

Syndicalism's Legacy and Left Labor Strategy Today

Category: Labor, Left Politics, Socialism

written by Kate Griffiths | January 11, 2020



Illustration, June 26, 1917. The Hand That Will Rule the World—One Big Union.

In Western Europe, revolutionary syndicalism ... was the direct and inevitable result of opportunism, reformism, and parliamentary cretinism (in the socialist movement).

—Lenin

Between the 1848 publication of the *Communist Manifesto* and the beginning of the twentieth century, socialists achieved mass working-class influence in the rich countries by building allied unions and political parties. But in the first two decades of the twentieth century, dissident revolutionaries built a rival tradition—the syndicalist movement. “Syndicalism,” an alternative term for “unionism,” reacted against the growing bureaucratic conservatism (and sometimes betrayals) of the socialist organizations. It stood for class struggle, direct action, workers’ control, rank and file democracy, internationalism, and revolution. Believing that working-class gains up to and including revolution required unionization as their weapon and striking (up to the general strike) as their tactic, syndicalists rejected political parties as worse than useless. This fit nicely for anarchists, whose influence resurged as “anarcho-syndicalism.” For others, syndicalism aligned with a return to the core Marxist concepts of working-class self-activity and self-emancipation. Syndicalist union federations prospered in Mexico, Ireland, Italy, Spain, and France. Though the movement was devastated by repression, fascism, and co-optation after World War I, much of its cadre joined the Communist International after grassroots workers’ democracy rose to insurrectionary success in Russia. As Communists, these ex-syndicalists accepted a reformulated role for working-class politics. But from their syndicalist experience they also forged for the International a theory of revolutionary union strategy—prioritizing independent rank and file organization—that was more sophisticated than anything previously developed by Marxists. The strategic effectiveness of this theory helped it survive the speedy corruption of the International to remain a vital influence within left union

strategy to the present.

In North America, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), founded in 1905, shared much with international syndicalism. Yet the Wobblies themselves rejected the label, preferring the term “industrial unionists.” The self-conscious syndicalists, organized by ex-Socialist and ex-Wobbly William Z. Foster, never embraced anything approaching mass membership. Yet they played a disproportionately influential role in the workers movement and provide unique answers to key questions facing today’s assembling labor left.

Like Mother Jones, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, and Mike Quill, William Z. Foster came from a radical Irish nationalist background. Leaving his impoverished Philadelphia family in 1900, he became a boxcar-hopping itinerant laborer. Constantly involved in unions and organizing, he taught himself revolutionary politics through the writings of Daniel DeLeon. After stints in the local left factions of the Socialist Party in Portland and Seattle, he joined the IWW during Spokane’s Free Speech campaign in 1909. “The paralyzing reformism of the Socialist Party (convinced me) that political action in general was fruitless,” he later wrote (Foner 1965, 416). He now believed in “the possibilities of direct action, ... especially the marvelous effectiveness of the passive resistance strike” as witnessed in Spokane (Barrett 1999, 41).

In 1910 Foster traveled to France to learn from the world’s leading syndicalist federation, the Confederacion General du Travail (CGT). International Socialist Bureau leader Emil Vandervelde lamented that the CGT, with only 400,000 members, had accomplished more for its members by syndicalist methods than the much larger Socialist-aligned unions in Germany. Contact with the anarchist wing of the CGT had Foster partially advocating sabotage as “marking an epoch in the development of working class tactics” (Foster 1910; 1,4). He “accepted on principle the anarchist position on ... marriage, individualism, religion, art, the drama, literature” (Foster and Ford 1913, 31). Significantly for the future, Foster took from CGT history the lesson that unions must maintain autonomy from political parties. He saw the CGT’s recent rise as stemming from the autonomy it practiced, in contrast to its earlier history, when rival internal socialist factions sought to rule or ruin it. Believing the IWW’s “socialist politician” founding members—not just the notoriously sectarian Daniel DeLeon, but Eugene Debs of the Socialist Party as well—had had a similar potential influence before their departure (Foster and Ford 1913, 32), Foster argued Wobblies should adopt “strict official neutrality towards all political parties, and as individuals ... vigorously combat the political action theory” (Foster 1911, 1,4). Later, as a Communist, Foster abandoned the principle of anti-politics. But against party pressure he fruitfully maintained, through the seminal years of the 1920s Trade Union Educational League (TUEL), his old strategic commitment to a non-partisan organizational orientation in union work. This orientation also set apart those relatively successful revolutionaries organizing the 1970s rank and file union caucuses, which they launched after study groups on the TUEL, from those who died on the sword of party supremacy in union work.

Most dramatically, CGT history convinced Foster that revolutionaries belonged inside established unions. Following CGT leader Leon Jouhaux’ advice to “tell the IWW, when you return to America, to get into the labor movement” (Barrett 1999, 48), he wrote upon returning to the United States that the IWW’s “failure to grow” stemmed from the “dogma of dual unionism” (Foner 1965, 419). After proposing dissolution to join the American Federation of Labor (AFL) at the 1911 IWW Convention (5 out of 31 delegates supported the proposal), Foster wrote a series of letters to the IWW newspapers *Solidarity* and *The Industrial Worker*. The ensuing debate makes fascinating reading. Letters opposed to Foster called the AFL a “job trust” and a “corpse.” Some argued that Wobblies couldn’t join the AFL, either because they had already been kicked out or because the AFL focused exclusively on skilled craft workers (something that was already changing at the time). Others pointed out that some Wobblies were already in the AFL as “dual card holders,” members of AFL unions who also paid IWW dues. There was also the claim that organizing the unorganized was more

promising than joining the AFL, which, though orders of magnitude larger than the IWW, still only included about 5 percent of U.S. workers.

Foster responded that organizing the unorganized could best succeed on a large scale if revolutionaries diverted AFL resources to the task, something his later packinghouse and steel campaigns proved spectacularly. He said that dual card holders left themselves vulnerable to charges of disloyalty, handing conservative “labor fakers” an effective pretext for attacking radicals. Above all he hammered the theme that abandoning the AFL left the masses of workers there under the exclusive sway of the bureaucratic leaders. The United States, he argued, had led the world in labor radicalism in the 1880s, but since then the dual-unionist self-isolation of the “militant minority” had put its labor movement far behind the other industrialized nations. Instead, he called on this militant minority to “get into the organized labor movement, and by building up better fighting machines inside the old unions than those possessed by our reactionary enemies, revolutionize these unions just as our French Syndicalist fellow workers have so effectively done with theirs” (Foner 1965, 420).

In 1912 Foster hopped boxcars for a North American speaking tour of IWW and AFL locals. Then he and his converts launched the Syndicalist League of North America (SLNA), “the first definite organization in the U.S. for boring within the existing trade unions by revolutionaries” (Foner 1965, 428-9). The idea actually came from England’s Industrial Syndicalist Education League, which Foster learned of in France. But it was indeed a new departure for North American worker revolutionaries, who for the first time self-consciously organized themselves to maximize contact with, and minimize separation from, their class fellows. The SLNA stressed that it was “a propaganda society” and not a union. It collected no dues, and President Foster received no salary from the organization. He kept his day job as a railroad car inspector.

The SLNA, in Foster’s words, “made quite a stir” (Foster 1922) during its brief life. Never numbering more than two thousand members (but including both Lucy Parsons and Tom Mooney), it had branches in 12 cities. In Kansas City the league launched an organizing drive that brought ten thousand new members under the local labor council. They uncovered corruption and replaced the council’s leadership there. In St. Louis they led a series of strikes. They gained “practical control” of the labor council in Nelson, British Columbia. But “the rebel elements generally were still too infatuated with dual unionism” (Foster 1922), especially because the IWW entered its golden years with the 1912 Lawrence strike. So the league died in 1915. Foster blamed his belief in decentralization for organizational weakness, also criticizing the ultra-radicalism in the form of “leftist direct attacks on the workers’ nationalistic feelings and their religion” (Johanningsmeier, p. 71) that he had encouraged.

Dozens of former SLNA members in Chicago continued to work loosely together inside the progressive-leaning Chicago Federation of Labor. They eschewed unnecessarily radical rhetoric but kept most of their syndicalist approach. They no longer had their own organization and were thus hampered in shaping rank and file consciousness independently. But the combination of the open-mindedness of federation President John Fitzpatrick and the labor shortages of World War I meant they were able to lead two unprecedented campaigns that paved the way for U.S. labor’s greatest victories in the 1930s unionization of basic industry.

Foster, still a member of the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen, in 1917 proposed to the Chicago Federation of Labor an organizing drive in the packinghouse industry. To do this, he suggested that the 12 craft unions with jurisdictions over different sections of the workers form a united Stockyards Labor Council to run the campaign. Foster and former SLNA alum Jack Johnstone headed the council. The organizing drive took off, soon bringing in sixty thousand workers. With apparent success in Chicago’s packinghouses, Foster next proposed to the national AFL a similar organizing

drive in the most important and strategic sector of basic industry, steel. This time he grouped 24 national unions together in the National Committee for Organizing Iron and Steel Workers. If successful, Foster believed, the AFL would be transformed by the massive influx of unskilled immigrant workers. Radicals could sweep aside conservatives with this new popular base, similar organizing drives could be launched in all the main industries, and the relative weakness of the U.S. labor movement would be overcome.

The packinghouse campaign required an aggressive anti-racist approach that broke with past AFL practice. Foster actively reached out to Chicago's Great Migration-era Black community through Black churches, promoted Black workers to shop steward positions (including in mixed-race shops), and actively fought racial discrimination by the packing companies. (Yet he failed in his push to get Blacks admitted as equal members in all of the union locals.) In the steel campaign, local company towns banned union rallies, so Foster pulled a page from the IWW playbook and organized successful free speech campaigns challenging the bans. In both instances, syndicalist tactics were being utilized inside the AFL.

The packinghouse drive peaked in 1918. The 1919 Great Steel Strike—the country's largest stoppage to that time—brought out 250,000 workers from Colorado to Pennsylvania, idling half the industry. Both campaigns went down to defeat amidst race riots, the Red Scare, bureaucratic treachery, repression, and postwar unemployment. Replacement workers destroyed the unions' bargaining power, especially in steel, where the corporations imported them from the Southern Black Belt and Mexico. But these campaigns raised the bar for U.S. labor—the unskilled and semi-skilled core of the U.S. manufacturing economy could be organized after all. "Even with a mediocre organizer, instead of a 'labor statesman' (heading the AFL) ... great armies of toilers could have been drawn into the labor organizations," Foster wrote. Instead, "the big men of labor could not be sufficiently awakened," and "Mr. Gompers sabotaged the steel strike from beginning to end" (Foster 1922). At the next major opportunity—the Great Depression—some of the bureaucrats would finally get on the right side of history.

The TUEL of the 1920s refined the old SLNA model. Foster no longer floated free as an individual revolutionary hired by progressive union tops. He once again built a militant minority formation capable of directly reaching large masses at the grassroots. Communist Party backing gave the TUEL more than forty branches. It coordinated national cross-union campaigns to form a Labor Party and to merge craft unions into industrial ones. And in line with syndicalist-influenced Comintern strategy, it advanced beyond the old SLNA method of taking over union leadership posts for a more patient approach that sought primarily to win the rank and file to a self-reliant use of strikes and direct action. Bureaucratic leaders were pressed to lead the struggles demanded by the ranks or face direct challenge. The 1920s saw politics move hard right and unions shrink by half. In this context the TUEL gained remarkable sway in the mining, ladies garment, and fur industries, among others. But in 1928, its fortunes flagging, the TUEL and Foster meekly followed the orders of the Stalinizing Comintern and (grotesquely) switched to anti-AFL dual unionism under a new name: the Trade Union Unity (sic) League (TUUL). The TUUL led some important struggles but squandered the proven potential of "boring from within." Nevertheless, independent socialist workers kept the TUEL approach alive and kicking in the giant Teamster-led battles in the 1930s, rank and file caucuses in the 1940s, and through the 1970s caucuses to today.

How did Foster go from libertarian to Stalinist? And how could he abandon his central teaching, boring from within, to go along with Moscow's dual-unionist *diktat*? His general approach, as authoritarian and sectarian tendencies grew inside the International, was to resist by maintaining his autonomy as the party's most prized labor leader. He was not among those who eagerly embraced undemocratic trends. But a certain lingering anarchist contempt for theory helped him rationalize pragmatic accommodations over principled opposition. A similar evolution occurred

earlier with Robert Minor, the famous anarchist cartoonist who became a notorious party hatchet man. And Foster had early absorbed elitist strains of anarchist thought that actually facilitated his embrace of Soviet dictatorship. For example, among writings he recommended to SLNA members were those of Friedrich Nietzsche, popular in some anarchist circles at the time. And he crudely interpreted the syndicalist “militant minority” concept to mean those who are “the directing forces ... (with) the sluggish mass simply following ... (the lead of their) superior intellect, energy, and courage” (Foster and Ford 1913, 43-44).

Today the teachers strike wave illustrates the importance of rank and file independence. West Virginia teachers wildcatted, Arizona teachers organized a broad bottom-up council of school-site reps, and the Los Angeles teachers walked out under a leftist rank and file caucus that had won elections in 2015. Elements of a new labor left, from the Labor Notes network to local DSA Labor Working Groups, are spreading. Today’s new socialist left should dedicate itself to building on all these developments. In doing so, the history of North American syndicalism offers the guidance of a method that successfully combined immersion among organized workers with the open and independent pursuit of class struggle by revolutionary methods.

REFERENCES

Barrett, James. 1999. *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foner, Philip. 1965. *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, vol. 4. New York: International Publishers.

Foster, William Z. 1910. “Special News from France.” *Industrial Worker*, vol. 2, no. 38, Dec. 8, 1910.

Foster, William Z. 1911. “The Socialist and Syndicalist Movements in France.” *Industrial Worker*, vol. 3, no.1, whole 105, Mar. 23, 1911.

Foster, William Z. 1922. *The Bankruptcy of the American Labor Movement*. Labor Herald Library no.4, 1922, available online.

Foster, William Z., and Earl C. Ford. 1913. *Syndicalism*. Chicago: William Z. Foster.

Johanningsmeier, Edward P. 1994. *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster*. Princeton University Press.