.

This argument links to a basic feature of much syndicalist writing - the dichotomy between leaders and rank and file. A naive presentation ignores the fashion in which appeals to the rank and file are employed often as a mobilising device by factions. There is no need to go all the way with Michels' scepticism and to accept that those who claim to articulate rank and file demands are simply a counter-élite. But complexities cannot be continued within the simplistic dichotomy. Syndicalist theory has failed often to accommodate complex patterns of factionalism, differential resources and representativeness.

Beyond the problem of the dichotomy, there is the root of the syndicalist critique. Why are socialist parliamentarians, union officials, systems of conciliation to be criticised? The answer, sometimes overt sometimes more by implication is that conciliation and more broadly caution do not serve the interests of those whom socialist parties and trade unions claim to represent. This belief is present clearly in The Miners' Next Step where there is a clear suggestion that workers' interest can be served only by a militant policy aimed at the abolition of capitalism and involving intervening policies that provide benefits and also contribute to the fundamental objective. The problems provoked by this assumption are massive. How can interests be imputed to individuals, let alone classes? Can this be achieved without reasonably incurring accusations of arbitrariness and illiberality? Such questions are debated repeatedly by political philosophers. More specifically for syndicalists there is a further problem. For a policy to be in my interests there has to be a reasonable expectation of its implementation. Syndicalist writings resonate with a passionate belief in the potential power of the working class, a potential whose realisation is thwarted by a range of factors including the structures and

procedures of existing trade unions. Any scepticism about such a class capacity must affect any appraisal. If syndicalist optimism about such collective self-emancipation is assessed as unrealistic, then the limiting compromises made by parliamentarians and trade union leaders may be more in the interests of those they represent. Here is the complex but necessary problem of counter-factuals.

Historians have debated how far by 1914, the appeal of 'Direct Action' was on the wane. Auguries were mixed; what is clear is that within the changed context of societies at war, industrial radicals were able to draw on sentiments that resulted from shortages, inflation and the growth of state authoritarianism. In Australia, such radicalisation was influenced by the perceived failures of Labour administrations and by the increasingly bitter debate over conscription, a furore which provoked sentiments of anti-militarism, the threat of industrial regimentation and hysteria that conscription would produce a White Australia defenceless against the "Asiatic hordes"(51). The integration of British trade unions into the Wartime State produced space for effective shop stewards committees especially in sections of the engineering industry which resisted attempts to dilute the craftsmen's preserve by the employment of workers - both men and women - who had not served their time(52). Within some of the mining unions Miners Reform Committees emerged which criticised entrenched leaderships in the radical terms of the Miner's Next Step(53). The Wobblies expanded significantly within the United States, in the period between the start of the War and American entry in April 1917. The IWW organised effectively amongst the harvest workers, 'timber beasts' and miners of the West; in his office in Chicago Haywood could claim to be the leader of a radical union with an exciting future(54). Ireland after the Easter Rising of 1916 was not just a society where the old Nationalist Party gave way to Sinn Feinn. The spiral

of misunderstanding, repression and alienation that produced the War of Independence was intertwined with the advent of a radical labour movement. From 1917, the ITGWU achieved major breakthroughs in small town and rural Ireland; this, more than 1913, was Ireland's syndicalist moment(55).

Yet these advances were sharply repelled, highlighting what many critics have viewed as the fundamental flaw in the syndicalist position. The early months of the War in the United States saw a coercive onslaught on the IWW despite the concern within the organisation that the legitimacy of the war should not be seen as a matter of principle. Both the state and vigilantes combined with employers to attack the IWW's organisation. In July 1917 this combination produced the forcible deportation of striking miners from Bisbee Arizona. They were taken by train to the middle of the Arizona desert where a mass tragedy was averted by the intervention of the army. Instead of a return to Bisbee, the strikers were kept in a military camp for three months. Strike actions in Butte Montana were destroyed through intimidation and the lynching of a Wobbly leader, Frank Little. Most decisively in September 1917, Wobbly halls were raided by Federal agents and 166 Wobblies were indicted on conspiracy charges. The outcome was a mass trial in Chicago with the predictable outcome of sentences of up to 20 years(56). This was an harbinger of the mass repression against the American Left after the Armistice.

The Australian counterpart was a Sydney trial of Wobblies on charges of seditious conspiracy and incendiarism. Conviction was based on flimsy evidence by informers; a threadbare justification that precipitated a campaign for the prisoner's release(57). Yet the trial and accompanying harassment weakened the power of Australian 'Direct Action' as did the failure of the New South Wales General Strike of 1917(58). In Britain repression was used less often, but the leaders of the Clyde Workers Committee, opponents of dilution and of conscription were arrested and deported. Socialists who backed the

Committee but lacked an industrial base were jailed(59).

These harsh experiences indicated that the Direct Action perspective had been thoroughly naive about State power. The idea that somehow power in the workplace could undercut or circumvent the State was exposed as a dangerous illusion. This was demonstrated forcefully after the War as established rulers, already neurotic in the light of the Russian experience confronted radical industrial challenges. The United States Left was battered into submission through the repression symbolised by the Palmer Raids(60). British radical trade unionist found themselves ensnared in the critical year of 1919 with a State that offered a powerful blend of inducement, conciliation and coercion(61). The ITGWU had a complex relationship with Sinn Fein during the War of Independence. As the Republicans set up a system of dual power, so the trade unions used the paralysis of the British State as the opportunity to seek wage increases through Direct Action. When workers in Nationalist Ireland struck for two days in support of political hunger strikers, many Trades Councils labelled themselves Soviets to administer services. Yet with the establishment of the Free State, the national revolution was openly revealed as socially conservative. In the context of spiralling economic depression, employers sought to roll back the unions' post-1917 gains. With the murderous Civil War settled, the State threw its weight behind the employers. Eventually in the Autumn of 1923 a trade union movement whose radical identity was already eroded was defeated heavily on several fronts. The national revolution had happened; the syndicalist movement had been destroyed(62).

The collapse of 'Direct Action' agendas also indicated the brittleness of the claim that power lay in the workshop or the mine. Radical self-confidence, high in 1919 during the brief post-war boom, collapsed as boom turned into recession in some well unionised sectors, and a strategy was

undercut by the capacity of employers to victimise activists. In Glasgow during the 1920s, it was commented bitterly but accurately that yesterday's shop steward is today's leader of the unemployed. One symbolic moment in this collapse - perhaps symptomatic rather than causal - came on 15th April 1921, the 'Black Friday' of the British labour movement when the Triple Alliance of Miners, Railwaymen and Transport Workers collapsed as the two latter groups called off their imminent sympathetic action in support of locked-out miners. An academic close to events wrote of the panic that struck delegates faced with the need to put theory and rhetoric into practice - a panic on which cautious union leaders could capitalise readily. Such capitalisation involved appeals to sectionalism as Jimmy Thomas the Railwaymen's leader - the very model of a business unionist - emphasised the security and value of member's conditions which should not be hazarded in support of intemperate miners' leaders(63). This victory for sectionalism arguably highlighted and facilitated the post-war stabilisation. For radical trade unionists, it was the ultimate sell-out which significantly they were powerless to prevent.

The defeat of syndicalism was not simply at the hands of States and employers. This radicalism was also a victim of the Bolshevik Revolution - or at least of what became the orthodox interpretation of that event. Many syndicalists became Communists, many were zealously orthodox, a few carried the stigmata of this former allegiance. As the One Way to Revolution crystallised through canonical texts so this older tradition of revolutionary socialism and democracy were patronisingly dismissed. Robin Page Arnot pronounced the epitaph for The Miners Next Step. Lenin "mercilessly" exposed syndicalism's "theoretical pretensions". Yet as Page Arnot acknowledged, "it was not until the artillery of Lenin was brought to bear on it in 1920 that the Syndicalist doctrines were overcome"(64). The tone, the imagery, the sense of dismissal and closure are familiar. The rupture on the revolutionary

left is captured in the last years of Bill Haywood, jumping bail in the United States and taking refuge in the Soviet Union. The cowboy on Gorky Street, submerging his radicalism in vodka, communicating in sign language with his Russian wife, a tragic testimony to syndicalism's defeat.

And yet the collapse of old certainties about socialism suggests the need to abandon a teleological vision in which primitive strategies give way to more scientific ones. Arguably the problems of socialism and democracy have been viewed through a limited - and limiting - range of lenses for too long. The historical context of the syndicalist moment should be re-examined; with all its strategic and political limitations; its arguments about democracy, its critiques of instruments and strategies deserve to be taken seriously.

1. For a discussion of this issue in a different historical context see Edward Thompson Customs In Common (Harmondsworth 1993).
2. For an account of the I.W.W. see Melvyn Dubofsky We Shall Be All (Chicago 1969); also Stewart Bird, Dan Georgakas and Deborah Shaffer Solidarity Forever. An Oral History of the I.W.W. (Chicago 1985).
3. For Haywood see Melvyn Dubofsky Big Bill Haywood (Manchester 198).
4. Sally Zanjani Goldfield: The Last Gold Rush on the Western Frontier (Athens, Ohio 1992); Sally Zanjani and Guy Louis Rocha The Ignoble Conspiracy: Radicalism on Trial in Nevada (Reno 1986); 60th Congress 1st Session House of Representatives Document No. 607 Papers Relative to Labour Troubles at Goldfield, Nevada.
5. Robert A Rosenstone, Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed (Harmondsworth 1982), Ch. 8; Eric Homberger John Reed (Manchester 1990), pp. 46-51.
6. Mark Leier Where the Fraser River Flows (Vancouver 1990).
7. Joseph White, Tom Mann (Manchester 1991), ch. 5.
8. Robin Gollan The Coalminers of New South Wales (Melbourne 1963) ch. 6.
9. Bob Holton, British Syndicalism (London 1976).
10. Ibid Ch. 5.
11. Emmet Larkin, James Larkin (London 1965).
12. Ibid Chs. 6-7; Bill Moran "1913, Jim Larkin and the British Labour Movement". Saothar (4) 1978 pp. 35-49.
13. New Statesman 6th September 1913 - the piece is headed "Anarchism in Dublin".
14. David Howell, A Lost Left: Three Studies in Socialism and Nationalism (Manchester 1986), esp. Ch. 4.
15. Larkin op. cit. pp. 208-210 for this episode.
16. The statement is attributed to the miner's leader Noah Ablett; for a study of his politics see David Egan "Noah Ablett, 1883-1935" Llafur 1986 pp. 19-30.
17. Vere Gordon Childs How Labour Governs: A Study of Workers' Representation in Australia (Melbourne 1964) - first published 1923 by the Labour Publishing Co. Ltd in London. The discussion of the similarities - and differences - between the United States and Australia is on p. 132-134 of the 1964 edition.
18. For discussion of the United States see David Montgomery. The Fall of the House of Labour (Cambridge 1989) - Ch. 5 for changing managerial techniques.

19. The Bishop of Southwell cited in J.E. Williams The Derbyshire Miners (London 1962) p. 424.
20. Ramsay MacDonald Syndicalism: A Critical Examination (London 1912); Phillip Snowden, Socialism and Syndicalism (London n.d.).
21. For material see Nick Salvatore Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist (Urbana Ill. 1982) pp. 242-258; Sally M. Miller Victor Berger and the Promise of Constructive Socialism 1910-20. (Westport Conn 1973) Ch. 3 and 6; Ira Kipnis The American Socialist Movement 1897-1912 (New York 1968) Chs. 7 & 18.
22. For a classical statement of this position see Clara Zetkin "Proletarian Women and Socialist Revolution" in The Socialist Register 1976 (London 1976) pp. 192-201.
23. In Karl Marx Selected Works Volume 2 (London 1942) p. 187.
24. ibid p. 183.
25. ibid p. 189.
26. The classic analysis of the SPO remains. C. Schorske German Social Democracy 1905-1917: The Origins of the Great Schism (Cambridge Mass 1955).
27. Gwyn Williams Proletarian Order (London 1975) Chs. 1 & 2.
28. Max Weber "The Prospects for Liberal Democracy in Tsarist Russia" - first published in 1906 - in W. G. Runciman (ed.), Weber Selections in Translation (London 1978) p. 283.
29. See Engels "England in 1845 and in 1885" originally in Commonweal 1st March 1885 then utilised in his Preface to the English editions of the Condition of the Working Class in England published in 1892.
30. For a discussion of this development see David Beetham "Reformism and the 'bourgeoisification' of the labour movement" in Carl Levy (ed.) Socialism and the Intelligentsia 1886-1914 (London 1987) esp. pp. 123-129.
31. ibid pp. 109-123.
32. ibid pp. 114-116 citing sources from Michel's syndicalist period.
33. Sidney and Beatrice Webb Industrial Democracy (London 1901) footnote on pp. 197-199 for an examination paper.
34. All references are to the 1972 reprint with an introduction by Mervyn Jones. For background documentation see David Egan "The Unofficial Reform Committee and the Miners' Next Step" Llafur 1978, pp. 64-80.
35. L J Williams, 'The Road to Tonypandy' Llafur 1973 pp. 41-52; also Dai Smith Wales Wales? (London 1984) Ch. 3.
36. Miner's Next Step, p. 15.
37. ibid pp. 18-20.

38. L. J. Williams, op. cit p. 41.
39. For Mill see his "Chapters on Socialism" in Geraint L. Williams (ed.), John Stuart Mill on Politics and Society (London 1976); and for Marx the discussion of the Paris Commune in "The Civil War in France".
40. Miners Next Step, p. 21.
41. ibid, p. 27.
42. ibid
43. ibid, p. 29
44. ibid, p. 30
45. ibid, p. 32.
46. ibid
47. ibid p. 24.
48. For the formation of the NUR see Philip Bagwell. The Railwaymen (London 1963) Ch. 13; and the discussion of syndicalist influences in Holton op. cit, Chs 6 & 12.
49. Robert Michels Political Parties (New York 1959) Part 5, Ch. 3.
50. Miners Next Step p. 30.
51. See for example Ray Evans Loyalty and Disloyalty: Social Conflict on the Queensland Home Front (Sydney 1987).
52. The classic presentation remains James Hinton The First Shop Stewards' Movement (London 1973).
53. For a lucid analysis that locates this moment in a broader context, see Alan Campbell, "From Independent Collier to Militant Miner: Tradition and Change in the Trade Union Consciousness of the Scottish Miners", Scottish Labour History Journal, pp. 8-23.
54. See Dubofsky "Big Bill" Haywood pp. 86-94.
55. On this see two books by Emmet O'Connor Syndicalism in Ireland 1917-23 (Cork 1988); and A Labour History of Ireland 1824-1960 (Dublin 1992) Ch. 5.
56. For material on this see Bird, Georakas and Shaffer op. cit pp. 125-136.
57. Ian Turner Sydney's Burning (An Australian Political Conspiracy) (Sydney 1969).
58. See Childe op. cit Ch. 11.
59. See Hinton op. cit

60. For an analysis William Preston Jr. Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals 1903-1933 (Cambridge, Mass 1963).
61. There is still a need for work on this critical year, not least on the containment of radical challenges within the coal industry. For a discussion of one theme which links to the argument of this paper see M.G. Woodhouse "Mines for the Nation or Mines for the Miners: Alternative Perspectives on Industrial Democracy 1919-1921". Llafur 1978 pp. 92-109.
62. See the work done by O'Connor cited in footnote 55.
63. See G D H Cole Labour in The Coal Mining Industry 1914-1921 (Oxford 1923), especially pp. 217-218.
64. Robin Page Arnot The Miners Years of Struggle (London) pp. 117-118.