Unit 6: Revolutionary Syndicalism in Britain and Ireland, 1910-17

This Unit aims to:

- Analyse the tactics and strategy of the British syndicalists from 1910-1917.
- Look at the extent of syndicalist influence within the working class.
- Examine the impact of the industrial unrest of 1910 – 1914.
- Briefly consider the Irish syndicalist movement.
- Look at the reasons behind the regrouping of the syndicalist movement after 1913.
- Examine the impact on the syndicalist movement of the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.
- Discuss the successes and failures of British revolutionary syndicalism, its theory and tactics.

Terms and abbreviations

ISEL: Industrial Syndicalist Education League
SWMF: South Wales Miners' Federation
URC: Unofficial Reform Committee
ASRS: Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants
IDL: Industrial Democracy League
BTCC: Building Trade Consolidation Committee
BWIU: Building Workers' Industrial Union

Introduction

This Unit follows on from Unit 5, which described the development of the revolutionary tendencies within the British labour movement over the forty-year period 1870-1910. The four years that followed saw an unprecedented wave of industrial unrest sometimes called the *Syndicalist Revolt*. These years, immediately preceding the First World War, were pivotal in the development of revolutionary syndicalism in Britain, marking the emergence of a recognisable and co-ordinated movement for revolutionary change that was to grow rapidly in numbers and in influence.

Tactics & Strategy I

The conversion of the prominent activist and former socialist politician Tom Mann to revolutionary syndicalism coincided with a turning point in the development of the movement (see Unit 5). Following a trip to France to visit the CGT (see Unit 4) by Mann and the well-known anarcho-syndicalist Guy Bowman, they launched the British syndicalist newspaper *Industrial Syndicalist* in July 1910. This was followed by the setting up of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League (ISEL) in January 1911. The ISEL and *Industrial Syndicalist* were important in that they drew together what had formerly been a scattered revolutionary syndicalist movement. The ISEL was also able to attract considerable support from outside the established syndicalist organisations, drawing activists from the wider trade union movement. The ISEL was an immediate success, part of which can be attributed to its adoption of a 'boring from within' strategy. With this strategy it envisaged growth through working within, and changing, the existing reformist unions, rather than the 'dual union' option of developing entirely new, revolutionary unions (see Unit 5). The ISEL acted as a propaganda group that sought to win over existing unions to syndicalism, and thus managed to expose syndicalist ideas to a far greater audience. The ISEL argued that the flaw in the dual unionist strategy that had been advocated by some syndicalist organisations up until this time was that it isolated syndicalist activists in the workplace.

The adoption of the 'boring from within' approach did result in some syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists refusing to become involved in the work of the ISEL. The SLP-BAIU, though present at the ISEL conferences, did largely boycott the organisation and became a constant critic of the League and Mann in particular. The SLP member and Durham miner George Harvey argued that what he referred to, as 'Tom Mannism' was *"nothing more than a federation of trade unionism on anti-political lines, whereas Industrial Unions were both political and industrial, having definite aims and methods."* This charge was consistently levelled against the 'boring from within' approach to revolutionary syndicalism, and has been since by successive left-wing political historians.

How well founded are these charges? Well, the ISEL was certainly not an anarcho-syndicalist organisation. Its main attraction at the time was its core argument that workers had to organise into fighting industrial unions, based on the methods of direct action. These were the main concepts put forward and accepted by the delegates attending the ISEL founding conference. The arguments had considerable merit, given the ineffectiveness of the unions at the time and the fact that there were some 1100 unions in Britain, often competing with each other for members. However, the ISEL went beyond merely being an organisation arguing for greater union amalgamation and more direct action. As demonstrated by views of the *Industrial Syndicalist* at the time, there was considerable attention given to the necessity of linking industrial unionism with the need for revolutionary change. Writing in the very first issue of *Industrial Syndicalist,* Mann made clarified Industrial Unionism by stating:

"...the new general federation of workers of trade unions, which will unite all workers as a class, will be avowedly and clearly revolutionary in aim and method… revolutionary in aim, because it will be out for the abolition of the wage...thereby seeking to change the system of society from capitalist to socialist."

Amongst those historians attempting to cast British syndicalism of the period as reformist, much has been made of the issue of linking commitment for the need to limit state control with support for limited parliamentary action. Undoubtedly, initially, Mann and others still saw some role for socialist parties and parliamentary action. But by 1911, he had rejected the idea of state control of industry, declaring that

syndicalism *"means the control of industry by syndicates or union of workers in the interest of the entire community...".*

By 1912, Mann rejected parliamentary action outright, declaring, *"political action is no use whatsoever".* In the same year, he charged himself with *"foolishness in the past in looking to parliament for labour's emancipation"*. Though he was never completely convinced of the ideas of anarchism, there is little doubt that by 1914 Mann was very close to being, if not in all-but-name, an anarcho-syndicalist.

It would be a mistake to fall into the trap of equating the ISEL and Mann as one and the same. Within the ISEL, there were many experienced activists who, from the outset, clearly espoused anarcho-syndicalist ideas. For instance Allen, who had already written a pamphlet on revolutionary unions (see Unit 5), wrote in *Industrial Syndicalist* in 1910:

"The industrial union is destined to become the most powerful instrument in the class struggle by showing the workers' class how to hold in check the rapacity of their masters...by the direct pressure of their collective economic strength; which power reaches its highest expression in the complete paralysis of the whole of the functions of capitalist society by means of the general strike...a strike aimed at the direct and forcible expropriation of capitalism."

In fact, while the majority of those active within the ISEL did not start out as anarcho-syndicalists, the ISEL and British syndicalism in general were driven by prevailing economic and social conditions towards anarcho-syndicalism. Certainly, by the outbreak of the First World War, this journey was virtually complete. In this, Mann and the ISEL reflected large sections of the British working class. Faced with an increasingly better organised capitalist system, increasingly reformist unions unable to defend basic rights, and various socialist organisations who were ineffectual and virtually ignored the day to day economic struggle, many workers came to reject parliamentarianism and adopt the idea of direct action and workers' control as an alternative. When faced with the working class unrest of 1910-1914, the state and capitalism were quick to drop their new found tolerance to trade unionism and unleash a wave of brutal repression. This had the immediate effect of awakening the latent anti-state sentiments within the working class, drawing more of them towards the ideas of anarcho-syndicalism.

Class Action

As early as 1910, anger at falling wages and disillusionment with trade unions was already widespread. It led to an explosion of mainly unofficial strike actions that dominated British activism for the next 4 years. In the period 1910-14, some 10 million working days per year were lost through strike action, and unions swelled from 2.1 million to 4.1 million members. Many of the strikes were unofficial and marked by their insurgent character, often resulted in civil unrest, and quickly began to pose a direct threat to the state. Outright defiance of police, magistrates and the military became a way of life for many workers.

Although the period of industrial unrest is usually dated from September 1910, with the beginning of the Cambrian Combine Strike in South Wales, there is evidence that tension had been growing in the years before this. The period of industrial peace that had begun in 1899 really ended in 1908. That year saw major disputes in the cotton, engineering and shipbuilding industries caused by imposed wage reductions and lockouts. In 1909-10 the north east of England witnessed a series of strikes by the boilermakers in the shipyards. In January 1910 the traditionally moderate Durham miners went on strike against an agreement already signed by their union. These disputes acted as a prelude to the full-scale working class revolt that was to begin in South Wales in September 1910.

South Wales Miners

It was among the mining communities of South Wales that the first major wave of sustained strike action occurred. At first, the grievances were centred on wages and conditions in the mines of the Cambrian Combine. However, the strike took on an increasingly insurrectionary nature as it progressed. Syndicalist influence grew steadily. At least three syndicalists were active on the strike committee (Rees, Mainwaring and Smith), and well-known syndicalist miners, such as Ablett and Hay, helped to spread the dispute throughout Wales. Meanwhile, Mann and other ISEL members were frequent visitors to the area. The influence of syndicalist ideas was given added impetus due to the fact that the strike remained unofficial. The South Wales Miners' Federation (SWMF) refused to abandon its policy of conciliation as a means of settling coalfield grievances. Left-wing party political support for the strike was non-existent; indeed, the Socialist MPs consistently denounced it in Parliament.

The strikers used militant tactics such as mass picketing throughout the strike. Mass picketing was used against blackleg labour and trains carrying scabs were stopped and the scabs ordered off and sent home. Attacks took place on any collieries still operating and attempts were made to sabotage power houses kept going by the management. Physical and verbal attacks on mine managers were common and, on at least one occasion, an attempt was made to blow up a mine manager's house. In response, the state unleashed a wave of brutal oppression not seen since Luddism. Troops and police were drafted in as large areas of South Wales came under martial law. Clashes between strikers and the state forces were common, with troops even resorting to charging workers with fixed bayonets. The strike lasted ten months and ended in defeat for the miners. The death and injury toll was also considerable; by the strike's end, four strikers had been shot dead, one had died of bayonet wounds and countless men and women had been injured.

However, the strike was not entirely in vain, not least because the demand for a minimum wage for miners emerged from it - a demand that was to be taken up by miners nationally in 1912. A campaign to reconstruct the SWMF on fighting lines also emerged from the dispute, centred on the syndicalist-inclined Unofficial Reform Committee (URC), which argued for a realignment of the policy structure and ideological orientation of the union along syndicalist

lines. The growth of the URC reflected the growing strength of syndicalist ideas among South Wales miners, which led to the election of Noah Ablett and Noah Rees to the executive committee of the SWMF.

The work of the URC led to the publication of *The Miners' Next Step* in early 1911. This pamphlet was to become highly influential and represents the one of the clearest commitments of the working class to the cause of revolutionary syndicalism. It was drafted by Hay and Mainwaring before being sent out for discussion by miners' lodges. After further alterations, the pamphlet was placed before a conference in Cardiff.

The Miners' Next Step is of importance because it clearly demonstrates that a large section of South Wales miners had broken with reformism and state socialism. The pamphlet argued for a democratically controlled union, rejected the idea of nationalisation or state control of the mines and called instead for direct workers' control of industry. It explained that this would come about by an escalating campaign of militant industrial action, based on irritation strikes, lightning stoppages and sabotage. According to *The Miners' Next Step* this campaign would culminate in a final conflict with capitalism that would lead to the establishment of a co-operative commonwealth based on industrial democracy and common ownership.

The publication of *The Miners' Next Step* proved a considerable boost to the cause of syndicalism. By summer 1911, Welsh "missionaries" were sent to all the main coalfields in Britain to publicise syndicalist ideas and distribute *The Miners' Next Step,* paving the way for the national miners' strike, which was to break out the following year.

Transport Workers

In summer 1911, unrest was already spreading from the miners to the transport industry, the dockyards and railways. The pace gathered between June and September, by which time largely unofficial and often violent strike action was felt in all main British ports and throughout the railway network. The disputes originated with a strike by seaman in Southampton, which spread quickly to Hull, Goole, Manchester and Liverpool. A strike committee was set up in Liverpool, which Tom Mann participated in. Mann's presence in Liverpool injected a syndicalist perspective into the dispute, as he argued for a direct actionist anti-state, anti-parliamentary, revolutionary approach. Addressing 3,000 strikers at Canning Place he said,

"Seamen had tried to induce parliament to consider their case and rectify some of their grievances...but in effect had been told 'to go to the devil' ...they had approached individual ship owners and government departments and the board of trade and were given the same message... The board...was a body of permanent officials drawn from the capitalist set who administered in the interests of ship owners. The Board of Trade is the enemy of the seaman. The only way to remedy the situation was by direct action."

The dispute soon spread to the dockers, who were at the time mainly employed by the ship owners. At first dockers came out in sympathy but soon put forward their own demands. Other groups of workers employed in ancillary jobs such as factories and processing plants joined the dispute. In Glasgow, police guarding the premises of the Clyde Shipping Company were attacked. George Askwith, the government's chief industrial conciliator, was given the task of resolving the conflict but, as he discovered the strikers, *" had new leaders, men unknown before; the employers did not know how to deal with them."* He reported the revolutionary mood in Hull with the total hostility to the mediation of union officials. As Askwith later wrote, when he finally reached a settlement with the union leaders and it was brought before a meeting of fifteen thousand,

"They announced the settlement; and before it was my turn to speak, an angry roar of 'No!' rang out – and 'let's fire the docks! I heard a town councillor remark that he had been in Paris during the Commune and had never seen anything like this ....he had not known

that there were such people in Hull - women with their hair streaming and half nude, reeling through the streets, smashing and destroying..."

Mass picketing techniques were widely used in Hull to spread the dispute. Attacks were also made on the offices of ship owners and on local Labour exchanges operated by the Shipping Federation. In response, troops and police were rushed into the area.

Apoart from Hull there was militant rank and file action in most of the main ports. On Merseyside, where the organised syndicalist presence was particularly strong, Tom Mann had been invited to lead the strike effort at an early stage. Here his own standing was enhanced by his fiery and unequivocal hostility to the Shipping Federation.

The seamen and dockers strike ended in early July with a partial victory. However, no sooner had the strike ended than further strikes were called by London dockers, hitherto unaffected by the dispute. The London ports were booming at the time, and the port authorities, anxious not to have a reoccurrence of Hull, made significant concessions that were accepted by the unions. Still, rank and file activists, including a number of syndicalists, argued for continuation of the strike. Unofficial action was organised and strikes quickly spread until the docks were paralysed. Militants led the campaign for direct action. Prominent amongst them was Ted Leggat, a committed anarcho-syndicalist, who traditionally began his speeches with, *"I'm Ted Leggat, the anarchist*." As food rapidly became scarce in the capital, the government intervened and Askwith was called in to mediate, with further concessions being won from the government.

Merseyside

Just as the dockers strike ended, strikes began on the railways. Wages and conditions were particularly bad in this sector; it was not uncommon, for example, for rail workers to work straight 36-hour shifts. Workers had become fed up with the Conciliation Boards, set up in 1907, which had proven slow moving and ineffective.

The strike began on Merseyside, where 1,000 rail workers walked out in favour of higher wages and an end to conciliation in early August 1911. They had been encouraged to walk out by the Liverpool strike committee, which was still functioning even though the seamen's strike was over. Within 5 days, the unofficial strike had spread to include some 15,000 railway workers and a further 8,000 dockers, who came out in sympathy. Within a week, the ship-owners imposed a general lock-out. This prompted the strike committee to call for an all-out strike by transport workers in Liverpool. Within days, over 70,000 transport and other workers were out on strike, and Liverpool was bought to a standstill.

A system of official permits was introduced, granting employers permission to move goods. The Post Office and many major companies were forced to apply to the strikers for permits. A real sense of the workers taking over the running of industry began to take hold. The transport permit system was seen as a real threat to the legitimacy of state power, implying an alternative form of social order based on priorities determined by the working class. The state was not slow to react to this challenge. Some 3,000 troops and large numbers of police were drafted in. Gunboats were also sent to Merseyside, with guns trained on working class areas. A civil service corps made up mainly of middle classes was formed to act as strike-breakers in carrying out the jobs of transport workers and municipal workers who had joined the strike.

The strike brought a sense of solidarity for the working people of Merseyside. It also polarised class feeling as the working class backed the strikers against the middle classes and police authorities. The resultant heightened class solidarity even overcame the traditional sectarian hatred between Catholics and Protestants. As Fred Bower, a Liverpool syndicalist stonemason, later recalled in his memoirs, the sectarian divide was crossed as class solidarity took precedence. Of a demonstration organised by Mann in support of the strikers, which he participated in, he noted:

"The Garston Band had walked five miles and their drum major proudly whirled his sceptre twined with orange and green ribbon as he led his contingent half out of the Roman Catholic, half out of the local orange band."

This demonstration, at which religious differences were temporarily overcome, was to prove a turning point. It was held on August 15th as a peaceful show of solidarity. The authorities unleashed a brutal attack on the 80,000 demonstrators, and thousands of police and mounted troops left large numbers of adults and children injured.

The attacks proved too much, even for the capitalist press. The Guardian described the attacks as a *"..display of violence that horrified those who saw it".* Even after the demonstration was dispersed, the state forces pursued the unarmed families through the Liverpool streets, attacking them at will. However, when the pursuing forces followed people into working class areas, they were met with resistance. As the Liverpool Daily Post described;

"...the residents took sides with the rioters against the Police, throwing bottles, bricks slates and stones from the houses and the roofs....bedding was set alight, so as to render the road impassable to the mounted police."

The battles between police and working class communities continued for several days of what *The Times* described as *"guerrilla warfare".* In one of the more serious incidents, an attempt to free two "rioters" from a police van was met with characteristic panic by the troops, who shot two striking dockers dead and left several men and women injured, fifteen of whom were admitted to hospital.

The strike in Liverpool ended after the employers made significant concessions to the strikers. However, the wider influence of syndicalism was considerable, both during and after the strike. Strong solidarity and industrial unionism had been the driving forces behind the dispute, even enabling workers to overcome occupational and sectarian differences. The strike committee, run on syndicalist principles, had been the main co-ordinating body during the dispute. The permit system set up by the strike committee moved the strike closer to the concept of workers taking direct control of the running of society. Throughout the dispute, activists hammered the unequivocal

syndicalist message home. To quote one leaflet produced by syndicalists during the dispute; "..*the culminating object of the workers should be the capture of the means of production*".

In the wake of the Liverpool strike, a new monthly syndicalist journal, *Transport Worker,* was set up. By October, it already had a circulation of over 20,000 in the Merseyside area, and local syndicalist street and public meetings had become a regular feature.

The Liverpool dispute cast its influence across the country. Many trade unionists began joining the syndicalists, and an increasing number of Social Democratic Federation (SDF - see Unit 5) members were won over to syndicalism. This coincided with the SDFs increasingly reformist position, concentrating its activities on electoral politics and virtually ignoring trade union struggle. Syndicalism was now the only movement in Britain advocating revolutionary change.

Nationwide Rail Dispute

In addition to the impact that the strike had in Liverpool there was a much wider knock-on effect as rail workers in other areas joined the dispute. Unofficial action in Hull, Bristol, Swansea and Manchester forced the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS - the main rail union) to call a national stoppage of all its members. Within days, all the rail unions had joined the stoppage, resulting in the first ever national rail dispute. The demands were centred on pay, length of the working week and an end to conciliation.

The national and general nature of the rail strike led rapidly to a new, strong sense of industrial unity among workers who, in the past, had been fragmented by sectional or regional interests. There was also a shift towards militancy in an industry where workers had hitherto had a reputation for moderation. Organised attacks occurred on parts of the railways still working. At Portishead, Bristol, over 1,000 workers launched an attack on a working signal box. Tracks were torn up and telegraph systems damaged. The military and police intervened, and the violence intensified. In Derby, troops were

ordered in to defend the railway station, resulting in pitched battles, with the troops resorting to bayonet charges to repulse unarmed workers.

Reminiscent of the recent miners' strike, state brutality was particularly ferocious in South Wales. In Llanelli, troops were ordered to open fire on workers occupying a level crossing, leaving two dead. Many more were wounded as the troops followed up their attacks with a bayonet charge. The two killed were tin-plate makers who had come out in support of the rail workers - an indication of the extent of growing working class solidarity. Indeed, such solidarity was widespread. Sympathy strikes even broke out among school children in many railway centres (62 strikes by school children were recorded at the time).

In late August, fearful of the militancy of the workforce, union leaders called off the strike, and agreed to a Royal Commission, before which all the grievances were to be put. This move by union bosses caused widespread anger among rail workers, and many initially refused to return to work. In due course, the Commission decided to keep the conciliation system intact, albeit in a modified form. More workers' anger led to a ballot for a second strike, and further concessions were squeezed from the employers, as union leaders reached agreement with the employers without the ballot result being disclosed. The decision to come to an agreement caused yet more discontent among workers and over 100 branches of ASRS passed motions condemning the decision.

The syndicalist influence in the national rail strike helped pave the way for an industrial union of rail workers, and the National Union of Railworkers (NUR) was duly established in 1913. A new paper, *The Syndicalist Railwayman,* was launched, in opposition to the official *Railway Revie*w, and syndicalist activists were elected onto the ASRS executive. An indication of the syndicalist influence can be gauged from motions put before the annual union conference in 1911, which included calls for workers to take direct control of *"the productive and distributive forces of society"* and construct an *"industrial commonwealth*". Another motion calling for an immediate end to *"all conciliation schemes, which are imposed on the workers by the employing classes and its capitalist backers, the state"* was defeated by 37 votes to 19. As in the mines, syndicalism on the railways had made considerable ground in a very short length of time.

Nationwide Miners' Dispute

The next nationwide industrial dispute was in coal mining. The strike centred on a minimum wage for miners - a demand that dated back to the South Wales miners' dispute. The Welsh miners' efforts in touring meetings in coalfield areas and selling *The Miners' Next Step* (the original 5,000 print run quickly sold out) arguably influenced the decision to call a national strike.

Even before the strike, the build up was enough to cause near panic among the British ruling elite. Troops were rapidly deployed to coalfield areas in response to a deluge of requests from local chief constables, magistrates and mine owners. Many units were issued with swords in case of hand-to-hand fighting, and arms were recalled from Territorial Army depots because of fears that the territorials might side with striking workers. Barricades were built around mine owners and managers' houses. Even the massive military build up was thought to be inadequate. As Askwith remarked; *"there are only 80,000 troops available for the purpose and the Territorials cannot be trusted".*

The syndicalist response to the military build up was to launch an anti-militarist campaign, centred on a leaflet entitled *"Don't Shoot",* written by a Liverpool building worker. Workers' papers took up the cause and the campaign was publicised by Jim Larkin in *The Irish Worker* and by *The Syndicalist* (which had replaced *Industrial Syndicalist* as the paper of the growing ISEL). One issue of the latter carried an article by Ricardo Magon, a Mexican anarcho-syndicalist, who argued that the rifle that now served the capitalist could equally serve the workers.

Other workers took up these pleas. For example, in Ilkeston, Derbyshire, the monthly journal *Dawn* called for resistance against the civil power stating;

"If blood has to be shed, I do not see why it should always be the workers' blood.... The master class has got everything in their own hands; they manipulate the political machinery. They are backed up by police and soldiers, by press and pulpit."

The impending strike action and anti-militarist syndicalist propaganda threw the ruling class into panic. Syndicalist dissidents were arrested. These included the militants from Ilkeston and Fred Crowsley, a railwayman who had distributed the *Don't Shoot* leaflet outside Aldershot barracks. Some of the more prominent included

Mann and Bowman, both of whom were sentenced to six months in prison under the Incitement to Mutiny Act 1797. This caused immediate outrage throughout the labour movement, and gave yet further publicity to the syndicalists. Indeed, the strength of syndicalism amongst miners is indicated by the numerous calls during the strike to make the release of Mann and Bowman part of the terms of any settlement.

After the build-up, the miners' strike of 1912 was relatively peaceful compared with other disputes of the time. A Parliament fearful of unrest rushed through legislation agreeing in principal with a minimum wage for miners (though it did not set a rate). Nevertheless, the miners voted against this solution and for continued strike action, only to have their wishes overturned by union leaders, who ordered a return to work. As in the rail dispute, this caused outrage among rank and file workers, and many at first refused to return to work. This blatant sell-out by union leaders led to further increase in syndicalist influence following the strike, as syndicalist organisations swelled amidst calls for a revolutionary industrial miners' union based on the ideas outlined advocated in *The Miners' Next Ste*p.

Tactics and Strategy II

By the end of 1912, syndicalism had become a household word. *The Syndicalist* had a monthly circulation of well over 20,000. There was growing tactical cohesion of revolutionary syndicalist ideas. The central aim was working class control of the social system, to be brought about by industrial unions through the use of the general strike. The first moves were being made to develop the ISEL from a propaganda organisation to a more formally constituted syndicalist organisation with a constitution and open direct democratic structure. Local branches were established and were active in all key industrial areas, especially London, Manchester, Liverpool, Birmingham and Coventry. Prominent syndicalists helped spread revolutionary industrial ideas by speaking at may trade union branches and socialist groups.

However, 1913 saw the ISEL split tactically around the issue of trade union strategy and the proper organisational form of the revolutionary syndicalist movement. Those who supported 'boring from within' argued that syndicalists should aim to reconstruct existing unions on revolutionary lines while others, led by Guy Bowman, abandoned the traditional ISEL policy and united with those who envisaged the 'dual unionist' approach. The former group, including Mann, left the ISEL, while the latter, continued with the ISEL name. The dual unionists felt that the ISEL had lacked a clear-cut revolutionary identity and was submerged in radical wage militancy. The split fractured the growing revolutionary movement and, although the ISEL continued, it had less influence. Circulation of *The Syndicalist* fell, the number of pages were cut from 8 to 4, and it appeared less often.

The 'boring from within' split from the ISEL formed the Industrial Democracy League (IDL), with initial prominent members including Mann, Hay and Ablett, and the well-known anarcho-syndicalist activist Jack Tanner. The IDL had more success than the dual unionist ISEL and by 1914 syndicalism was regaining organisational strength. The IDL paper *Solidarity* steadily increased circulation over the next two years.

While it caused a short-term hiatus, the split did not prove the great hindrance to the spread of syndicalism that might have been expected. Syndicalist influence continued to grow on the railways, with both Mann and Bowman being regular speakers at branch meetings across the country. The creation of the NUR in 1913

boosted the syndicalist movement, and the 1914 annual conference was dominated by calls to end conciliation and adopt direct action methods towards the industry being directly controlled by workers. Similarly, in the mines, South Wales' syndicalists worked within the Plebs League and in producing the highly influential paper *The South Wales Worke*r. Syndicalism also began to challenge the lib-lab dominance of the Durham Miners' Association, while the Yorkshire coalfield became a centre of syndicalist activity by the outbreak of the First World War.

Engineering Workers

In 1913, revolutionary syndicalism began to gain ground in other sectors of industry, starting in engineering. Grievances among engineering workers had been growing for some time, especially in the largely female unskilled workforce, where women were generally paid half the adult male wages. Indeed, it was in this sector that a strike broke out in the Black Country in 1913. The strikers were organised in the Workers' Union, specifically formed to organise non-craft engineering workers in 1898. The strike took a militant course, with widespread pickets and sabotage attacks on factories. Troops and police were drafted in to break the dispute, while Mann toured the area on the invitation of the strikers. Support and solidarity from syndicalists in other areas significantly increased support for syndicalism within the Workers' Union, especially among West Midland Branches.

Syndicalism also grew within the Engineering Amalgamation Committee, the secretary of which was Jack Turner, now a member of the IDL. He and other syndicalists aimed to establish a network of further local amalgamation committees that would unite engineers from the various unions into one propagandist organisation. By early 1914, these had indeed been established in all the main engineering and metal work centres and led to a hitherto unknown level of co-operation between craft workers and semi-skilled and unskilled workers.

While not all workers within the amalgamation movement were syndicalists, the important role of syndicalism is demonstrated by the popularity of the pamphlet *One Union for Metal, Engineering and Shipbuilding Workers,* written by the syndicalists Watson and Young (editor of *Solidarity*). The pamphlet sold 10,000 copies within the first 10 weeks, and the influence continued to spread and grow, even within the craft-dominated unions.

Building Workers

The building trade was another sector that saw rapid growth of syndicalist ideas and practice in the build up to the First World War. As elsewhere, there had been a syndicalist presence prior to 1912, with many active ISEL members in the building trade. However, this gathered pace with the growing amalgamation movement and the Building Trade Consolidation Committee (BTCC) established close links with the ISEL by 1912. The syndicalist influence in the building trade was given direction by these close links. This syndicalist influence was especially concentrated in the London area, where there was an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, the William Morris Socialist Club.

The BTCC called for an industrial union for all building workers, regardless of trade and, in 1913, building workers voted for the amalgamation by 31,541 to 12,156. The leaders of the various builders unions, who had set up the vote as a way of diffusing the issue, chose to ignore the result. There followed a rash of unofficial strikes, especially in the London area. At a meeting in December 1913, the employers warned the unions that if they could not discipline their own members and stop the rash of unofficial disputes, they would take action themselves. True to their word, they duly called a lock-out which affected some 40,000 building workers.

The response of some union leaders was to blame the unofficial strikers. Organisation of the dispute was taken over by the syndicalists around the BTCC. This was no surprise - they had already organised numerous mass meetings, publicised the key issues through the pages of *Solidarity,* and especially written and distributed a syndicalist manifesto.

As soon as the lock-out was declared, a special branch delegates conference was organised, and rank and file control of the dispute secured. Assurances were made that any agreement would be put to a ballot of all building workers and that no union would negotiate separately. Two attempts by union leaders to end the dispute in the first weeks were heavily defeated by 23,481 votes to 2,021 and 21,017 votes to 5,824 respectively. On the streets, it was marked by non-violence, mainly because there was virtually no scabbing.

After five months, employers offered a number of concessions, only to see their offer turned down by the strikers by 21,000 votes to 9,000. This proved too much for some union leaders, and they began to break ranks. Outraged building workers sent a flood of resolutions to union offices, and a mass meeting of 7,000 was organised in Trafalgar Square, at which no union leaders were allowed to speak. Nevertheless, the union leaders had effectively sold out the workers again, by cracking open the unity of the union organisations in the dispute.

The blatant undermining of the dispute by the union leaders led to a radical rethink by syndicalist building workers. The majority, previously committed to working within existing unions, decided to form a new revolutionary building workers' union, The Building Workers' Industrial Union (BWIU). This was an immediate success, with four existing building workers' unions immediately joining. During the next few months, the BWIU grew steadily, especially in Liverpool and London, where syndicalist presence among building workers was already strong. The growth of the BWIU was only halted by the outbreak of the First World War.

Irish Syndicalism

In Ireland, as in Britain, the influence of syndicalism had grown since the turn of the century. Activists who had clear syndicalist leanings were household names by 1912, including Jim Larkin and his sister Delia, who was particularly active in the women workers' movement, and James Connolly. However, it must be noted that special conditions had developed in Ireland through the merciless oppression of Irish people by the British state, and that republicanism was therefore a dominant political current at the time. In addition, most prominent activists never broke completely with the idea of parliamentary action and a socialist party. Connelly was influenced by the ideas of de Leon (see Unit 5), and was instrumental in the formation of the Socialist Labour Party. Nevertheless, syndicalism was a major force in Ireland, and this force was felt in full during the Dublin Lock-Out of 1913-14.

The episode started when, in a bid to crush the growing militancy of the Irish Transport & General Workers' Union (ITGWU), 25,000 workers were locked out by management. As in Britain, the events were marked by brutal repression. At a demonstration following the arrest of Jim Larkin by the increasingly panicked state forces, police clubbed two workers to death and left over 400 injured.

In Britain, while the official union movement limited their solidarity to sending money, the rank and file members were prepared to go much further. In September 1913, over 10,000 railworkers were involved in the blockading of Irish goods in support of the Irish workers. This action was entirely unofficial, being organised by local strike committees, and almost became a national sympathy strike after the employers sacked local activists for refusing to work normally. This led to a rapid spread of local strikes in protest at the sackings.

A return to work was secured by the union leaders, with vague promises of a renewal of action to be organised by the union. However, this never occurred, and further isolated sympathetic actions continued over the next few months. In South Wales, there was a mass walk-out of rail workers after two drivers were sacked for refusing to handle Irish goods. In many areas, union leaders were struggling to keep workers from going out in support of their Irish comrades. Harry Orwell, a dockers' union official, declared:

"We have had to rearrange the whole of our paid officials in London, placing them in certain centres with the express purpose of preventing any disorganised move. It has been with the greatest trouble, and some of us have received strong words, that we have so far held the men in check."

Larkin embarked on a speaking tour in Britain, and 24,000 people in Manchester turned out to hear him speak. Similar numbers heard him speak alongside Connelly and the American Syndicalist Bill Haywood with over 7,000 turning out in Edinburgh, and a further 4,000 in Glasgow. These numbers demonstrate both the support for the Irish workers and the significance of the syndicalist movement in Scotland at the time. As Larkin's tour gathered momentum, his message become more explicit. In the past, he had limited himself to attacking the conciliatory trade unions and union leaders and calling for the organisation of "One Big Union" in order *"to use our economic power for our salvation".* At a meeting in Sheffield, chaired by Barton, a local syndicalist, his message that workers should *"arm themselves"* was met with sound applause. He also began to stress that working class organisation should have a strong social dimension.

At a special TUC conference called to discuss the dispute in Ireland the TUC leaders overwhelmingly cast their unions' votes against sympathetic action despite the support from the rank and file. In January 1914, with strikers beginning to return to work, Larkin, with no official support from Britain, was forced to declare the dispute lost. However, the ITGWU continued to grow, and the strike had radicalised the Irish workers' movement towards syndicalism. The 1914 Irish Congress of Trade Unions, chaired by Larkin, voted for the abolition of the capitalist system and supported specific plans for militant action. Though it did not rule out parliamentary action, it maintained that industrial organisation was a necessary pre-condition for effective political action, a position very near to both Connelly and Larkin's proposals.

The First World War

The growing popularity and gathering organisational momentum of syndicalism was ended by the outbreak of war in 1914. Just prior to the war, the British economy was entering a downturn that was already forcing wages down and seeing a rise in unemployment. At the same time, the new excessively brutal state policy towards the syndicalist movement was causing heightened working class resentment and swelling the syndicalist organisations. In 1920, Ernest Bevin recalled the pre-war period:

"It was a period which, if the war had not broken out would have, I believe, seen one of the greatest industrial revolts the world ever had seen."

The wider issue of the political manoeuvring that led to the outbreak of war is outside the scope of this Unit but the timing dealt a crushing blow to workers' unrest across Europe. In the event, it had the desired effect. The forces of the state and the mass hysteria that greeted the outbreak of the war stopped the syndicalist movement in its tracks.

British syndicalists as a whole opposed the war from the outset. For this, they faced constant harassment from the police and organised mobs, which broke up syndicalist meetings. Prominent organisers were often the first to be forcibly enlisted and disappeared or were killed in action. By 1916-17, however, war weariness was growing and militancy was again on the rise. At the same time, the Russian revolution appeared to offer a major breakthrough for the workers of the world. Many syndicalists were drawn to Marxist-Leninism, and this damaged any real hope of a revival of syndicalism or anarcho-syndicalism after the war. The central ideas of syndicalism, such as direct action and workers' control, did not sink without trace. In fact, they continued to play a role in revolutionary thinking after the war, as we shall see in later units.

Conclusion

The Industrial Syndicalist Education League, set up in January 1911, played a major role in shaping working class resistance to capitalism in Britain over a period of several years. The ISEL was certainly not an anarcho-syndicalist organisation, but its core argument was that workers had to organise into industrial fighting unions based on the methods of direct action. In the face of state oppression, British syndicalism grew rapidly into a mass workers' movement, which took on an increasingly revolutionary anarchist nature, and was only stopped by the outbreak of the First World War.

Many of the criticisms levelled at this crucial chapter in British labour history are ill founded. Far from being concerned only with pay and conditions, it always contained and maintained a strong and overt revolutionary message. It was acutely aware of the need for politics and theory as a basis for effective strategy and action, and it rapidly developed a sophisticated analysis of the state, becoming increasingly anarchist as a result. With hindsight, this episode of British syndicalism was a crucial forerunner of anarcho-syndicalism, not least because it indicated the importance of community-based organisation alongside workplace organisation. This development, however, was not to occur until well after the First World War, and it did not surface in Britain.

Key points

- The launch of the *Industrial Syndicalist* in 1910 and the formation of the ISEL in 1911 brought together the British syndicalist movement for the first time
- The ISEL grew through adopting the tactic of ‘boring from within’ rather the dual unionist strategy in regard to the existing trade unions
- Industrial unrest had begun to grow in 1908 and exploded during the years 1910 – 1914
- At key points during this period the actions of the union leadership often undermined the effectiveness of strikes and workers’ solidarity
- Anger at falling wages and disillusionment with the union leaders proved a fertile ground for syndicalist ideas
- Syndicalism was based on the day-to-day struggle of the workers and not based on an amorphous theoretical model
- Industrial unrest was marked by a high degree of class conflict and widespread solidarity in industries and in the communities
- The outbreak of war in 1914 broke the momentum of syndicalism.

Checklist

1. What were the differences between ‘boring from within’ and ‘dual unionist’ approaches?
2. Why did the ISEL prove more successful than previous syndicalist organisation?
3. In what ways did the development of Irish syndicalism differ from that in Britain?
4. What were the main features of the industrial unrest of 1910-1914?
5. In which ways did the split within the ISEL affect British syndicalism?
6. What are the main reasons for the decline of British syndicalism at the end of the period 1910-1914?

Answer suggestions

1. *What were the differences between 'boring from within' and 'dual unionist' approaches?*

'Boring from within' was an approach whereby syndicalists worked within existing unions in order to change their structures and practices through participation and example. 'Dual unionists' argued that the existing unions could not be reformed and therefore separate revolutionary unions should be set up as alternatives.

2. *Why did the ISEL prove more successful than previous syndicalist organisation?*

The ISEL brought together the majority of British syndicalists and rank and file union militants in one organisation and was seen as an integral part of union activity. This strengthened solidarity amongst and between syndicalists and union members.

3. *In what ways did the development of Irish syndicalism differ from that in Britain?*

Irish syndicalism developed alongside Irish republicanism and was more heavily influenced by the ideas of Daniel de Leon. For these reasons it never fully broke away from the idea of parliamentary action.

4. *What were the main features of the industrial unrest of 1910-1914?*

The industrial unrest of this period was marked by a high level of solidarity, community involvement in strikes and sabotage. It was also marked by state repression in the form of violence and coercion. During this period, British syndicalist speakers travelled around the country, speaking to encourage strikers and sympathisers and spreading the ideas of syndicalism.

5. *In which ways did the split in the ISEL affect British syndicalism?*

The split in 1913 saw a minority of ISEL members turning to dual unionism due to their frustration with union leaders. This saw the majority form the Industrial Democracy League and continue the policy of 'boring from within'. After a short hiatus, British syndicalism continued its growth in numbers and influence.

6. *What are the main reasons for the decline of British syndicalism at the end of the period 1910-1914?*

The outbreak of the First World War resulted in heightened state repression of anti-war organisations, amongst which was British syndicalism. Later the influence of the Russian revolution diverted the attentions and energies of many syndicalists. World War I provided the British government with an opportunity to get rid of prominent syndicalists, many of whom were forcibly enlisted, then 'disappeared', or were killed at the front.

Some discussion points

- Are the approaches of ‘dual unionism’ and ‘boring from within’ still relevant for the twenty-first century?
- What do you think were the major weaknesses in the British syndicalist movement of this period and what lessons can we take from these today?
- Was British syndicalism, as suggested by many historians, lacking in a theoretical basis?
- It has been argued that a syndicalist inspired general strike would have occurred had it not been for the outbreak of WW1. What are the difficulties of speculating on what might have happened?

Further Reading

Many of the further reading sources quoted in Unit 5 also cover the period and events discussed in this Unit. Therefore, refer generally to these in addition to the more Unit 6-specific sources quoted below.

John Laurent (ed.). Tom Mann’s Social and Economic Writings. Spokesman. ISBN 0851 244688. £7.95 -AK-

A collection of Mann’s writings showing his political development from the emergent socialist movement in the 1880s, his time in Australia, and through ‘new’ unionism to Syndicalism, up to around 1915-16. Includes ‘The 8-Hour Day’.

John Quail. The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists. Paladin. ISBN 0586082255. -LI-

The only book of its kind - British Anarchism from an Anarchist point of view, now sadly out of print. If you can find a copy, see especially chapter 14 ‘The Insurgent Virus’.

Wilf McCartney. Dare To Be A Daniel: A History Of One Of Britain’s Earliest Syndicalist Unions. KSL pamphlets. £1.00 -AK-

Memoirs of an activist in the, pre-First World War, Cooks Syndicate. 38 strikes fought, 38 won! Here is a little gem, an easily read pamphlet which gives a case study commentary on an episode of struggle and the ‘down-tools’ methods that were found to be so successful.

Ken Weller. Don’t Be a Soldier! The Radical Anti-War Movement in North London 1914-1918. Journeyman/LHWC, ISBN 0904 526569. £4.95 -AK- -LI- -BS-

Shows that, despite myths of the middle-class commentators, the real anti-war movement had its roots in a ‘rebel milieu’ of syndicalists and the radical wing of the women’s movement.

Mark Shipway. Anti-Parliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers’ Councils in Britain, 1917-45. Macmillan Press. ISBN 0333 43613X. -BS- -LI-

Written from a ‘councillist’ point of view so not overly sympathetic to Syndicalism, but full of unique and fascinating detail.

(Cont’d..)

IRELAND

James Connolly. The Lost Writings. Pluto Press. ISBN 0745 312969. £13.99 -AK-

Over 100 of Connolly's essays and articles from Irish and political journals, including many from his more syndicalist period.

James Connolly. Labour in Irish History. Bookmarks. ISBN 0906 024322. -LI-

Useful provided you ignore the Introduction, which attempts to crowbar Connolly into an SWP view of the world.

Conor Kostick. Revolution in Ireland: Popular Militancy 1917-1923. Pluto. ISBN 0745 311237. £13.99 -AK-

Described by Organise!-IWA as "a recommended antidote to the more common nationalist histories". It is however marred by the tendency to claim that, if only a revolutionary (sic) party (like the author's own SWP!) had been around at the time, then history would have been so much better.

For more on Syndicalism in Ireland (rather than the influence on Britain, as discussed in this Unit) write to Syndicalist Solidarity Network, PO Box 505, Belfast, BT12 6BQ.

Notes: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).