

# **Nothing To Syndicate**

**Against the Democracy of Work and the Work of Democracy**

2018

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# **Nothing To Syndicate: Against The Democracy Of Work & The Work Of Democracy**

## **A Critique Of Syndicalism From An Anti-Industrial Position.**

*“We begin to see how Marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety. There is a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis, a society that does away not with the category of worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital. In other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratize work and thus help to keep in place and ensure the coherence of Reformation and Enlightenment foundational values of productivity and progress. This scenario crowds out other post-revolutionary possibilities, i.e. idleness etc.”*

— Frank Wilderson, “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal”

*“A sickle can be used for something other than to reap, and a hoe can serve to dig the grave for all that has outlived its time.”*

*The Daily CNT, (Spain, January 2, 1933)*

*“To remember what they had lost and what they became, what had been torn apart and what had come together, the fugitives and refugees and multitudes in flight were called the Sisala, which means ‘to come together, to become together, to weave together.’”*

— Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

Cue the groans, leap to whatever pre-formed expectations you may have, and swipe left to instead arrive at a far sexier (and far shorter) piece on some racist shitbag getting punched or whatever, cus’ you’re currently reading a *critique of anarcho-syndicalism*. There’s a long history of pieces like this, and most of the time they’re dry, demagogical, and philosophically vapid. Get out now! But if you’re still with me, I promise there’s a kind of timely necessity behind this hesitantly written piece.

The last two years of US social movement activity, since the ascendancy of the Trump candidacy and subsequent backlash among broad sectors of American society, have been a whirlwind of growth and crisis. In this time a huge wave of new faces have found themselves

eager to join in the historical moment of occupations, street conflicts, anti-racist community defense, and grassroots organizing.

Not unlike the highways and bridges around us, much of the anarchist infrastructure we had built in the mid-2000s—radical bookstores, newspapers, ‘zinedistros, social centers, regular assemblies, medic and tech collectives—was too small or in disrepair, ill-prepared to absorb this exponential increase in brand new, un-vouched for, and totally passionate bodies that we were meeting in the streets.

Assemblies in my town, for example, swelled from a couple dozen to nearly two hundred people immediately following Trump’s election. Most of these people had never participated in such an event and held little to no personal or political context for one another. Among many there was a vague desire to organize in an autonomous and non-electoral way, but very little shared experience with how to do so. And at least a few of these new faces were likely informants.

Enter the strictly public-facing and lowest-common denominator politics of more traditional activist organizations. Following this political moment, organizations like the Indivisibles, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), previously nonexistent or peripheral to most combative politics actually happening on the ground, exploded in size. It’s not hard to see how that happened: show up to a meeting, sign a membership card, agree to a remarkably thin level of political affinity with other complete strangers, and you’re *a part of things*.<sup>1</sup>

I say all this out of sympathy. As a teenager in a small southern town in the late 90’s, I had a pretty awkward time finding radical and anarchist politics myself. I remember, after attending my very first demonstration, during which a squad of about 30 black-clad punks with golf clubs and hockey sticks attacked a limousine en route to a presidential debate, being desperate to get involved in any way I could.<sup>2</sup>

“And what if certain kinds of human alienation—in this case from the natural world and our own dependency upon it—are hardwired into the rationalist *form* of industrialism itself?”

I couldn’t find the crazy people with hockey sticks—they were mostly from one town over, and kind of intimidating regardless, even without the hockey sticks—so I walked up to the first table I could find and got chicken-hawk recruited by the ever-timid, incredibly condescending, totally manipulative International Socialist Organization. Fast forward through two years of paternalistic programming where my own experiences of wage work and alienation didn’t seem to fit their one-dimensional projections of *the revolutionary subject*, and I was outta there. That’s just how shit goes sometimes.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is not a critique of public-facing or “formal” organizations *per se*. Revolutionary movements need a variety of accessible entry points for new folks, whether that’s a union, a social center, a medic collective, or something else, and the failure of anarchist infrastructure to adequately fill this role in 2016 partly explains the emergence of more reformist groups like DSA. Rather, this piece takes aim at some of the ideological baggage carried by the more prominent leftist organizations currently playing this role.

<sup>2</sup> They called it a sports bloc, by the way, and I was thrilled at how instead of being content to just chant slogans against the rich like the rest of us, they actually *did the thing*.

But in our current context, it can be hard to take the time to step back and actually engage in constructive critique of the ideas behind these political ports of entry. Some might argue that the dangerously resurgent fascism and far-right politics we're confronting make it a poor time for obscure internal arguments over revolutionary strategy, but I think history shows this is the *most* necessary time to debate our visions for a different kind of future.

Unfortunately, American radicals in particular are notoriously terrible at authentic, substantive debate; we are a world of endless splits, passive aggressive "cooperation," personal ad hominem attacks, inappropriately weaponized privilege politics, and twitter-shaming. The "best" outcome in this context is often that a kind of big-tent attitude develops where all critique is sidelined—but this merely papers over the contradictions in vision, organization, and tactics that will inevitably emerge in revolutionary struggle. I believe that people with different experiences who want different things can still work to mutually beneficial aims, especially when autonomy and self-determination remain guiding principles, but growth is always limited by inauthenticity.

Hopefully, this critique, and any responses to it, can avoid those pitfalls to some degree. I believe passionately that developing trust and affinity is both possible and absolutely necessary amongst those with differing ideas, but that conflict must be intrinsic to this process. On that note, I'm tremendously thankful to the many who have challenged me (and who continue to do so) in my own political assumptions over the last 20 years.<sup>3</sup>

**TLDR Intro:** This is a partly theoretical and partly personal critique of *syndicalism*, the "movement for transferring the ownership and control of the means of production and distribution to workers' unions." This idea has a long history within (and outside of) anarchism—it has inspired everyone from immigrant miners in Colorado to starving Catalan brick layers to South African laborers, and offers a radical alternative to the pro-capitalist business unionism of groups like the AFL-CIO. It was part of the philosophical backbone of the millions-strong social revolution in 1930's Spain, and, as contemporary Spanish anarchists admit, also bears some of the responsibility for that revolution's betrayal and failure. And in an oddly anachronistic resurgence, syndicalism is a driving force of the IWW, which has grown tremendously in North America in the last two years and been impressively involved in a range of activity, from anti-prison agitation to anti-racist defense and fast food worker organizing.<sup>4</sup>

As anarchists, it is taken for granted that we are struggling to abolish rather than democratize the state. But a strange blindspot continues to exist for many, who frame their efforts as a struggle to democratize (rather than abolish) the economy. As this article demonstrates,

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<sup>3</sup> I still remember a four-hour long conversation with an extremely smart, auto-didactic train-hopping anti-capitalist hobo, named after a certain starchy vegetable, who grew up working shit-jobs most of his life, fervently explaining to my youthful and earnestly left-anarchist self why he was absolutely not interested in "workers' self-management" and "democratizing industry." Thank you for your patience, P.

<sup>4</sup> This article is primarily directed not at a specific organization or its members but at an *idea*. In the majority of cases I've found modern-day wobblies to be solid people who, though sometimes driven by a strange nostalgia for a more radically "authentic" past, possess a genuinely anti-authoritarian ethos and comradely nature.

this is not a battle over mere semantics; it strikes at the heart of the world(s) we want to share, and what paths we choose to get there.

This piece integrates a number of theoretical perspectives and emphases—anti-state communist, afro-pessimist, ecological, “insurrectionary,” and the personal, to name a few—that are fairly ubiquitous in much anti-authoritarian writing of the last ten years and directly relevant to syndicalist thought, but seem to remain largely unexamined by many of the newest “recruits.” A central shared theme in all these critiques, while they approach the question of workers’ self-management from very different backgrounds and histories, is that a revolutionary approach which emphasizes the *democratization* of the economy, rather than its destruction, is extremely likely to reproduce the patterns of whiteness, bureaucracy, ecological destruction, and alienation that characterize the economy as it currently exists.

## Act I: On The Practice Of Polishing Green Turds

In a landmark report recently released by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the world’s leading climate scientists warn that there are “only a dozen years for global warming to be kept to a maximum of 1.5C, beyond which even half a degree will significantly worsen the risks of drought, floods, extreme heat and poverty for hundreds of millions of people.”<sup>5</sup> The report makes clear that only extreme action would have a chance to prevent carbon emissions from pushing us over this 1.5C line. These types of reports are not atypical—it feels like every five years or so a new dire analysis attempts to politely and futilely convince global industrial capitalism to step off the path of its inevitable death march. But this was the most intense warning to date, and comes at a time when many of the world’s major economies, from capitalist USA to “communist” China, are particularly inclined to ignore it.

To be frank: the global industrial economy threatens the very existence of human life on this planet. Those who suffer the ecological effects of runaway climate change are, predictably, the poorest, people of color, the indigenous, and quite often the currently or formerly incarcerated. Ecological crises are themselves drivers for further economic stratification, ever more Orwellian forms of state control, and capitalist accumulation. By juxtaposition, it should be obvious that a classless and stateless society in which wealth and resources were held in common—accessible to everyone and owned by no one—would not just result in but *require* a fundamentally different relationship between people and the natural world around us.

Syndicalists, along with many other “classical” anarchists and leftists, have usually offered a woefully inadequate response to environmental problems. It is suggested that, with the unions in charge and the profit motive removed, there will no longer be a structural impetus for environmental destruction. There is a certain logic to this—I can imagine it being a little easier to convince my co-workers to stop polluting in a certain way than my shitty boss who’s beholden to a growth-obsessed economy. A no-growth economy would certainly be

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<sup>5</sup> “Global Warming Must Not Exceed 1.5C Warns Landmark UN Report”, The Guardian.

better for the earth than our current situation. But what if these pollutants are intrinsically necessary to a certain form of industry? Or, as it stands, to virtually *all* forms of industry? And what if certain kinds of human alienation—in this case from the natural world and our own dependency upon it—are hardwired into the rationalist *form* of industrialism itself?

To give a more precise example: a common industrialist response to the current climate crisis, from opportunistic green capitalists and progressive politicians to the IWW's own "Environmental Unionism Caucus", has been to propose a wide range of "alternative" solar and wind power.<sup>6</sup> But these industries' technologies are themselves remarkably toxic, difficult or impossible to recycle, and require mining and resource extraction that is highly dangerous to workers and reproduces authoritarian governance all over the world. The problem of solar panel disposal "will explode with full force in two or three decades and wreck the environment" because it "is a huge amount of waste and they are not easy to recycle," said one Chinese solar official recently. Said another expert in Germany, "Contrary to previous assumptions, pollutants such as lead or carcinogenic cadmium can be almost completely washed out of the fragments of solar modules over a period of several months, for example by rainwater," making safe disposal almost impossible.<sup>7</sup> Similar materials (and problems) are required for wind power.

I propose that cadmium telluride, copper indium selenide, and sulfur hexafluoride do not cease to cause cancer when it's a union flipping the switch instead of a Board of Directors. A car driving off a cliff is in big fucking trouble, and if there are no brakes, it doesn't matter who is in the driver's seat.

The specter of ecological colonialism also remains. It is not a coincidence that industrial resource extraction and modern state coercion evolved on the historical stage side by side. Alternative power sources and most industrial machinery and robotics require a constant new supply of heavy metals, much of which must be mined in Africa and the Global South. Do we realistically think that, with the profit motive and state coercion removed from the equation, African laborers will *voluntarily* mine cobalt—an incredibly dangerous and toxic process—to power the cell phones of millions of westerners 10,000 miles away?<sup>8</sup>

One might argue that with the solar and wind industry I'm unfairly choosing a convenient exception to pick on, that the vast majority of industries could be collectivized and self-managed by their current workers with little modification required to have them run in an environmentally sustainable manner. But does anyone actually believe that? That the economy that gave us nuclear bombs, PVC, DDT, superfund sites, and Miracle Whip just needs a little green, self-managed tinkering and everything can keep on humming like normal? And if we don't believe that, then how does a predominantly syndicalist strategy for

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<sup>6</sup> "Restoring the Heartland and Rustbelt Through Clean Energy Democracy," IWW Environmental Unionism Caucus.

<sup>7</sup> "If Solar Panels Are So Clean, Why Do They Produce So much Toxic Waste?", Forbes Magazine.

<sup>8</sup> Adding to this specter of colonialism is the very real fact that the soon-to-be-syndicated workplaces across North America all reside on stolen land. I don't know what native folks will want to do if the rev pops off—I suspect they'll have a lot of different ideas about it—but if many of them want to remove large parts of their land from the industrial and economic paradigm, it would be a colonialist and counter-revolutionary act for a union to stand in their way, self-management be damned.

social revolution—in which unions take power from bosses and continue to run all these workplaces for society’s benefit—make sense?<sup>9</sup> If we’re honest about the ecological need to close, destroy, or totally re-structure the vast majority of the economy’s workplaces, is a syndicalist strategy for revolution, in which workplaces are privileged as the *primary* drivers for transitions in power and self-governance, the best option?

A common, usually defensive response to this ecological critique has been to accuse the author of advocating a pre-industrial Stone Age, a kind of Hobbesian hunter-and-gatherer existence where everyone dies a miserable death with no penicillin and no teeth at the ripe old age of 40.<sup>10</sup> But this a remarkably false dichotomy that I think most readers can see through. A post-revolutionary world will likely look like nothing we can currently imagine, past or present—it might incorporate formerly industrial technologies in non-industrial ways, it may be a world where much work and labor is being done with no “workplaces” or “economy” whatsoever, and it will probably look radically different from one bioregion to the next<sup>11</sup>—but it cannot look like a rehashed, worker-managed version of *this world*, or that car is going to drive off of that cliff.

## Act II: Precaricats, Robots, And The Universal Wage

As Peter Gelderloos points out in an article released after Trump’s election, “The corporate architects of the new economy, like Google, Apple, and Facebook, may be the only hope for capitalism to survive the ecological and financial crises it has created. Economic growth based on fossil fuels and manufacture, followed by financial bubbles, has had a three hundred year run and it might be meeting its geological limits. Of all the capitalists, only those of the IT sector are ideating game-changing transformations to this dynamic, and developing the technologies to make them feasible, from ethereal production to AI to extraterrestrial exploitation.”<sup>12</sup>

A few readily identifiable shifts in the life of North America’s working class(es) are important in this part of the conversation. First, many sectors of this class that might have once worked one steady, relatively well paying job for decades no longer have that “privilege.” Though racial and gender hierarchies among wage workers remain more entrenched than ever, the reality of 2, 3, 4, or even 6-income households, as a necessity for survival, are a

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<sup>9</sup> The ecologically disastrous paths of the USSR and China are also an alarm bell worth ringing. Though rank and file workers hardly had (or have) more power in these societies than in the US, the warning signs of a bureaucratic and production-obsessed economy ring true.

<sup>10</sup> That being said, won’t it be remarkable to live in a world where industry hasn’t destroyed so much of the natural world that living by hunting, fishing, and sustainable small-scale agriculture is possible again? Shouldn’t that be a goal? If someone offered me a trade where I could sit at a lake catching my dinner instead of checking fedbook every ten minutes, I’d take that shit in a minute.

<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the imagination is a fun place to start! For an exploration of this theme, check out Post-Civ!published by Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness. I’d also suggest writings from the ZAD in France.

<sup>12</sup> “Long Term Resistance: Fighting Trump and Liberal Co-option”, Peter Gelderloos.

fact of life not just for the most marginalized but for most of us.<sup>13</sup> A variety of neoliberal shifts in monetary policy, the globalization of production and labor markets, the explosion of the prison-industrial complex, and the transition to a service economy all played a role in this. A drastic loss of unions—down now to around 11 percent of the private economy—played a role too, but this was far more the result than the cause of these changes.

And it's not just that we're all working a weird handful of precarious part-time jobs. We're working *all the time*, even when we're not at work: creating ad revenue for Facebook, logging into our work app to get more hours, answering emails while on "vacation," cooking rushed meals for our kids between shifts, fixing shit our landlord won't repair, selling our own identities on Instagram and Etsy, spinning the millennials' mousewheel in a desperate effort to turn social capital into actual capital. We're supposed to be fighting back against our bosses, but it can be difficult to even pinpoint *who exactly our boss is*, if it's not just the economy itself.

Of course, understanding work only through the lens of the union, the workplace, and the wage has usually meant leaving more than half the population out of the equation. As feminist theorists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Silvia Federici, and Selma James pointed out years ago, understanding unwaged labor, like housework, as work that is intrinsic to the "reproduction of labor" requires us to completely reframe our ideas about anti-capitalist resistance, not just in theory but in practical terms of *where resistance takes place* and how that resistance is seen (or not). To take seriously the resistance of those who engage in feminized labor—whether it's paid or not, or performed by men or women—in part requires that we decenter the workplace as the sole or primary site of struggle.<sup>14</sup> And because so many forms of unwaged, feminized labor are racialized as well as gendered in specific ways, refusing to decenter the workplace in our understanding becomes an act of whitewashing class struggle. As workplaces continue to become ever more diffuse and decentralized anyway, the observations of these feminists become more poignant than ever.

Robotization and AI threaten to speed up these changes even more. For all of Trump's racist dog whistling about immigrants, it's Chappie and Wall-E that are "taking jobs," not undocumented folks, an obvious fact that both Republicans and Democrats find convenient to ignore. The neoliberal economic shifts that we rioted against in the late 90's and early 00's—alongside squatters in Prague, Mayans in southern Mexico, and steelworkers in Seattle—met effective, widespread resistance and also have a certain built-in limit: once capital is fully free to roam the globe, labor prices can only get so much lower.

Robotics and AI solve that problem and help capitalists re-localize production: no need to move a factory to Singapore if you can pay computers absolutely nothing to do the work right at home. This isn't just a manufacturing phenomenon either, as we were once assured.

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<sup>13</sup> In my household, for instance, there are three kids and four adults, three of whom are parents. Between the five oldest of us, we work nine part or full-time jobs. Several of us are on some kind of public assistance, and we still have it a lot better than some folks in my neighborhood.

<sup>14</sup> Even in the heyday of syndicalism, Spain's glorious CNT was largely dependent on informal neighborhood networks run mostly by women, and decentralized armed affinity groups operating clandestinely and outside of formal union channels.

The service economy is starting to prove successful with this too, as worker-less Amazon Go! stores well demonstrate.<sup>15</sup>

Gelderloos again: “On the other hand, AI and robotics threaten the social contract by undermining the historic point of unity between the capitalist logic of accumulation and the statist logic of social control: control people and profit off of them by putting them to work. Any solution to that crisis would require bold interventions by the State approaching some kind of utopian yet corporate socialism (a prediction that was already made in 2009<sup>16</sup>, that socialism would not result from the development of productive capacities, as Marx foretold, but rather repressive capacities, once the State had the techniques to surveil and control those who were no longer kept in line by the threat of hunger).”

This “corporate socialism” is part leftist utopia, part techie-capitalist scheme. For example, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos has been a loud voice for the universal basic income, a guaranteed salary provided to all by the state regardless of employment, but undoubtedly tied to a whole range of bureaucratic measurements and citizenship standards.<sup>17</sup> In other words, an ingenious form of social discipline, with a wide range of support from the Left, that helps solve precisely the kind of tension (presented by increasing numbers of “under-employed people) that the transition to AI and robotics creates. Think of welfare, updated to the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

What does all this mean? For one, it helps explain why the most advanced, militant, and widespread resistance to state, capital, whiteness, and citizenship of the last 20 years has mostly occurred *outside the workplace*. This is true from the caracoles of the Zapatistas and the accompanying “anti-globalization” movement, to Occupy, to the organizing and sub/urban riots of Black Lives Matter, to Standing Rock, to the prison strikes<sup>18</sup> of 2016 and 2018, to #OccupyICE, and beyond.

It also helps explain why so many of our creative tactical adaptations of late have focused on sabotaging capitalism at the points of *circulation* and *extraction* (think highway blockades, die-ins at malls, mass looting and burning, expelling police from neighborhoods, the occupation of airports and plazas, blocking rural access points for mining or pipelines), rather than at the point of *production*. It’s mostly working class and dispossessed people engaging in these tactics, but they are not the mass factory lock-ins or strikes of a century ago. It is telling that the only notable “general strike” of our generation, that of Occupy Oakland on November 2, 2011, succeeded in accomplishing a (partial) retail, service, and port shutdown not primarily by internal workplace action but rather by tens of thousands of people blocking ports and roadways and physically attacking businesses *from the outside*. Even the port workers, themselves a powerful union, stood on the sidelines, mostly supportive

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<sup>15</sup> “Amazon Just Opened a Human-Free Supermarket,” News Channel 5.<https://www.newschannel5.com/simplemost/amazon-just-opened-human-free-supermarket>

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of this, check out *Here at the Center of the World in Revolt* by Lev Zlodey & Jason Radegas.

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2018-07-18/universal-basic-income-gets-nod-from-obama-bezos-should-fund-it>. It’s unclear if Bezos’ basic income will cover the three-fold increase in rent costs you’ll face when he moves his Amazon headquarters to your town.

<sup>18</sup> Some might argue that these prison strikes did in fact occur at “workplaces”, but this is an awkward attempt to fit a square peg in a round hole, as the next section will hopefully demonstrate.

but constrained by their own contract and regulations. There were thousands of people who refused to work that day, but their participation in the strike and its accompanying attack on capitalist normality was not centrally catalyzed by a union, but rather by other organizing structures.

The reason for this tactical and strategic shift has not primarily been ideological but *practical*. It's not because all these people have something fundamentally "against" organizing at work, or love their jobs, or whatever. *It is the world we live in.*

We are also no longer living in the modernist era of the "big organization." The large, bureaucratic, and corporately structured bodies which characterized resistance in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are either gone or hold little of the relevance and power they once did. Social movements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, at least in their autonomous and radical expression, are necessarily an infinitely complicated venn diagram of coordination and contradiction. None of the recent examples of struggle given here relied primarily on a singular, unified mass organization.<sup>19</sup>

While movements still need to provide clear entry points to new would-be insurgents, it is no longer "One Big Union" that holds sway in these moments, but the multitudinous interactions of a thousand collectives, affinity groups, gangs, crews, projects, assemblies, spokescouncils, and smaller organizations. This does not make us weaker—it makes us stronger!—and anachronistic efforts at uniting everyone behind one single organization are destined to be either bureaucratic, recuperative, or fail entirely.<sup>20</sup> We do need open and overlapping spaces of coordination between these diverse structures and efforts; we don't need a forced or superficial unification. And to be clear, this is *not* an argument "against organization," but in favor of *more* organization that is flexible, autonomous, localized, efficient, and responsive to immediate practical needs rather than theoretical positions, egotistic personalities, or bureaucratic machinations.<sup>21</sup>

The mainstream press and sociologists have explained the diverse and diffuse nature of contemporary protest simply as the product of new "social media," while socialist cadre groups dismiss this dynamic as a sign of "political immaturity." These are both lazy explanations that fail to take into account a whole array of material and cultural shifts in the last 50 years, not to mention the conscious choice of radicals to avoid the well-charted mistakes of the past.

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<sup>19</sup> The IWW's Incarcerated Organizing Committee (IWOC) was important to both the 2016 and 2018 strikes, but its role has been exaggerated by media, which latched onto the most apparent, legible organization it could find to explain a movement it did not understand. The actual organizing for the strike depended on IWOC agitation but also a wide array of already existent prisoner study groups, gangs, prisoner publications, and collectives and affinity groups on the outside. A look at where strike participation popped off is illustrative: in many of the "hottest" facilities, there were few if any IWOC members at all.

<sup>20</sup> For an excellent historical study, by a participant, of how syndicalist structures can reproduce bureaucracy and betray workers' own initiatives, check out Carlos Semprun Maura's ***Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Catalonia.***

<sup>21</sup> The Invisible Committee once wrote, "We just have to keep in mind that nothing different can come out of an assembly than what is already there." So many times people join an organization because that is how they think things happen. But no formation, regardless of how "perfect" its structure, will prove powerful if the individuals present fail to bring initiative, care, daring, creativity, and mutual trust.

It should be clear what all these changes in the nature of work mean for syndicalism: *It is difficult to organize the workplace if there is no workplace. It is even harder if there are no workers.* Of course, there still are workplaces, and we are (mostly) still workers, and people have been organizing at their jobs however we (still) can. This should continue as long as these conditions of work remain—we should be organizing and rebelling in every place in which this world is reproduced, which is *everywhere*—but it's no wonder that a strategy which centrally privileges the workplace as the primary site of counter-power feels bizarrely out of date and hopelessly inadequate.

Many North American anarchists work in service sectors that are still vulnerable to self-organized worker-driven resistance. There remains enough of a bourgeois desire to “be served,” and psychological barrier to experiencing that service from a robot, that we still have these jobs for the time being. A lot of these employers are smaller and have less access to variable capital, and so myriad opportunities to undermine their credibility with the public and sabotage their profits still exist.

But even when social conflict does erupt on the job, the material shifts laid out in this section suggest a radical change in *how* we organize at (and against) work. The union, as it is traditionally understood, is a calcified fossil that evolved in a very different time period—perhaps it can be dusted off and reinvented, but it will never again be the primary driver of revolutionary change. From mutual aid networks and non-workplace-based assemblies to neighborhood pickets and 21<sup>st</sup>-century relevant forms of cyber and industrial sabotage, we need a newly diversified toolbox to attack this era of capitalism.<sup>22</sup> As these tools continue to reshape our struggles, it becomes clear that our efforts must point to something other than democracy and workers’ self-management.

## Act III: Burning Down The American Plantation

To observe these *facts* of 21<sup>st</sup> century resistance outside of, beyond, and against the workplace is not to express unqualified validation or universal approval of these movement spaces. Within every encampment, every prison strike noise demo, every highway takeover, every airport occupation, and every open assembly, there remains a multitude of fault lines, all of which pass through the central, racialized contradiction that is *civil society*.

Critical theorist Frank Wilderson writes, “There is something organic to the Black positionality that makes it essential to the destruction of civil society.” This can be thought of through the lens of one’s relation to the economy and work:

The worker demands that productivity be fair and democratic (Gramsci’s new hegemony, Lenin’s dictatorship of the proletariat, in a word, socialism). In contrast, the slave demands that production stop, without recourse to its ultimate democratization. Work is not an organic principle for the slave.”

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<sup>22</sup> The 2018 West Virginia teachers’ strike offered an inspiring example of this, in particular in the massive networks of mutual aid that emerged, and the willingness of at least some teachers to organize in direct opposition to union bureaucrats. At the same time, the extremely limited, political, and ultimately conservative scope of the demands themselves speaks to this critique. Sometimes the exception proves the rule.

Civil society—that sphere of the capitalist world, outside of government but beyond “private” life, that supposedly makes living in a democracy so special—is the “discursive and structural territory for the (white) fear of black proletarian rage.”<sup>23</sup> It assembles the horizontal power of the PTA board, the union bureaucrat, the church BBQ, the permitted protest and peace marshal, the non-profit board, the deputized slave patrol and its willing volunteers—all as a kind of state auxiliary. In a democratic settler state such as our own, it is a rhizomatic but crucial governing organism, a permanent force designed to maintain state, economy, and above all, white supremacy. Civil society speaks to us of *justice, rights, peaceful protest, the rule of law, and innocence*. It chants at us, *This is what democracy looks like!*<sup>24</sup> “Whereas the positionality of the worker (whether a factory worker demanding a monetary wage, an immigrant, or a white woman demanding a social wage) gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society,” writes Wilderson, “the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society.”<sup>25</sup>

Does a slave rebellion gesture toward the democratization of the plantation, or its destruction? What about a prison riot? The good protesters may defend our “rights” as *prisoners*, but no one is trying to democratically self-manage their prison—they’re trying to burn that shit down and get free.<sup>26</sup> As author Saidiya Hartman puts it, “I refuse to believe that the slave’s most capacious political claims or wildest imaginings are for back wages or debt relief. There are too many lives at peril to recycle the forms of appeal that, at best, have delivered the limited emancipation *against* which we now struggle.”<sup>27</sup>

Some might object to the relevancy of all this to a critique of syndicalism, but the historical parallels, in particular at the end of the Civil War, are abundant. When well-intentioned Northern bureaucrats traveled south with “justice” in their mouths, charged with restarting the post-war agrarian economy, their task was clear: By hook or by crook, force former slaves to sign labor contracts with their former masters, who had been restored ownership of their former lands in direct opposition to the slaves who had been occupying them.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> “Expanded Notes on the Police, their Predecessors, and the White Hell of Civil Society,” Saralee Stafford and Neal Shirley.

<sup>24</sup> A last note on civil society: A few years ago, during a daytime lull in an anti-police uprising in a nearby city, me and my exhausted, tear-gas-drenched friends were loading up cases of water in the trunk of our car. A well-dressed woman exiting a Starbucks approached us with a mix of fear and genuine concern, begging us, “Please, don’t do anything unkind.”

<sup>25</sup> “The Prison-Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal,” Frank Wilderson.

<sup>26</sup> This all feels particularly relevant given how IWOC has been involved in both the 2016 and 2018 prison strikes. (Or tried to be—in many areas, like my own, they have almost no members on either side of the wall, and have ended up the spokespeople for other people’s organizing or struggles). It’s a strange fit—I’m pretty sure the wobbly comrades I know are aware that the prisoners they’re writing with are not trying to “self-manage” the prison. This all feels like another example of the activity having moved beyond the vision.

<sup>27</sup> *Lose Your Mother*. Saidiya Hartman, pg. 170. (My italics).

<sup>28</sup> For more on this aspect of the Freedmen’s Bureau, check out Eric Foner’s *A Short History of Reconstruction*. By most accounts the majority of these agents were earnest anti-racist reformers who thought that by providing education and labor contracts they were helping end chattel slavery, but this did not change their use-value to Northern capitalists and politicians.

Some laborers signed willingly, some resisted, and others remained marooned as far away as they could.<sup>29</sup>

To be fair, I am *not* accusing “syndicalism” of the mistakes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Freedmen’s Bureau. But the logic of *production*, of *preserving the economy* at all costs, and of maintaining the *form* of the economy under the guise of “justice” in a post-revolutionary period, all ring true. The “conceptual anxiety” in the face of Black rage and freedom, of which Wilderson accuses those anti-capitalists hoping to democratize the economy, also reverberates throughout the personal memoirs of Northern white abolitionists of the time.

Ultimately, for all the conflicts that existed between Northern and Southern visions of progress and race relations, the betrayals and economic transitions of the Reconstruction period were *jointly* built upon a deeply held white anxiety towards a Black freedom that reformers (correctly) understood can only mean the end of America.<sup>30</sup> Instead, a paper freedom was offered, a right to (sometimes) sit in a voting booth, witness booth, or prison cell, and even this was suffocated by the still unending realities of forced labor and social death. The convict lease system, the restoration of expropriated plantations to their “rightful” owners, the modernization of police forces and penal codes, and the expansion of state prison systems all reflected this: that bondage had not been abolished, but rather democratized. The red and blue lights that periodically flash across the walls of my neighborhood, and the streetfights we find ourselves in with Proud Boys and neo-Kluxmen, are equally a reminder of this fact. Here we are 150 years later, still living in this “afterlife of slavery.”<sup>31</sup>

The question behind this history, that still approaches us urgently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is: If the democratization of slavery brought us prisons, what will the democratization of the modern economy bring us?

## Act IV: Bon Appétit, Asshole

I would add another dimension to the more removed critiques mentioned so far: that of individual desire. These critiques mean nothing if they do not engage dialogically with our own personal experiences of the workplace, democracy, and racialized and gendered labor.

Speaking as someone who has worked in the food industry, and in particular fine dining and the catering industry, for nearly 20 years (with a variety of other wage jobs mixed in), I can barely find the words to express how absolutely disinterested I am in “self-managing” this industry, whether it’s right now or after some kind of worker-led revolution.

I love cooking for and feeding the people I care about.

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<sup>29</sup> I would encourage readers to check out histories of the Ogeechee Insurrection as well as the Sea Island maroons, who, in addition to refusing to grow cash crops for the Union, maintained their cultural autonomy and a century later were still resisting yuppie development projects like golf courses.

<sup>30</sup> “I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come.” – James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*.

<sup>31</sup> *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman.

I hate serving clients. I hate the way their eyes glide over me like I'm not there, the way I'm trained to be invisible, the way I'm scolded for eating their food, the way they stare at me with derision when I mix their drinks, the way their backwashed filth feels when I scrape and rack their plates, the way my feet and back and wrists hurt at the end of the shift, the way the black and white uniform is an unspoken reminder of the Plantation, the looks of depression and alcoholism and exhaustion on my friends' and co-workers' faces. And considering that I have a degree of white privilege—and am paid above average for the service sector I'm in—I can only *imagine* the anger and frustration others feel. Nobody who gets free is trying to do this shit one minute longer than we have to, regardless of whether there is a boss or not. And I think that's true for tens of millions of service workers across North America.

“Why should the ghost of capitalism be allowed to prescribe the creative and decision-making forms of a new society?”

This anger and depression is only heightened by the critical awareness that there is simply nothing *necessary* about this work—nothing I do would be needed for any kind of egalitarian society to function. In a decent society parties and weddings (which themselves would be a completely different affair in a stateless and non-patriarchal world) could easily be “run” by the guests and their friends themselves. Only in a society as completely alienated as our own do narcissistic, self-absorbed people pay thousands of dollars to have their most intimate and personally important days attended to by complete strangers who stare at them in barely hidden contempt.

I do not want a world where this workplace continues to exist in any way shape or form. I want it gone. I want my time taken up teaching and learning with kids, growing and finding food, cooking and eating with the people and animals I love and whom I depend on to survive. By all means I desire to (and do) struggle alongside my current co-workers around the immediate needs that we have—most of which looks like theft and fudging our hours, given the array of institutional, cultural, and temporal constraints that make aboveground institutionalized organizing difficult in our industry—but no amount of post-revolutionary self-management will make this workplace tolerable. If the rev happens on a Tuesday, I can promise you that we'll be smashing the plates, stealing the silver, and torching the tents by Wednesday morning.

One could argue that our “union” could choose to carry on a different activity than the labor we carried out before the rev—maybe we turn one of the wedding venues we work at into a school or collective housing, for instance—but then it would make more sense to invite in a whole new set of (former) workers with more skills and experience in that field, at which point our “caterers’ union” would be a redundancy. And why should our union, constituted by humans somewhat arbitrarily assembled by capitalism, get the final say with what happens at that venue anyway, any more than the other people who live in the area or have immediate needs and visions for how to use the space? Why should the ghost of capitalism be allowed to prescribe the creative and decision-making forms of a new society?

While anarchist organizing in our workplaces may have an immediate relevancy in the here and now, in the sense that it helps us meet our short-term needs and opens another

site of conflict, it can hardly be the central or sole driver of human organization after a social revolution. TLDR: I have no interest in making the catering industry a democracy. Thanks but no thanks.

## In Conclusion

Above all, the critiques in this piece share a deep rejection of the goal of democratizing our economy. They vary from the historically materialist, feminist, and ecological to the anti-racist, ontological, and even “existential.” To be sure, these points of critique could also be aimed at other, more statist versions of the socialist project. And this is just as relevant to an approach that sees syndicalism as a transitional stage—*don’t worry, the One Big Union will wither away on its own, ideally before the sea levels rise much more!*—as opposed to an “endgame” in itself.

A few side notes regarding this project of democratization: If the work of most socialists is to make the economy more democratic *indirectly* through the state (either through totalitarian single-party rule or the farce of elections), the strategy of anarcho-syndicalism has been to bypass the state and do so directly. But while this more direct approach has historically opened up space for broad and meaningful antagonism with the state and capital, it remains conceptually wedded to *democracy*.

In the context of a supposedly anarchist revolution, this implies its own paradox: a democratic body with no central enforcement apparatus (i.e. a state’s monopoly on violence) or *singularly legitimate* decision-making body (again, a state), that rests instead on the premise of autonomy and self-determination of its members, is no democracy at all, but something else entirely. Labeling the structure a “direct” democracy does not resolve this conceptual confusion.<sup>32</sup>

It is no coincidence that history’s democratic ancestors (Athens, etc.) were predominantly militarized slave states, and that the central vehicles for white supremacist expansion in North America were democratic in form—this kind of state has historically been adept at military expansion, soliciting consent from privileged but governed majorities, and stabilization in times of crisis.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, for leftists to retroactively label certain indigenous stateless societies as “democracies” because it gives them the warm diversity-fuzzies is both Eurocentric and racist. The sooner we discard the democratic absurdity and develop new language for our visions of individual and collective freedom, the better off we’ll be.

Returning to the questions at hand, I admit that the criticisms in this piece attack the question of workers’ self-management from very different directions, and harbor internal conflicts with each other. In this sense I am not presenting a singular program, but rather a set of different (but related) problems *fundamental* to the syndicalist project. Frankly, I’m still thinking my way through all these problems and what they mean for the day-to-day struggles of which I’m a part. I’m immediately skeptical of grand, universalizing theories that claim to

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<sup>32</sup> For further inquiry, I would highly suggest the series of articles From Democracy to Freedom by Crimethinc, as well as Uri Gordon’s writing on anarchist decision-making in *Anarchy Alive!*

<sup>33</sup> Worshipping Power, by Peter Gelderloos (AK Press), has some useful information on this.

offer the perfect scientific formula, and am more comfortable in the negative role of (active) pessimist and experimenter.

I am also not proposing a new “site” for attack, to replace the workplaces of old as the *central*, privileged lever at which we will assert revolutionary power. There should be no new “revolutionary subject” to replace the idealized “worker,” “peasant,” or “lumpen,” around which detached middle-class socialists will salivate and spew forth their objectifying projections and predictions.

I believe it is both necessary and to our strategic benefit that any sort of anarchistic social revolution attack our oppression at all points of its reproduction—this still means the workplace, but also the home, the urban neighborhood, the back roads and mountain hollers, schools, suburban developments, forests, swamps, deserts, reservations, *everywhere*. To state once more, in anticipation of a mountain of misunderstanding: this article is not suggesting that we abandon conflict with our bosses. It is arguing that we *de-center* the workplace as the primary site of such struggle, and that we understand this struggle to be gesturing towards something fundamentally more revolutionary, terrifying, and beautiful than the democratization of the economy. A worker once wrote in a very old, dusty CNT newspaper: “A sickle can be used for something other than to reap, and a hoe can serve to dig the grave for all that has outlived its time.”

If this takes us using an informal neighborhood assembly to coordinate a raid on a state armory all led simultaneously by a militia of mechanics, a collective of Quaker clergy, and a platoon of power-line attacking squirrels, *I'm fucking down for that*. Shit may get weird. But that's a better option than privileging one sector of resistance over others, or centralizing a single node or channel of decision-making (i.e. the One Big Union) because that's what our revolutionary blueprint tells us to do.<sup>34</sup>

“In an economy, different spheres of life—work, play, ritual, family, friendship, creativity, learning—are starkly alienated from one another, and all are typically subordinated to that which best continues to allow the economy to function.”

As the *false life* of white civil society is torn at the seams, it is to be expected that a wide range of workplaces might be destroyed, abandoned, or completely re-appropriated. *Communization*—the both spontaneous and organized act of creating communal and stateless forms of life—has to be understood as a broadly diffuse and social process, not limited to or prescribed by the nodes of individual workplaces as they evolved under capitalism.

In an economy, different spheres of life—work, play, ritual, family, friendship, creativity, learning—are starkly alienated from one another, and all are typically subordinated to that which best continues to allow the economy to function. This is a state of affairs to be opposed resolutely, and tactics of revolt and forms of organization that allow these spheres to blend back together indistinguishably are to be encouraged.

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<sup>34</sup> One might respond that syndicalists are already organizing in a variety of sectors, not just the workplace. This is admirably true, but only more so begs the question why this dated strategy has not updated itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So often the activity of the militant speaks to a reality not yet explicitly recognized by our ideas, which remain millstones around our necks.

Put differently: As anarchists, we are not struggling to democratize the state. In the same manner, it needs to be understood that we are not struggling to democratize the economy. Just as we reject the notion of handing the reigns of the state over to a new set of owners, we ought reject any such proposal for the economy. This doesn't mean the dispossessed and exploited will not "lead the way"—they already are—but it does challenge a workplace-centered approach geared towards preserving the economy and production in their currently understood sense.

Just as a graveyard comes to provide soil for new life once unknown to the tombs and concrete slabs surrounding it, the death march of capital can give way to totally new pathways for creativity and abundance. But this requires more than a struggle with the current owners of the means of production; it means an antagonism with the logic of production *itself*, and by extension, the version of *ourselves* that this logic has produced. Our task is not to "crowd out" the many post-revolutionary possibilities available by adhering to a blueprint that is hopelessly anchored to *this* world, but to open the door to a new world "in which many worlds fit."

# Aiming At Ghosts: On The Limited Usefulness Of A Critique Of 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Syndicalism

**Both A Defense Of Workplace Organizing As Well As A Critique Of The Article *Nothing To Syndicate*, Which Was Recently Published On *It's Going Down*. Includes Some Discussion Of The Ideas Of Frank Wilderson, And Their Limitations.**

As the anarchist movement has responded and adapted to the increased level of social struggle seen over the past few years, it feels as though a lot of the tired old debates of the past have been pushed aside, as we've been confronted with newer problems and challenges. *Nothing to Syndicate: Against the Democracy of Work & the Work of Democracy*, a recent critique of anarcho-syndicalism, feels like kind of a throwback, the sort of thing that one might find in the middle of a heated argument between Evasion-era Crimethinc and NEFACers.

The author argues at length against the idea of workers' self-management of the economy and gives a basic introduction to anti-work positions, but never makes it quite clear who they're arguing against.

In a telling footnote early on, they say that, "This article is primarily directed not at a specific organization or its members but at an idea. In the majority of cases I've found modern-day wobblies to be solid people who, though sometimes driven by a strange nostalgia for a more radically "authentic" past, possess a genuinely anti-authoritarian ethos and comradely nature." And that's the thing: are these ideas actually widely held among modern-day wobblies? And if not, what's the point of the critique?

It's notable that, out of a very long and wide-ranging list of sources, they seem to cite precisely one contemporary wobbly/syndicalist text, which seems to suggest a certain lack of engagement with the ideas and tendencies that they're meant to be arguing against.

One of their strongest points is made early on, when they discuss the ecological impact of the technology needed for solar and wind power. These questions – how a post-capitalist society would relate to the earth and manage "natural resources," what technologies and materials are compatible with the continuing survival of life on this planet and which ones will have to be abandoned, and how we'll cope with the absence of those resources we can't rely on anymore – are, I think, pressing ones for us all. But things become less impressive when they move on to ask whether "the economy... just needs a little green, self-managed tinkering and everything can keep on humming like normal? And if we don't believe that, then how does a predominantly syndicalist strategy for social revolution—in which unions take

power from bosses and continue to run all these workplaces for society's benefit—make sense?"

And there's the thing – who exactly are they arguing with here? Which contemporary wobblies actually see liberation in terms of keeping the existing economy and workplaces running under workers' control?

Indeed, it's questionable whether the author's caricature of anarcho-syndicalism has ever been accurate: in another footnote, they talk about how, "Even in the heyday of syndicalism, Spain's glorious CNT was largely dependent on informal neighborhood networks run mostly by women, and decentralized armed affinity groups operating clandestinely and outside of formal union channels." I'm not sure why they offer this as evidence to support their argument, when it instead seems to show that syndicalism has always been more thoughtful and complex than the strawman they wish to argue against.

Later, they assert that "the most advanced, militant, and widespread resistance to state, capital, whiteness, and citizenship of the last 20 years has mostly occurred outside the workplace. This is true from the caracoles of the Zapatistas and the accompanying "anti-globalization" movement, to Occupy, to the organizing and sub/urban riots of Black Lives Matter, to Standing Rock, to the prison strikes of 2016 and 2018, to #OccupyICE, and beyond."

One obvious point of contention here is whether or not the prison strikes occurred in workplaces. They do at least acknowledge this issue in a footnote, but insist that it's not really the case. Beyond that point, it's also unclear whether this is meant to be a list of international struggles (as the mention of "the Zapatistas and the accompanying "anti-globalization" movement" would suggest), or purely U.S. ones, as with the later examples. Even just confining myself to the US, I would suggest that looking at the organizing work that led to the attempted assassination of Judi Bari, the mass walkouts on May Day 2006, the movement in Wisconsin 2011, the longshore dispute that coincided with the high point of Occupy, and the wave of illegal education strikes that took place earlier this year – along with the prison strikes of 2016 and 2018 – provide a powerful list of counter-examples, especially when remembering that many of the education strikes involved mass defiance of the law.

Discussing the attempted general strike in Oakland 2011, they assert that "the only notable "general strike" of our generation, that of Occupy Oakland on November 2, 2011, succeeded in accomplishing a (partial) retail, service, and port shutdown not primarily by internal workplace action but rather by tens of thousands of people blocking ports and roadways and physically attacking businesses from the outside. Even the port workers, themselves a powerful union, stood on the sidelines, mostly supportive but constrained by their own contract and regulations."

This is a serious misrepresentation: apart from anything else, it's worth stressing the point that outside pickets were so successful in disrupting the port precisely because the port workers had a strong tradition of radical workplace organization, which allowed them to win contract provisions that mean they can respect outside pickets. That strong workplace organization is why Oakland port workers were able to shut down the port, not just during Occupy in 2011, but also, for instance, against the Iraq War back in 2007, in solidarity with Black Lives Matter in 2015 and against Trump's inauguration in 2017. Years after Occupy

Oakland, the port workers are still able to carry out disruptive workplace actions in solidarity with a wide variety of social struggles; the “other organizing structures” praised by the author seem not to have aged quite so well.

They spend a while stressing the changes in the nature of work, pointing out that, “It is difficult to organize the workplace if there is no workplace. It is even harder if there are no workers.” Before immediately conceding that “there still are workplaces, and we are (mostly) still workers, and people have been organizing at their jobs however we (still) can. This should continue as long as these conditions of work remain—we should be organizing and rebelling in every place in which this world is reproduced, which is everywhere”.

This is a pretty massive concession. And just saying that “we should be rebelling everywhere” passes over some pretty important questions – at what sites do we have relative power? Where do we have more or less leverage? And even leaving this point aside, out of “everywhere”, where do we spend most of our waking lives?

Perhaps in the future, most of us will be part of the surplus population; but right here, right now, there are around 156,795 thousand people reported as employed in the US. That being the case, for a lot of us, fighting where we stand means fighting at work.

To Our Friends – not usually seen as a particularly old-fashioned text – also has relevant insights to offer here:

“What defines the worker is not his exploitation by a boss, which he shares with all other employees. What distinguishes him in a positive sense is his embodied technical mastery of a particular world of production. There is a competence in this that is scientific and popular at the same time, a passionate knowledge that constituted the particular wealth of the working world before capital, realizing the danger contained there and having first extracted all that knowledge, decided to turn workers into operators, monitors, and custodians of machines. But even there, the workers’ power remains: someone who knows how to make a system operate also knows how to sabotage it in an effective way. But no one can individually master the set of techniques that enable the current system to reproduce itself. Only a collective force can do that. This is exactly what it means to construct a revolutionary force today...”

They insist that “a strategy which centrally privileges the workplace as the primary site of counter-power feels bizarrely out of date and hopelessly inadequate”; it would be nice if they considered what contemporary IWW strategy looks like, with its embrace of community self-defense via the General Defense Committee and prison organizing via the Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee. And, indeed, it might be worth engaging with the full history of revolutionary anarchist unionism, like the FORA in Argentina, which attempted to build power outside the workplace way back in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

“They insist that “a strategy which centrally privileges the workplace as the primary site of counter-power feels bizarrely out of date and hopelessly inadequate”; it would be nice if they considered what contemporary IWW strategy looks like, with its embrace of community self-defense.”

In the next section, they draw on the work of the stockbroker-turned-academic Frank Wilderson, who asserts that the true Revolutionary Vanguard – sorry, the subject with the most irreconcilable positionality – is not the worker, but the Black subject. In my opinion, Wilderson's thought is well overdue a critical examination, with an eye to figuring out how far it can be useful to anarchists and other revolutionaries, and how far it's mainly a good toolbox for academics and would-be specialists in/managers of revolt. In the meantime, a brief examination of the uses to which it's put here will hopefully show some of its limitations.

The author offers a supposedly insightful quote from Wilderson:

“Whereas the positionality of the worker (whether a factory worker demanding a monetary wage, an immigrant, or a white woman demanding a social wage) gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society, the positionality of the Black subject (whether a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting) gestures toward the disconfiguration of civil society.”

It's actually impressive how much Wilderson manages to get wrong here, in such a short space of time. Perhaps the most glaring error is how, in his keenness to draw lines around the One True Revolutionary Vanguard, he posits “an immigrant” as an entirely separate category to “a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting.” This might make for a neat conceptual model, but it's hard to square with the reality of those border states where immigration offenses such as illegal re-entry make up a high proportion of those who become prison slaves, or indeed the existence of immigrant detention centers – do places like the Northwest Detention Center really resemble “civil society” more than they resemble prisons? It's worth noting that, in contrast to Wilderson's dismissive attitude, the prison strike organizers took a far more inclusive and solidarity-building approach, specifically including detention centers in their call and stressing the similarity in conditions between immigrants and others affected by the prison system.

Wilderson's false distinction between immigrants and prison slaves isn't just a factual mistake, it's the grounding for a theoretical claim: “the positionality of... an immigrant gestures toward the reconfiguration of civil society” – that is to say, the demands put forwards by immigrants are inherently reformist and nonthreatening, in contrast to those of Black subjects. Of course, I don't want to deny that immigrants, like anyone else, can put forward reformist demands for inclusion, but it is also the case that the state – any state, not just the US – can only function by drawing lines between insiders and outsiders, so those that cross borders without permission are subversive to the state's functions in a much deeper way than Wilderson admits.

This is one of those points where the right – from the Pittsburgh murderer specifically choosing to target a synagogue that he saw as threatening because of its work with migrants, to Trump militarizing the border, through to conservative social democrats writing articles against open borders and saying “If “no human is illegal!,” as the protest chant goes, the Left is implicitly accepting the moral case for no... sovereign nations at all” – actually have a far clearer understanding of why border control is so important to the state than Wilderson does.

It's also worth noting how his similarly dismissive reference to "a white woman demanding a social wage" simultaneously shows an ignorance of what "white women" actually demanded in texts like "Wages Against Housework", which rightly or wrongly posited the social wage as a step towards the overthrow of the system as a whole, and serves to posit the whole issue of reproductive and domestic labor as solely a white thing, as though unpaid reproductive work was not also carried out by Black women, as though attacks on the social wage aren't often put into practice precisely by aiming at the figure of Black "welfare queens" and so on.. If Black women put forward the same demands for a social wage (as historically they have done – see Piven and Cloward's discussion of the National Welfare Rights Organization in *Poor People's Movements* for more on this point), is it still a reformist demand for the reconfiguration of civil society, or does it suddenly become a revolutionary demand aiming at the disconfiguration of civil society?

Following Wilderson, and the author insists that prisoners are part of the proper innately revolutionary no demands vanguard, telling us that "no one is trying to democratically self-manage their prison—they're trying to burn that shit down and get free."

At this point, it's worth comparing the overheated projections of Professor Wilderson and his followers to the actual demands put forward by the prison strikers. Contrary to the ideology that claims prisoners have such an irreconcilable positionality that there's no way they could demand anything short of "burn that shit down and get free", prisoners speaking for themselves actually put forward demands like voting rights and the restoration of Pell Grants – not exactly a total disconfiguration of civil society. Or how about that document written by an inmate after the Vaughn Uprising, "For a safer, more secure and more humane prison" – real "burn shit down and get free" stuff, right?

Of course, to point out that the prison strikers made reformist demands for inclusion is in no way to insult them or downplay the significance of their struggle, and there are lots of cases of reformist demands for inclusion leading people towards revolutionary conclusions. But it does suggest that, if Professor Wilderson's analysis of the positionality of prison slaves can only work by talking over and ignoring the actual voices of prisoners themselves, there might be a few problems with it.

Any struggle always faces the possibility of reformists trying to co-opt, tame and manage it. There's no shortcut that can get us around the need to engage with and fight against this possibility. It'd be nice if Professor Wilderson had managed to find the One True Revolutionary Struggle that is always inherently radical and can never be co-opted or managed; but I don't think that's the case, prison struggles have to face these problems just like any others. Indeed, to the extent that they make it harder to get a clear understanding of what's going on, and encourage a false complacency about the potential of reformists co-opting such movements, Wilderson's ideas actually make it harder to fight against prison reformism.

The next section is a personal critique of the food service industry based on the author's experiences. There's some good stuff in there, but it mostly just made me think "we've all read *Abolish Restaurants*" – although perhaps the author hasn't, since they seem so unaware that it's possible to have a critique of work and still to see the workplace as a strategically important site of conflict.

It is also worth pointing out that, when workers in the past did win extremely limited forms of control over their work, or even just expressed aspirations toward it, they have made attempts to transform their workplaces rather than just managing them, as in the Lucas Plan or the Green Bans in Australia.

The author seems to simultaneously suggest that work is so obviously terrible that no-one would ever want to self-manage it, and also to criticise syndicalism and other workplace-focused strategies in a way that implies that no-one from these traditions has ever noticed how much work sucks, as if no syndicalists or wobblies have ever expressed critiques of work that go beyond “let’s manage all this ourselves.” Even if you think the Lucas Plan or the Green Bans are hopelessly inadequate compared to what real liberation would be like, they do at least serve as examples of the fact that over and over again, class struggle in the workplace has gone beyond just asking for higher wages or questioning who gives the orders, and whenever we get strong and confident enough, we always start trying to transform what we do and how we do it.

They ask, “Why should the ghost of capitalism be allowed to prescribe the creative and decision-making forms of a new society?” But again, who exactly says it should? Again, Argentina’s revolutionary union, the FORA, was arguing that: “We must not forget that a union is merely an economic by-product of the capitalist system, born from the needs of this epoch. To preserve it after the revolution would imply preserving the capitalist system that gave rise to it. We, as anarchists accept the unions as weapons in the struggle and we try to ensure that they should approximate as closely to our revolutionary ideals”, way back in 1904 – and that quote is taken from a history published by another anarcho-syndicalist group in 1987, showing that anarcho-syndicalists have always been thinking about these issues.

There’s a lot to engage with in their critique of the service industry, but pretty much all of it is already covered in *Abolish Restaurants* – so, since these criticisms and ideas have been expressed before, and since wobblies and class-struggle anarchists have always been involved in helping to spread these ideas and keep them in print – see, for instance, the role of the IWW-affiliated project Thoughtcrime Ink in printing AR, and the fact that the IWW sell it through their publication department, and host it on their website (admittedly, with a slightly critical disclaimer), then what’s the point of a critique that explains these ideas as if wobblies have never even engaged with them?

Approaching the conclusion they claim that their critique “is just as relevant to an approach that sees syndicalism as a transitional stage... as opposed to an “endgame” in itself”. Which, I think, is frankly untrue: a strategy that sees workplace organizing as a centrally important part of a strategy for the abolition of wage labor and the economy (again, the approach first set out by the FORA is relevant here) is a different thing to a strategy that aims towards unions self-managing the economy, and you can’t just say that a critique of one works as a critique of the other. At the risk of stating the obvious, to say that the service industry should be abolished is a fair objection to make to people who don’t want to abolish the service industry, but it’s not really a relevant critique to make of people who do.

They also state that, “There should be no new “revolutionary subject” to replace the idealized “worker,” “peasant,” or “lumpen,” around which detached middle-class socialists

will salivate and spew forth their objectifying projections and predictions.” Which, again, makes me wonder why they spent so much of their essay plugging Wilderson, since the whole purpose of the Wilderson quotes they cited setting “the positionality of the Black subject” against workers, women and migrants was precisely to establish a claim about a new idealized revolutionary subject.

They say that, “it is both necessary and to our strategic benefit that any sort of anarchistic social revolution attack our oppression at all points of its reproduction—this still means the workplace, but also the home, the urban neighborhood, the back roads and mountain hollers, schools, suburban developments, forests, swamps, deserts, reservations, everywhere”. But “do everything everywhere all the time” isn’t really a strategy. To start off with, there’s the simple question of what it actually means to fight where we stand. On a very basic level, most days I spend a lot of my waking hours at work, and none at all in a swamp or the desert. Obviously, not everyone would say the same, but I think that statement is probably true for a pretty hefty percentage of the population, and that not that many people can say the reverse, that they spend more time in swamps or deserts than at work.

So, just looking at where we tend to spend our lives, before thinking about any real strategic questions about where we have power and leverage and so on, I think that the workplace has an importance that other places on that list don’t have. Next, if we question what it means for “the back roads and mountain hollers.. forests, swamps, deserts” to be counted among the places where our oppression is reproduced, I would tend to suggest that these places are important to capitalism, to the state and the economy precisely in so far as, and to the extent that, they are workplaces where people are getting paid to do something, and that attacking the system in those places tends to consist of trying to stop people do the things that they’re getting paid to do there. So again, we arrive back at the strategic importance of workplace struggle: if a tree falls in the forest and there’s no-one there to hear it, does it still reproduce capital?

The author hastens to stress that they are “not suggesting that we abandon conflict with our bosses”, but simply arguing against “privileging one sector of resistance over others, or centralizing a single node or channel of decision-making (i.e. the One Big Union) because that’s what our revolutionary blueprint tells us to do”. In an important footnote, they add “One might respond that syndicalists are already organizing in a variety of sectors, not just the workplace. This is admirably true, but only more so begs the question why this dated strategy has not has not updated itself for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So often the activity of the militant speaks to a reality not yet explicitly recognized by our ideas, which remain millstones around our necks.”

But again, I find myself asking: is this really a case where a dated strategy has not been updated, or is it one where the strategy has indeed been updated, but people offering critiques argues as though it hasn’t? At the risk of repeating myself once again, I think it’s worth looking at the strategy explicitly set forward by the FORA, and the work of syndicalists and wobblies in keeping that tradition alive.

The article closes with a restatement of some ideas from communisation theory about the abolition of the economy, but again I’m unclear why the author seems to assume that syndicalists have never encountered these ideas before, as if only people who were ignorant

of these perspectives could still have a strategy that sees workplace power as being centrally important.

As we struggle to live out our ideas and apply revolutionary strategies, whether anarcho-syndicalist or not, to the challenges we face, we'll find ourselves faced with all kinds of conflicts and arguments. But I think a lot of them will be far more interesting than just rehashing a critique of early-20<sup>th</sup>-century syndicalist ideas and arguing as if no-one's ever encountered Abolish Restaurants.

**Anarchist communism 4eva, if destroyed still true.**

*—a tired old workerist dinosaur*

**Further reading:**

- Work Community Politics War
- Abolish Restaurants
- Fighting for Ourselves
- On the Un-Logic of Anti-Blackness
- Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness

# The Ghosts That Still Haunt Us: Old School Syndicalism Not As Irrelevant As It Should Be

**A Critique Of Another Critique Of A Critique Of Syndicalism. This Piece Addresses This Essay, Also Published On *It's Going Down*.**

“We must not forget that the union is, as a result of capitalist economic organization, a social phenomenon born of the needs of its time. To retain its structure after the revolution would imply preserving the cause that determined it: capitalism.”

– Lopez Arango, E. & de Santillan, DA.

Theorists affiliated with FORA as cited in Anarchist Social Organization by Scott Nappalos

I'll be honest—I'd never heard of FORA before reading “Aiming at Ghosts”, a recent article published by *It's Going Down* critiquing another recent article “Nothing to Syndicate.” But I'm going to make a wager here: most wobblies haven't heard of FORA either.

Let me start by saying that I am not the author of Nothing to Syndicate although I was very excited by its publication. I have also distributed numerous copies of the pamphlet (and will certainly continue to do so).

“Aiming at Ghosts” takes its name from the author's primary premise: the syndicalists described in the original essay do not exist, they are phantoms of the imagination. Today's syndicalists, the author suggests, have evolved past their caricature as people LARPing the 1930's. However, the evidence is rather scarce that this is the case. The article is further fleshed out and includes a large digression where the author puts their ignorance of afro-pessimism on display.<sup>1</sup>

First off, lucky you. I wish I had the privilege of never meeting a noteworthy number of said LARPers. In fact I've met far too many wobblies, destroying their lives in awful workplaces as their sacrifice for the union, intent on recreating the conditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century

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<sup>1</sup> I don't even bother to reply to the author's really abhorrent ignorance of Frank Wilderson's work because it's just so obscenely wrong. No, your snide remarks don't mask the fact that you haven't put an ounce of brainpower into thinking through the difference between the concept of “irreconcilable positionality” and a revolutionary subject/vanguard (as if the “One Big Union” isn't a goddamn *de facto* vanguard anyway). Read Frank Wilderson or any afro-pessimism honestly for more than five minutes and hopefully you can figure this one out on your own.

heyday of labor organizing. Rather, their most efficient work is often the sabotage of other non-syndicalist radical efforts.

The author begins by conceding a point in the original article about the ecological considerations of syndicalism. However, they again posit an ignorance about who would actually advocate for the position critiqued. Well, the section of the original article in question in fact cites not simply the IWW, but their “environmental” caucus in particular, as being out of touch with the full implications of the ecological catastrophe we’re living in. If the self-proclaimed environmental unionists are falling short, why would we expect better of those who don’t claim any unique considerations for the environment?

It is here the author first cites one of two articles (by the same author) about FORA, the Argentina Regional Workers’ Federation, that they will cite multiple times throughout the piece. Unfortunately, it does not reflect upon the whole of syndicalists that a single author wrote two articles across two years that engage a bit critically with the IWW’s history. Interestingly enough, FORA probably goes further than the author does in their criticism—in fact, FORA outright rejects anarcho-syndicalism, and calls for the abolition of unions (although only “after the revolution”).<sup>2</sup>

Next, the author compares their list of recent waves of workplace with the original article’s list that attempts to highlight those outside the workplace. The author brings up contention around whether or not prisons count as workplaces, as well as the 2006 strikes and walkouts, the education strikes this past year, and the longshoremen’s involvement in the west coast Occupy movement. Let’s take these one at a time.

The author seriously misses the point of the original article about the November 2<sup>nd</sup> “general strike”, which was not really arguing whether or not the Longshoremen’s union (ILWU) organizing helped pave the way for the port shutdown to be effective. To the extent that November 2<sup>nd</sup> in Oakland, CA was a general strike, it was accomplished not through workplace organizing but by the blockading and even attacking of businesses. The purpose of that afternoon’s anti-capitalist demonstration was to shut down what hadn’t yet closed. The ILWU would have gone to work as usual had tens of thousands not made their way to the port and shut it down. If they did not have “a strong tradition of radical workplace organization, which allowed them to win contract provisions that mean they can respect outside pickets” the night might have ended with those massive crowds having to more diligently enforce the shutdown.

This might in fact be the most controversial position of this whole essay, but I believe that considering the prison strikes as a workplace issue narrowed the scope of struggle significantly. 2016 saw prisoners Holman repeatedly take over the dormitories, set fire to guard towers, and attack guards—one fatally. With this momentum, how can calling for a mere work stoppage seem appropriate?<sup>3</sup> Of course, that prison strike saw inmates all the way from Florida to Michigan take collective and riotous action. Actions like these, in addition

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<sup>2</sup> For those of us who don’t believe in “after the revolution”, when is the right time to abolish unions?

<sup>3</sup> This might read as a silly exaggeration to those without the context, but the call for the 2016 prison strike originally came from Alabama where Holman prison is located. Michael Kimble, an anarchist prisoner at the facility, has even gone so far as to publicly criticize groups like FAM, who helped call for the strike, for their lack of support for militant prisoners.

to work and hunger strikes, helped fill out the mosaic of the 2016 prison strike. In 2018, the prison strike was still understood as primarily involving work and under strikes, which was reinforced when reporting on strike activity:

“There have been many protests, disruptions and unusual occurrences in prisons across the US in the last two weeks, these incidents might be strike related, or they might simply be occurring at the same time. Outside organizers are pursuing leads and seeking confirmation. In our strike roundup we’ve been careful to only include instances of protest that were explicitly connected to the nationwide strike and its demands.”

—IWOC’s website

This creates a self-fulfilling narrative where strike activity as understood in the strictest definition is what circulates on the inside, and then we only catch wind of the actions that can fit that within that framework on the outside.

There are other struggles that have emerged around workplaces that the author mentions, like this past year’s education strikes or those around May Day in 2006. The original article made no attempt to suggest that there have been no resistance erupting from workplace struggles. Only that the workplace has been decisively de-centered as the site of conflict.

Lastly, the author dismisses the original article’s personal testimony from the service industry as simply rehashing the ideas from the prominent text, *Abolish Restaurants*. To say nothing of the way this dismissal perhaps mirrors the way syndicalism flattens all workers’ experience, it’s also not an argument to say that someone else has criticized something before and that’s the end of it. Critiques of syndicalism are not made because they are new—syndicalism was critiqued even when it was relevant about a century ago. It’s also not evidence that the IWW engaged with ideas because they host the article on their website with a disclaimer saying that such ideas are “ultra-left dogmatism.”

In the end, I think that if syndicalists actually take to heart the lessons laid out in the original article, then they have come so far from syndicalism that the label hardly matters anymore. If one believes that there are many worthwhile struggles that happen outside of the workplace, that don’t need to be mediated, that unions are in fact a product of capitalism, and that self-management is not a goal but instead one aims for a much more vast and deep transformation of life—why consider yourself a syndicalist anymore? It doesn’t matter to me anyway.

But this is where the author and I diverge. There are a number of syndicalists who still base their organizing around the strategies of early 1900s, whether they’re older and stuck in their “NEFAC”<sup>4</sup> ways, or younger and haven’t read *Abolish Restaurants*, or any political analysis written in the last 50 years besides what’s included in the union newsletter. And I am personally very thankful that someone wrote such a thoughtful (much more so than this article) critique of syndicalism for the present day.

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<sup>4</sup> The author suggests the original article is reminiscent of “a heated argument between Evasion-era Crimethinc and NEFACers.” Even such phrasing reminds us that CrimethInc. has evolved significantly over the past twenty years to keep pace with the shifting world around them.

find each other.



Nothing To Syndicate  
Against the Democracy of Work and the Work of Democracy  
2018

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