

Why should we think about anarchist unionism?

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the push towards capitalist reforms in China, self-proclaimed Communist movements the world over have lost their main sponsors and sources of political inspiration and legitimacy. Subsequently, since the early 1990s anarchism has seen a resurgence within social movements in the US. Some movements, like the early anti-globalization movement and Occupy Wall Street, have more foregrounded anarchist ideas, while all social movements have been touched by an increased number of anarchists within them, such as the abolitionist wing of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The labor movement has long been a central part of social movements in the US, sometimes radical and sometimes not, but always touching the lives of millions of people and putting them into varying degrees of action for reform and occasionally towards revolution. While the US labor movement is at a historical nadir in terms of union membership density, the last decade has seen a broad uptick in strike activity and public support.

With this modest resurgence of both anarchism and union organizing, it's strange that there's very little overlap between the anarchist movement and the labor movement in the US today. There are very few anarchist-led organizations or prominent anarchists working within the labor movement, and the labor movement has very few prominent leaders or groupings of its own that identify with anarchism.

From a historical vantage point this is unusual. In the early 20th century anarchism was at times the dominant leftist pole within the international labor movement, with anarchist-led labor federations claiming tens or hundreds of thousands of members and leading large strikes in countries on five continents. However, the repression and precipitous decline of anarchism as an international social movement from the 1930s - 1980s overlapped considerably with the successful assault on the labor movement in the US (and to a lesser degree in other countries) from the late 1940s - 2000s. These movements shriveled up and became

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increasingly isolated from each other over the second half of the 20th century.

The time is ripe for bringing these two movements back together. The weaknesses of each movement can be bolstered by the strengths of the other. The contemporary anarchist movement claims anticapitalism as a central pillar but has little organizational basis among the masses of people who are exploited by capital in their workplace every day. Today's most widely read anarchist theorist and writer, the late and otherwise great David Graeber, is certainly not anti-worker but doesn't emphasize union struggle in his writings. This is broadly the trend within today's anarchist theory both in academia and in popular texts. In contrast, most of the leading figures of the anarchist movement at its height from the 1890s - 1930s, from Peter Kropotkin to Lucy Parsons, were passionately committed to building radical unions. This wasn't incidental, but rather the commitment to worker struggle is part of what made anarchism so powerful.

The union movement today is weighed down by shallow electoralism, bureaucratic proceduralism, and liberal collaborationism. Not only legislators and judges but mainstream and progressive union leaders alike have pushed workers to abandon democracy, militancy, and radicalism in their dealings with employers. Anarchism contains an unparalleled belief in the power of workers themselves--not sweet-talking politicians, sympathetic lawyers, or savvy union presidents--to create social change directly through their own passions and efforts. Anarchism as a body of theory and legacy of past struggle is best placed to awaken the labor movement from its legalistic slumber.

I'd like to help introduce the current generation to the core ideas and glorious history of anarchist unionism. The core ideas are simple: direct democracy empowers workers to make decisions themselves instead of relying on others to decide for them, and direct action empowers workers to take action themselves instead of relying on others to act on their behalf. By deciding and acting themselves, workers learn to directly lead their

The FAU built a flourishing mass anarchist unionism that played a leading role in the country's labor movement, something anarchists the world over had not been able to do for decades before and have not been able to since. There are different ways we can interpret the FAU's exceptionalism. Is the FAU a mere aftershock from the massive earthquakes of early 20th century anarchist unionism? Or is the FAU a bridge to the future?

Conclusion

The legacy left to us by our predecessors is a glorious one. At their peaks they had *almost* everything and, by comparison, we begin now with *almost* nothing. But the recent rise of the anarchist and labor movements portends the conditions for an anarchist labor movement to be reborn. No doubt our movement is just an embryo right now, as it was in 1869.

Contrary to left mythology, history doesn't pick sides, doesn't put its finger on the scales, doesn't select a chosen few. No one's coming to make this movement for us. It's up to us, as it was up to the First Internationalists, the Cuban tobacco pickers, the Italian auto workers, the Chilean miners, the Peruvian textile workers, the Spanish telephone workers, and the Uruguayan bank workers. Though our numbers are currently few, in surveying the landscape of labor and anarchism today I see no dearth of passion or brilliance that would obstruct us from achieving our loftiest ambitions.

All revolutionary movements start somewhere, and there's nowhere in history I'd rather choose to start than where we are right now. Favorable conditions are the fuel, our traditions and ideals are the matches, and all we need to do to ignite a movement is create a spark. What we have now that anarchist unionists past never will again is blood in our veins, fire in our hearts, and an opportunity to burn brighter than ever before.

were closed down and operations moved to the country's interior where the union movement was much weaker. At this point 800 labor activists and 5,600 workers from various striking industries had been arrested. Anarchist leaders of the bank workers union were tortured while in detention. The strike wave was finally defeated and although some concessions had been won, most demands were unmet.

While such a flash of labor militancy and harsh repression in 1969 alone is more than most countries see in a decade, a high degree of militancy was maintained and the movement as a whole showed little sign of slowing down up to 1973. In that year, a military coup with support from the CIA led to the establishment of a right-wing dictatorship under Juan Bordaberry, similar to and followed a few months later by the dictatorship established by Augusto Pinochet in Chile. According to Araiza Kokinis, labor strife was the main reason that Uruguayan elites threw their support behind the coup.

In the aftermath of the coup the level of repression became totally overpowering. The left labor movement was crushed and dozens of members of the FAU, the first of the leftist organizations to be specifically targeted, were disappeared, tortured, and executed. Soon not a single member of the FAU was living freely in Uruguay as they had all been forced into exile, killed, or imprisoned. The AFL-CIO provided 100s of 1000s of dollars of seed money to help establish a new and more moderate Uruguayan labor federation to rival the now-hobbled CNT. The first five years of the dictatorship saw real salaries drop by 50% across the country.

Was it all for nought? If past revolutionaries have taught us anything it's that even when the final goal is not reached, popular struggle for both basic dignity and radical change is always invaluable. Without these efforts capitalism would have no resistance and would be immeasurably worse. It's only through movements like these that the human impulse for freedom blooms and some space for human development and happiness of the majority of people is created beyond the otherwise all-encompassing machinations of capitalism and the state.

own struggles to win reforms, build power from below, and advance towards the simultaneous abolition of capitalism and the state.

Anarchist unionism from 1868 - 1939 assumed the status of a mass-based social movement in, depending on how you count, a dozen or two countries. But only recently has anarchist scholarship attempted to collect and examine this history more comprehensively, which non-anarchist labor historians have largely ignored. As far as I know, this piece is the first time this history has been collected and presented together in an accessible and semi-comprehensive way in a shorter-than-book-length text.

The membership numbers of anarchist unions in this period were eye-popping to me when I first encountered them. I had read some about the North American IWW and Spanish CNT, but only in researching for this piece the global anarchist movement in these years did I realize how broad and deep the movement was. It was a revelation.

What are the principles of anarchist unionism?

The essential principle of mass anarchist politics is that radical social change can only be meaningful, sustainable, and transformative when it is created from the bottom up instead of from the top down. This principle emerged out of the radical worker movement of the mid-1800s as some socialists became critical of the strategy of taking over the state, either through elections or by force, as a top-down means to weaken and abolish capitalism. Over the following decades this tendency was further theorized and consolidated into anarchism as a distinct wing of the international socialist movement in contrast to the wing that advocated using political parties to seize state power. Both wings are committed to abolishing private property and establishing workers control of the means of production, and thus both are rightly considered socialist. Anarchists, however, favor building social movements independent of the state to achieve these ends while "state socialists" favor seizing the state.

Uruguayan Communist Party (PCU) and its partners, Arayaza Kokini's research shows how the Tendencia unions were responsible for more than 70% of the CNT's major strikes and 67% of the CNT's workplace occupations in its peak years of struggle. In addition to the unions FAU predominated in, Tendencia unions included those of textile workers, teachers, gas and electrical workers, beverage workers, sanitation workers, healthcare workers, railway workers, and sugarcane workers. At peak moments of social unrest, many PCU-aligned unions temporarily bucked the more cautious approach of their formal leaders to participate in wildcat strikes and other unauthorized actions led by the Tendencia.

The highest degree of class conflict in this period was 1967 - 1973. To take a look at just one of those years, in June of 1969 the FAU-led bank worker union conducted a campaign of rolling strikes in protest of IMF pressure on the government and in solidarity with a large-scale strike of meat processing workers which also saw the rail workers unions refuse to service the meat processing plants. Arayaza Kokini writes how these conflicts spiraled out into more industries, with "The wave of illegal work actions extended nationwide, including wildcat strikes, sabotage campaigns, vandalism, and censorship defiance." 500 workers were arrested.

Later that month 8,500 bank workers initiated their own nation-wide strike at 105 bank locations demanding the nationalization of Uruguay's financial sector, the right to strike, wage increases amid skyrocketing inflation, and the rehiring of fired union activists. On July 2, the CNT conducted a 36-hour general strike in protest of the violent repression of the striking unions. Two weeks later the Uruguayan Armed Forces occupied all state-owned financial institutions to forcibly open them and conscript the striking bank workers as a way to coerce them either back to work or to prison.

In August, hospital and textile workers held strikes in solidarity with the bank workers. In September, the Armed Forces were ordered to occupy all private-sector banks as well. A number of the largest meat-packing plants

The anarchist principle of bottom-up change applied to a union context has two main components. First, in workers' relations to employers and the state, their primary mode of creating change is direct action. Such direct actions include all kinds of work stoppages, confrontations with bosses, and other forms of disruption and spreading awareness such as pickets. Direct action is a bottom-up mode of creating social change because it requires workers to act together collectively instead of relying on one or a few specialists, elected leaders, or elites to act on their behalf. Anarchist unionists support direct action to win reforms in the workplace, the industry, and the wider economy. The kinds of reforms anarchists seek are those that weaken capitalist power, control, and profit and that increase worker power, control, and wages.

Anarchists don't necessarily oppose, and sometimes support, state reforms, state redistribution of wealth, state protection of rights, and state action against corporations. It's only that anarchists oppose putting energy into electing and lobbying politicians as the strategy for achieving any kind of positive change. Thus, anarchists support people themselves taking direct action to disrupt the status quo and pressure elites but oppose relying on politicians, lobbyists, or lawyers to fix deep social problems for them. Anarchists support dumping resources into building autonomous social movements to pressure the state from the outside, often pressuring politicians to make concessions via policy or executive action, instead of dumping resources into electing politicians to wield state power from the inside.

While this distinction may seem trivial or academic, for anarchists it is all-important. Building power outside of the state keeps agency in the hands of the people in the form of movement organization controlled by people themselves. The key distinction here is who is given the power to act on their own agency. In giving politicians power by electing them, politicians become powerful and necessarily become part of an elite who as a small group of individuals hold key leverage over decisions in government. In building grassroots social movements, unions and community

Americas lured many leftists into seeing the state as a useful vehicle for advancing their interests.

But in the US today a hobbled welfare state and the absence of strong Communist Parties provide favorable conditions for the reconvergence of the already growing labor and anarchist movements. With this newly unearthed history we also have the benefit of being able to learn from the mistakes and successes of earlier anarchist unionists. Not in almost 100 years have the prospects for anarchist unionism been this ripe.

Uruguay 1967 - 1973

Troy Andreas Araiza Kokinis's remarkable 2023 book, *Anarchist Popular Power: Dissident Labor and Armed Struggle in Uruguay, 1956-76*, illuminated in depth for the first time for English-speaking readers the full scope of the Uruguayan anarchist movement in the 1960s and 70s. This is significant because it truly elevates that movement to the claim of being the last truly anarchist union movement of its scope and intensity in world history and the only one since the 1930s.

Beginning in 1956, activists in the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU) sought to build a radical, direct action-oriented labor movement by entering the mainstream unions and fighting to make them more militant. First establishing a presence among and leading strikes with rubber workers in the 1950s, FAU organizers gradually built up their forces in unions of bakers, bank workers, public sector workers, and graphic arts workers. In 1964, the FAU was instrumental as a minority influence in founding the National Workers Convention (CNT), which was then the main labor federation in Uruguay and that included reformist and radical unions. Within the CNT, the FAU spearheaded the creation of a syndicalist-like coalition called the Tendencia that grew to consist of 71 unions that eschewed electoral politics and practiced direct action.

While the Tendencia unions were never a majority, about a third overall, within the CNT behind the unions under the leadership of the reformist

organizations are given power to take direct action to advance their interests, which sometimes gets exercised in pressuring politicians to follow the orders of the movement. But here, the politicians aren't given any agency or power by the movement to act independently of the desires of the movement.

For workers to be able to take bottom-up, mass-based direct action they need forms of organization designed to facilitate democratic participation in decision-making. The second component of bottom up change is direct democracy. In workers' relation with each other, their primary mode of union organization is one where members are making decisions themselves over all aspects of the movement. Just as bottom-up social movements should not depend on others taking action for them, so these movements should not depend on others or a small subgroup making the main decisions for them. Any separation of authority out of the hands of the main group of people leads to a separation of interests between formal leaders and members that undermines unity, solidarity, and democracy.

A core tenet of anarchist unionism that follows from a commitment to direct democracy is the explicit rejection of union collaboration with or support for political parties, which use a pseudo-democratic institution of representation within a larger capitalist state. Total organizational independence from political parties follows both from anarchists' commitment to direct action and direct democracy.

Union structures and practices are sought which give workers direct democratic control over their organization and action. In unions, anarchists advocate workplace organizing committees, or for larger forms of decision-making, worker assemblies and delegate assemblies. Each of these structures facilitates participation in decision-making around action and union governance by those directly affected.

For example, the Spanish CNT was the largest anarchist-led union federation in history with 1.7 million members in the late 1930s and is described as follows by brickmaker, writer, and CNT leader Jose Peirats:

that were still very small, I think we can say Spain, Portugal, France, Cuba, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Brazil, and Mexico.

In which countries did anarchist unionism push the labor movement to a “revolutionary moment” where the overthrow of capitalism and the state was at least temporarily achieved and had the potential to go even further? Italy in 1920 and Spain in 1936 went the furthest. Other countries that saw major general strikes in their largest cities and the momentary loss of state control of much of their populations include Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Mexico. To a lesser degree this also occurred in France, Peru, and Chile.

When we pay homage to our forebears I think there’s some justice in giving them their full due. And when others doubt anarchism’s potential in the labor movement, we’ll do well to remember the scale of what our predecessors accomplished.

What were the reasons for the decline of anarchist unionism?

The main causes of the decline of the anarchist union movement, in order of importance, were violent repression, the rise of a rival Communist movement, and the capacity of the state to respond to pressure from the working class via reforms and ultimately the erection of the welfare state.

The grisly details of state violence are tough to read, but the scale of violence that the states of the world had to resort to to stomp out their anarchist union movements highlights anarchists’ effective organizing and popular appeal. The Revolution in Russia gave the Communist movement an aura of victory that radicals desperately wanted, even if reports coming out of Russia from anarchists were cautionary and critical. The spread of social welfare programs, increased regulation and Keynesian planning, and the legalization of unions in many countries in Europe and the

“The unions constitute autonomous units, linked to the ensemble of the Confederation only by the accords of a general nature adopted at national congresses... Apart from this commitment, the unions, right up to their technical sections, are free to reach any decision which is not detrimental to the organization as a whole... it is the unions which decide and directly regulate the guidelines of Confederation. At all times, the basis for any local, regional, or national decision is the general assembly of the union, where every member has the right to attend, raise and discuss issues, and vote on proposals. Resolutions are adopted by majority vote attenuated by proportional representation.... This federalist procedure, operating from the bottom up, constitutes a precaution against any possible authoritarian degeneration in the representative committees.”

Though most anarchist and anarchist-inspired unions do elect officers to formal leadership positions, their authority tends to be much more constrained in scope and degree compared to similar positions in other left and liberal unions. The minimization of bureaucracy is a key feature of anarchist unions, with most anarchist unions retaining just one or very few administrative paid positions in contrast to mainstream unions’ legions of paid officers, organizing staff, and in-house legal and research teams.

By my back-of-the-envelope calculations, the Spanish CNT in the 1910s had a union member-to-paid staff ratio of around 50,000:1 with its membership of 700,000. This compares to a member-to-staff ratio in the US as a whole today of 14.4 million total union members to 109,000 total paid staff employed by unions, or about 132:1.

Some critics of direct democracy accuse anarchists of fetishizing moral principles over political strategy. They claim that direct democracy aligns with people’s abstract values and makes them feel good but sacrifices a more hard-nosed strategic orientation to revolutionary organizing. They claim that trying to make the future society in the present is a distraction from building real power. Some anarchists, including such a broad range

Commercial Union (ICU) in 1919. In 1921 the ICU passed a resolution to “dissociate itself from any political body whatever, but solely to propagate the industrial economic and social advancement of all the African workers through the industrial action...” While syndicalists were an active part of the ICU, especially early on, as the union grew it came to house an ideological stew that also included Garveyism, Christian unionism, and African nationalism. Reaching a peak membership of 100,000 in the late 1920s, it collapsed by the early 1930s due to state repression, internal splits, and a lack of unifying strategy and vision.

Scholar Arif Dirlik writes that “Anarchism was the dominant ideology during the first phase of socialism in Eastern Asia.” Mostly, however, anarchism in this region and period emerged as an intellectual and/or anti-imperialist movement before being overtaken by Russian and Chinese Communism. Syndicalism was overall not a major part of early Asian anarchism with a few exceptions. Anarchism in the labor movement reached its highest point in the region as the main ideological force in the 1910s and early 1920s in South China.

(An extended version of this pamphlet can be found online at tinyurl.com/anarchistunionism, which includes an audio version and hyperlinks to sources. There you can also read histories of the large-scale anarchist union movements of this period in Italy, Germany, Britain, Spain from the 1910s-30s, Uruguay, Brazil, Peru, and Mexico as well as some history of people of color and women in these movements.)

What did these movements amount to?

To understand the full historical weight and meaning of these union movements, we can ask even larger questions. In which countries did anarchist unionist movements go beyond mass-movement status and achieve a degree of hegemony as the primary ideological and organizational force in the labor movement? Excluding those cases where available information is more limited and those earliest labor movements

as both Errico Malatesta and David Graeber, do emphasize the virtues of this kind of “prefigurative” politics because it advocates building egalitarian social relations in the present instead of waiting to implement them after the abolition of capitalism.

While recognizing the value of prefigurative politics, I mainly prefer direct democracy for strategic reasons. I think creating organizations that exclude a majority of people from having direct involvement in the important decisions in our social movements creates both passive followers among the masses and ample opportunities for corruption and self-aggrandizing behavior from leaders in positions of authority. This in turn leads to pressures to suppress dissent and conform to leadership expectations in a way that off-ramps radical social movements into authoritarian dead-ends (like Stalin’s rise in the Russian Revolution) or mild social democratic reformism (like the German Social Democratic Party). Once movements are run by an internal set of elites, they start to mimic the same behaviors as pro-capitalist economic and political elites. The creation of undemocratic structures in social movements is bad strategy because it is ineffective at sustaining and growing revolutionary organizations towards the abolition of capitalism and the state.

While any successful project, organization, or movement necessarily starts with a smaller number of people and grows to include a larger number, there are stark differences between anarchist and other approaches to movement building. For example, many who claim Leninist politics advocate a vanguard strategy of putting socialists in positions of formal, top-down authority in the state, in unions, and in other movement organizations. Their aim is to use positions of formal authority to grow the movement by allocating resources, planning strategy, and providing direction.

In contrast, anarchist strategy focuses on creating organizations and meeting spaces where discussion is open and members are themselves given agency over decisions instead of relinquishing that agency to formal authorities in the movement. Building radical spaces and organizing

vehicles that emphasize direct democracy is how bottom-up change happens. Establishing direct democracy is necessary but not sufficient for anarchist movement building, which also requires taking direct action, fostering community, developing organization, using persuasion and conducting political education, spreading skills and confidence, and leading by example.

From what conditions did anarchist unionism emerge?

Anarchist unionism has its origin in the left workers' movement of the 1860s and 70s. In 1864 the radicals of Europe coalesced and founded the first large-scale anti-capitalist organization, the International Workingmen's Association (commonly referred to as the First International). It contained a broad mix of ideologies, and its members were variously involved in creating worker cooperatives, armed insurrectionary cells, socialist political parties, and radical unions.

Over the 1860s the First International polarized increasingly towards a faction of state socialists, of which Karl Marx was the most prominent figure, and another faction of anti-state revolutionary unionists, of which Mikhail Bakunin was the most prominent figure. The state socialists advocated building social movements that contained a wide variety of organizations, including unions, but which were all connected through a centralized political party. The anti-state socialists advocated building social movements that contained a wide variety of especially unions, but which were entirely independent of all political parties.

In the late 1860s and early 70s the International had upwards of 800,000 members in its affiliated sections and an activist core of 20,000 who were involved in a wide range of political and organizational activities. Held together by a commitment to anti-capitalism, it was an international mass movement. In 1871, top state officials in France and Spain were violently suppressing the International within their own borders and proposed a

In 1912 anarchists formed the Chilean Regional Workers' Federation (FORCh), which in 1917 merged with and essentially took over the country's other main labor federation, the Grand Workers' Federation of Chile. The newly refounded FORCh maintained an anarchist leadership until its displacement by Communist Party leaders in the mid-1920s. A Chilean IWU was founded in 1918 and had 25,000 members by the early 1920s. Inspired by and loosely modeled on but formally independent of the IWU centered in North America, the Chilean IWU represented the dockworkers and sailors of most of the country's main ports. Anarchists and syndicalists provided the primary leadership and ideological influence of the Chilean union movement from 1917-1927, with the movement's peak union membership reaching 200,000 organized workers in 1925.

In 1927 former Army Colonel Carlos Ibanez won the presidency on a populist platform. He combined mild social reform with brutal repression that smashed both the FORCh and Chilean IWU. While syndicalists were still an active force in the Chilean labor movement after its revival in the 1930s, they never regained the prominence they held from 1900 - 1927.

Africa and Asia

Moving out of Latin America, syndicalists played a prominent role in the union movement in South Africa from the 1900s through the 1920s. Radical whites were the large majority of the syndicalist movement early in those years as European sailors brought anarchist literature and ideas to the port cities. Syndicalists' opposition to white supremacy in contrast to the mainstream labor parties and unions eventually fostered a base of interracial organizing and solidarity.

The syndicalist International Socialist League was founded in 1915, which helped launch the all-black Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) loosely based on the IWU and the primary union among black dock workers in Cape Town. The IWA then merged with a number of minority white and majority black, coloured, and Indian unions to form the Industrial and

world's leading producer of nitrate and its mining and export were a pillar of the economy despite miners and their families living in slums in remote company-controlled towns.

The situation reached a head in 1907 when nitrate miners in Tarapacá Province called a general strike to demand higher wages and gathered miners from the wider region to march on the port city of Iquique. Contingents of workers arrived in the city each day to join the strike, and the national government began sending military regiments to bolster the armed forces already stationed in Iquique. Eleven days after the conflict began estimates of the number of workers on strike ranged between 10,000 and 30,000. A stand-off ensued and after negotiations had been stalled for days General Silver Renard ordered the army to open fire on the union leaders who were meeting on the balcony of a school that was being used as a gathering center by the workers and their families. One observer of the events described it:

“On the central balcony ... stood 30 or so men in the prime of life, quite calm, beneath a great Chilean flag, and surrounded by the flags of other nations. They were the strike committee... All eyes were fixed on them just as all the guns were directed at them. Standing, they received the shots. As though struck by lightning they fell, and the great flag fluttered down over their bodies... There was a moment of silence as the machine guns were lowered to aim at the school yard and the hall, occupied by a compact mass of people who spilled over into the main square... There was a sound like thunder as they fired. Then the gunfire ceased and the foot soldiers went into the school by the side doors, firing as men and women fled in all directions.”

Estimates put those killed at between 2,000 and 3,600, making it one of the deadliest industrial conflicts in world history, later to be known as the Santa Maria School Massacre. Despite the state's willingness to commit mass murder against striking workers, the radical worker movement continued to grow.

continent-wide alliance of governments to attack and destroy it. However, Britain, where the First International's General Council was headquartered and where the unions affiliated to the International were more reformist, refused in favor of a softer approach to co-opting and disciplining its labor movement.

Around 1870 anti-state socialists led the main sections from Italy, Belgium, Spain, Netherlands, and Switzerland, while state socialists were influential in Germany, France, and Britain. Many other sections were smaller or were contested enough to not have played a decisive role in the upcoming schism. Disagreement over different revolutionary strategies saw the First International split in 1872. Anti-state socialists continued on as their own grouping and gradually adopted the term anarchism to describe their views. After the split and the loss of the potential for a united international socialist organization, the competing Internationals gradually lost momentum and became inactive by the late 1870s.

Some have argued that rivalries between these early anarchists and state socialists escalated further than was necessary or helpful. Indeed, Marx's critique of capitalism has been incredibly influential on many anarchists. Marx and Bakunin's rivalry and verbal sparring in their correspondences and at the congresses of the First International certainly created the conditions for mutual antagonism based as much in personality and ego as in political theory and strategy. The legacy of this split has led many subsequent anarchists and Marxists to emphasize the contrasts and take partisan stances towards each other. While recognizing unavoidable differences, other anarchists and Marxists have emphasized the continuities and agreements between their movements. Left variants of Marxism in particular have long had an affinity with anarchist theories and practices.

While radical unionism provided the main thrust of early anarchism as a mass movement, by the 1880s insurrectionary methods were ascendant and became dominant. Insurrectionary anarchists advocated bombings and political assassinations to spur the wider masses to spontaneous revolt that

could overthrow the state. By the 1890s, the insurrectionary wing had lost favor in the wider anarchist movement as little had been achieved and much repression had been invited by their actions. Many prominent anarchists who previously supported these tactics, including Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, and Errico Malatesta, became more critical of them and began focusing more on building mass organizations like revolutionary unions.

What kinds of anarchist unionism are there?

Those unions that explicitly endorse anarchism have come to be called “anarcho-syndicalist.” Other unions forefront anarchist practices of direct action and independence from political parties but maintain a more open political posture by not explicitly endorsing anarchism. These unions have come to be called “syndicalist.” Even though syndicalist unions historically have been mostly led by anarchists and have clearly adopted some anarchist precepts, the aim of not explicitly declaring themselves anarchists is to make them more open to unionists of a broader ideological spectrum. Historically, these terms have often been used interchangeably or with even different meanings, but there’s been a recent push to standardize their meanings. Throughout this piece I use the term “anarchist unionism” descriptively for both syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist unions even though not all syndicalists identify as anarchist.

In a global movement context, anarchist unionists were often taking the same core ideas and applying them in very different ways and for different reasons in different locales. Edilene Toledo and Luigi Biondi write:

“In every country, syndicalism developed in response to specific circumstances. In Italy and Argentina, for instance, it emerged above all as a rejection of the [state] socialists, while in France and Brazil it arose as a union practice that could unify a range of militants.”

wing of the movement, which itself continued to suffer intense state repression and a series of further splits. Political instability accompanying the economic free fall of the early months of the Great Depression emboldened the military to execute a coup in 1930 and install General Urburu as president, who brutally crushed both the moderate and radical wings of the labor movement.

Chile 1900 - 1927

Syndicalism began to take root in Chile in the 1890s and then started to bloom in the early 1900s with the spread of resistance societies. At a time when syndicalist unions were not strong enough to survive intense repression, these societies formed with one foot in the workplaces but also one foot in the surrounding communities and regions in a way that made them more resilient. These were semi-clandestine anarchist groups that mixed a variety of functions, including coordinating direct action at workplaces and spreading strikes, organizing self-defense of workers facing repression by employers and the state, engaging in social struggles outside of the workplace, and spreading radical propaganda. These societies proliferated and often bolstered union struggles before the emergence of more fully-fledged and large-scale union federations. At their peak in 1910, there were more than 400 such resistance societies composed of 55,000 members operating in Chile.

In 1905, a protest rally with as many as 50,000 people in Santiago against taxes on meat imports was fired on by police, which led to a series of escalations in which a total of 200 people were killed. Anarchists and syndicalists were in the lead of the popular uprising and Santiago’s unions called a general strike and were in control of the city for a couple days before the state’s forces regrouped and crushed the movement, killing as many as 300 more. The events became known as the Red Week.

Two of the early strongholds of Chilean anarchist unionism were the ports and the nitrate mines, which had seen increasing strike activity and social unrest throughout the first decade of the 20th century. Chile became the

closely with state socialists within the same union federation by endorsing a more open syndicalism vs. those anarcho-syndicalists who felt that a rejection of electoralism was a core principle that couldn't be compromised within their organization and who felt committed to an explicit anarchist program.

In 1919, workers with loose connections to FORA-V at an iron works factory in Buenos Aires went on strike to demand an eight-hour day. Scabs and police were brought in to break the strike, and at one confrontation the police opened fire and killed four workers. 200,000 workers attended the funeral procession for the slain workers, where the crowd was fired on by police who killed 39 more people that day. A general strike was called by all of the union federations and gun fights broke out across the city between spontaneously formed workers' militias and the police and the newly organized Argentine Patriotic League, which was formed by business and military leaders to violently suppress the unions. The military itself soon mobilized 30,000 troops into the capital city. The strike subsided on its third and fourth days, and after the dust cleared as many as 700 workers had been killed and 55,000 arrested. The events became known as the Tragic Week.

Union membership and strike activity had grown steadily through the 1910s in spite of the FORA split and in fact climbed higher in the immediate wake of the Tragic Week, with FORA-IX claiming 70,000 members in 1920 and FORA-V claiming 200,000 members in 1922. Outside of Spain, no other country in the world saw an anarchist labor movement that was as large and lasted as long while solidly in the majority of overall union influence as was seen in Argentina from 1896 through the mid-1920s. But the 1920s saw a slow decline of the power of anarchists and the entire labor movement along with them.

The high point of these struggles in the 1910s and early 20s forced the government to pass a series of positive labor law reforms and forced employers to raise wages in concert with the booming economy of the 1920s. This took some of the wind out of the sails of the more militant

While at times syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists have co-existed as rivals in the same country, such as in Argentina in the 1910s and 20s, in most countries and periods one or the other has held a clearly dominant position. In the peak years of anarchist unionism from 1895 - 1939, syndicalism was more prominent in roughly the first half and anarcho-syndicalism became more prominent in the second half.

When and where was anarchist unionism a major social force?

Before venturing into a historical survey, I should make a couple disclaimers. In attempting an overview of such broad scope I can only provide a bird's-eye view of this history. I've chosen to emphasize the scale and achievements of these movements as well as the pivotal events at the height of their struggles rather than the ideas and actions of individual leaders. For the sake of brevity I've highlighted just a few key moments in each of these revolutionary movements, but there were often dozens or hundreds of other strikes and uprisings happening in the same country before and after the key struggles I've selectively narrated. In focusing on some of the sharpest moments of conflict, I also don't mean to emphasize the scale and intensity of these actions over the long hard work that these labor activists spent building up unions. Rather, the militancy of their actions was a result of the gritty organizing and movement-building they had done over the preceding years.

I've used a loosely geographical and chronological ordering to present the trajectory of the global anarchist union movement. Each section is subtitled by country and my rough estimation of the years when anarchist unionism was legitimately a mass-based social movement. Taken together, the histories of these movements can seem repetitive, but that's part of the point: These are what mass anarchist union movements look like. They certainly contain a lot of variation but also have a lot of common features and themes. And by the 1910s and 20s these movements were seemingly *everywhere*.

While anarchist unionism first emerged as a coherent politics in and around the First International in the 1860s, it was in Spain in the early 1870s where it first approximated the character of a mass-based social movement.

Anarchists connected to Mikhail Bakunin founded the Spanish section of the International in 1870, which by 1872 claimed 20,000 members and 516 trade union sections. While not an explicitly anti-state organization, they disavowed participation in electoral politics and anarchists dominated the key elected committees and administrative positions. Union sections were federated from the local up to the national level and decentralization gave sections considerable autonomy. Successful strikes led to further growth and the ability to lead larger strikes. In 1873 they claimed 60,000 members and a popular following of many more, which was the largest of any national section belonging to the First International.

In early 1873, the Spanish King Amadeo of Savoy abdicated the throne in the face of widespread social unrest due to a range of causes, and there followed a series of short-lived republican governments. In early 1874, a military coup led to the re-establishment of the monarchy. All unions were made illegal, worker newspapers were outlawed, strikes were repressed with bullets, and the Spanish International was explicitly targeted with hundreds of arrests. In 1877 in one instance of repression, the state placed 66 imprisoned Spanish Internationalists in weighted sacks and threw them into the ocean. The movement was crushed.

While short-lived, the Spanish Internationalists' tens of thousands of members first created the organizational forms and political positions at scale that presaged the emergence of mass movement anarchist unionism in subsequent decades.

state socialists, and two who didn't declare any particular ideology. Disagreements over the role that Socialist Party members who did not belong to any of the unions could play in the federation led the state socialists to leave and create their own separate union federation in 1903. In 1905, the FOA grew to 56 unions representing 32,000 members. That year FOA delegates voted to adopt an anarcho-syndicalist stance by explicitly endorsing anarchist communism as its goal and added the word "regional" to their name, now the Argentine Regional Workers' Federation (FORA), to signal the organization's anti-nationalist politics.

There were frequent strikes and brutal repression throughout these years, with many union leaders being deported, many striking workers killed, and the FORA being declared illegal by the government on multiple occasions. The crescendo reached a high point in 1909 when police attacked FORA's May Day rally and killed eight workers. In response all of the country's labor federations called an indefinite general strike in which 250,000 workers participated. Many of the country's main union halls were shut down by the police, 2,000 unionists were arrested, and three more workers were murdered during the unrest. On May 8th the strike ended when the government conceded the release of all of the imprisoned unionists and allowed the union halls to reopen.

In 1914, the main state socialist union federation voted to join the FORA en masse with the intention of forcibly reforming it back to a more syndicalist political pluralism. In 1915 the FORA officially voted to drop anarchism as its official ideology and to again adopt the more open syndicalist stance. In response, many of FORA's unions held a separate congress and voted to split off to form their own federation that retained their explicit commitment to anarchist communism. The syndicalist FORA became known as FORA-IX as it was the ninth congress where pluralism was reinstated, while the anarcho-syndicalist FORA is sometimes called the FORA-V in reference to the explicitly anarchist position taken originally at FORA's fifth congress in 1905 which was then reclaimed in 1915 after the split. This split can best be seen as a disagreement among anarchists and syndicalists over whether to work

flickered in and out of existence until a modest resurgence began in the 1990s and continues to this day.

Following this loosely chronological and geographical thread through syndicalist world history, we now pivot to its presence in Latin America. The urban working classes of many major South American cities in the early 1900s consisted mostly of recent European immigrants who lacked voting rights, making anarchist direct action feel more practical than political parties to many workers. Most of the migration came from Spain and Italy, which had their own strong anarchist labor movements. Anarchist organizers who had been exiled or were fleeing state persecution were among those who arrived in the Western Hemisphere and helped fill the workplaces of these burgeoning capitalist cities. While anarchist union movements outside of Europe were seeded by European immigrants, exiles, and travelers, these movements soon grew local roots and blended with local traditions.

Argentina 1896 - 1930

While anarchist unions had existed in Argentina since the late 1880s, syndicalism as a social movement first made its larger presence felt in 1896. Two dozen anarchist unions held conferences that year to discuss the prospects for and coordination of larger-scale strike action. The anarchist workers saw their aspirations realized when railway workers on the country's busiest rail line between Buenos Aires and Rosario struck, which then spread to other rail lines across the country. Anarchist unionists organized sympathy strikes and by early September 25,000 workers across the country were on strike. The strike collapsed days later but the stage had been set for larger union action and organization.

In 1901, 27 unions representing 10,000 workers came together to form the country's first large-scale organization of unions, the Argentine Workers' Federation (FOA). The federation was politically pluralistic but its driving ideological influence was unmistakable. The elected ten-person administrative committee of the federation consisted of six anarchists, two

Cuba 1887 - 1920s

Anarchist unionism spread beyond Europe early on through political networks, migration, and anarchists often fleeing persecution for their political activism, with sections from Egypt, Turkey, the US, Argentina, and Uruguay affiliating to the later anarchist congresses of the First International. Anarchist ideas started spreading within the Cuban labor movement in the 1870s.

Historian Joan Casanova argues that anarchists became the dominant force in Cuban labor politics in the 1880s after more moderate, reformist labor leaders failed to secure gains with more conciliatory approach to employers, especially on tobacco plantations and in cigar factories that constituted the second largest industry in the country. A strike led by these reformers failed disastrously in 1886, and partly in response "urban labor began to elect anarchists to the most important leadership positions in the labour movement." The changed politics and tactics of the movement also changed their fortunes: "The big strikes and lockouts that tobacco workers won in 1887 and 1888 in Havana, and in 1889 in Key West (an island off southern Florida, seventy miles from Cuba), showed workers the validity of the anarchists' approach to class struggle..."

The union movement receded in the 1890s but saw steadily increasing organizing thereafter. A wave of strikes following WWI provided rich soil for anarchist unionism to sprout again. The Workers' Federation of Havana (FOH) was founded in 1921 and the National Workers Confederation of Cuba (CNOC) in 1925, which claimed 129 union sections and 200,000 members. The FOH and CNOC were Cuba's main labor federations, were syndicalist in orientation, and were organizationally and ideologically led by anarchists. Historian Frank Fernandez documents how:

"the most important accords [of CNOC's founding congress] were "the total and collective refusal of electoral politics," the demand for the eight-hour day, the demand for the right to strike, and the unanimous desire not to bureaucratize the newly created

organization. Juana María Acosta, of the Unión de Obreros de la Industria de Cigarretas (“Cigar Industry Workers Union”), was elected provisional president of the CNOC — the first time in Cuban history that a woman was named to such a position — and she made the demand, “equal pay for equal work.””

The election to the Cuban presidency of the general-turned-dictator Gerardo Machado in 1925 spelled disaster for the anarchist movement which had had more room to maneuver under the more moderate previous administration. In the next couple years strikes by manufacturing, sugar, and railway worker unions were met with the harshest repression, and most of the anarchist movement’s top leaders and spokespersons were disappeared and executed. The Cuban Communist Party gathered increasing influence within the CNOC and became its leading force by the late 1920s.

France 1895 - 1914

While the earliest Spanish and Cuban syndicalists were immensely influential within their own countries, it was with French workers that radicals the world over first became aware of syndicalism as a mass movement. The General Confederation of Labor (Confédération Générale du Travail, or CGT) was one of the main labor federations in France that emerged after the legalization of unions in 1894 and was majorly influenced by syndicalists from its beginning. The CGT was politically pluralistic throughout its main syndicalist period from 1895 - 1914. Anarchists never became the majority pole but were the most influential of all the minority factions which also included socialists, communists, and liberals. The CGT’s 1906 Charter of Amiens declared it independent of all political parties with a delegate vote of 830 to 8, and anarchists were repeatedly elected to the top positions of the federation throughout these years.

Alongside the CGT was an interconnected network of labor centers called the Bourse du Travail, which began as a labor exchange initiative of local governments to replace hyper-exploitative private employment agencies

The anarchist movement in Chicago and the US as a whole was decimated and took decades to recover. It should not be forgotten that at the moment of highest struggle and strike activity over the demand for the eight-hour day, anarchist unionists led the movement. The frame-up of anarchists for the bombing became known as the Haymarket Affair and their fight is commemorated annually on May 1st as International Workers’ Day.

The advance of industrialization in the US marched on and soon there was plentiful kindling for a renewed fire in the anarchist labor movement. The syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was founded in 1905 in Chicago as a radical alternative to the mainstream American Federation of Labor and to bring together the far flung and diverse radical unionists of the day. After a power struggle in 1908 by the more Marxist factions of the union to bring it into formal alliance with the Socialist Labor Party failed, many of the state socialists left and the primary ideological influence remained anarchist as it stayed true to its original principle of independence from all political parties.

From its founding through the mid-1920s, the IWW achieved increasing prominence through such fights as the 1912 “Bread and Roses” textile worker strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, large efforts among maritime workers on the Atlantic and Gulf seaboards and especially among dockworkers and sailors in Philadelphia, the five-day Seattle General Strike of 1919 that involved 65,000 workers and in which the IWW played an active role, and mass organizing of Arizona and Montana copper miners, Pacific NW and Southern lumberjacks, and Midwestern agricultural workers. From a peak of an estimated 150,000 members in 1917, the union started to decline sharply in the mid-1920s due to the effects of persistent government repression (in 1918, 101 of the union’s lead organizers were convicted on charges of obstructing US efforts in WWI and most were sentenced to decades in prison), company thugs murdering IWW organizers (like Frank Little and Wesley Everest), internal splits, and competition for members from the ascending Communist Party. By the 1930s the IWW was a mere shadow of its former glory and by the 1950s only remnants remained as occasional campaigns

proletarian movement and to outflank the liberal reformist unions, the CLU and IWPA took up the eight-hour day while demanding no reduction in wages to go along with it. They now saw this demand as a way to significantly improve the lives of workers and as a step towards abolishing capitalism.

The mainstream unions held a rally of more than 7,000 in early April of 1886, which the CLU followed up a couple weeks later with a rally of their own that drew 25,000. A general strike supported by all the union federations began on May 1st and drew the participation of 10s of 1000s of Chicago workers, with more than 40,000 winning some kind of reduction in hours by the end of the strike's first week.

At the same time one of Chicago's largest employers, the farm equipment manufacturer McCormick Harvester, was engaged in a bitter dispute with its workers. On May 3rd, a fight between locked out workers and scabs and police broke out by the gates of its largest factory resulting in the death of a locked out worker. A response rally the next day drew thousands, and as the event was winding down with only hundreds of demonstrators left, 175 cops descended to clear the square. A bomb was thrown at the police, killing one instantly and injuring many others, which led the police to start firing indiscriminately. Four workers and seven more officers ultimately died from gunshot wounds.

While the thrower of the bomb was never identified, the government used the event as a pretext to break the back of the anarchist movement. Four anarchists, including August Spies and Albert Parsons who were among the main leaders of the IWPA and committed unionists organizing with the CLU's eight-hour day campaign, were charged with responsibility for the deaths despite not being present at the time of the bombing. They were found guilty in a sham trial and were executed despite an international solidarity movement to save them. Anarchists the country over were targeted for repression.

that had provoked worker riots. However, radical labor activists began taking over these labor exchanges and succeeded in turning them into community union halls. The halls typically housed the offices and meeting rooms of major unions in an area while also containing theaters, libraries, and hosting all sorts of community events. By 1902 the Bourse du Travail had become so intertwined with the CGT that they decided to formally merge.

By 1902 the CGT had 100,000 members. In these years the CGT waged most of its strikes without using formal negotiations with employers or even formal contracts. According to one source, six out of every ten strikes ended when "the boss opened the factory gates and upped the wages."

In 1904 the CGT adopted a campaign for the eight-hour day which was to focus solely on direct action and eschew electoral and lobbying methods. Preparation for a general strike to begin on May 1st, 1906 included conferences in 80 French cities. On the eve of the strike the President of France moved 60,000 soldiers into Paris to suppress it and arrested 700 union leaders. Nonetheless, 200,000 workers participated with some of the strikers staying out for over a hundred days. Only 10,000 workers decisively won a decrease in their workday hours from their employers, but in response to the pressure of the strike the French government passed a law mandating one day off work per week.

1912 saw the peak of the CGT's membership in this period top 600,000, which constituted 40% of all dues-paying union members in France. However, the onset of World War I in 1914 tore the union apart. Some syndicalists along with the majority of the other factions threw their support behind the war against Germany, a considerable proportion of the members were conscripted onto the war's front lines, the CGT voted to join a French coalition of government, employers, and unions to coordinate the war economy, and many anarchists left to form their own separate labor and anti-war organizations. Syndicalism still remained a lesser force within the CGT for more than a decade but its leading years were over.

In the US the anarchist union movement got its start earlier and peaked later than it did in France. The International Working People's Association (IWPA) was founded in 1881 at a conference of anarchists in London hoping to restart the First International, though the organization only took root in the US and Mexico.

The origins of the US IWPA came in part from anti-electoral radicals within the US Socialist Labor Party (SLP) who split off in 1881 to form a network of anarchist cells mostly focused on insurrectionary armed struggle. The more radical foreign-born Germans in the SLP didn't have the vote, were far lower in the social class hierarchy than most of the skilled Anglo-American workers in the SLP, and thus were less convinced that electoral politics was a viable tool to make real change.

In 1883, German anarchist and then-insurrectionist Johann Most immigrated to the US and gave fiery speeches across the country drumming up interest in the IWPA. A confluence of former SLPers and new followers of Most led to the founding of the IWPA section in the US at an 1883 conference in Pittsburgh. While radical unionists coexisted among the insurrectionists, their numbers and influence were marginal in the beginning with neither the words "union" nor "strike" appearing in the IWPA's Pittsburgh Manifesto that decried the treatment of workers and their exploitation by capitalists.

Of the 26 cities represented at the IWPA's US founding, the Eastern cities coalesced around Most's insurrectionary program while the Midwestern cities took on an increasingly unionist tenor. IWPA activists were initially critical of the eight-hour day movement as mere mild amelioration under capitalism, but this shifted as anarchist workers started joining the IWPA Cigar factories in Chicago in the 1870s contained an increasing number of German and Bohemian immigrant workers who had been organizing in

the labor movement. These workers had been on a path of increasing radicalization due to violent police repression of their meetings and rallies, on the one hand, and the red-baiting, xenophobia, and reformism of leaders of the mainstream cigar maker unions, on the other. Anarchist unionists in Chicago founded their own Progressive Cigarmakers Union (PCU) in 1883 and adopted the IWPA's Pittsburgh Manifesto word-for-word as a declaration of their own politics while retaining their unionist outlook.

Upon trying to widen their reach into the local labor movement, the PCU applied for but was denied entry into Chicago's mainstream labor federation, the Trades and Labor Assembly. The PCU then created its own rival federation, the Central Labor Union (CLU), which by 1884 was joined by local German-majority unions of tanners, tailors, and printers. The CLU's program stated that "labor created all wealth, that there could be no harmony between labor and capital, and that strikes as presently conducted [by mainstream unions] were doomed to failure. It urged every worker to reject capitalist political parties and to devote his or her entire energy to labor unions in order to resist ruling-class encroachment upon their liberties."

By 1886, the CLU grew to include 22 unions and represented 20,000 workers in Chicago, more than the Trades and Labor Assembly. As far as I know, this brief moment was the first and only time in US history that an anarchist unionists controlled the largest organization of workers in a major US city.

The more mainstream Trades and Labor Assembly and the Knights of Labor had taken up the campaign for the eight-hour day in 1885, drawing large crowds at mass meetings and rallies. However, they saw the demand as consistent with capitalism and advocated a reduction in wages to go along with the reduction in hours to make it more palatable to employers. The more privileged craft workers in the mainstream labor movement were not so nearly impacted by excessive working hours as unskilled immigrant workers were. Seeing an opportunity to make inroads into the