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Syndicalist unions in Siberia

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Internationally there is a long and close historical relationship between anarchism and what in English is often referred to as syndicalism or revolutionary unionism. Such unions have no bureaucracy, all decisions being made by their membership and include among their aims the abolition of capitalism and its replacement with libertarian communism. Recently we received details of one of the newer syndicalist unions, the Siberian Confederation of Labour (SKT).

Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism were reborn in the USSR in the opening created by Gorbachev's 'glasnost' in the late 1980's. Lenin and the Bolsheviks physically destroyed the previous movements of the 1917 to 21 period. Not only were the anarchist organisations and papers suppressed but also tens of thousands of activists were jailed or even executed.

On May 1st 1989 the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (KAS) was founded. This body took the same name as the mass anarcho-syndicalist union (it probably had over 50,000 members) that had been suppressed by the Bolsheviks in 1918. The founding

meeting of this new organisation included delegates from the Siberian towns of Tomsk and Irkutsk..

In the difficult conditions of the early 1990's KAS quite rapidly split into a number of different anarchist organisations. At the fourth conference of KAS the Siberian anarcho-syndicalists proposed the creation of KAS unions and by 1994 they had themselves created regional unions in the cities of Omsk, Seversk and Tomsk. In 1995 a conference of the SKT was held in Tomsk leading to the regular production of Dielo Truda (again the name of an anarchist paper suppressed by the Bolsheviks) and Rabochy.

1998 saw the blockade of railway lines by workers across Russia (often demanding the payment of wages) with some participants affiliated to the SKT. In January of 2000 the union centre 'Trud' of Novosibirsk, the confederation of labour of Kusbas and the union of the aluminium factory in the town of Sayanogorsk also affiliated to the SKT.

Today the SKT has a total membership of 6,000 with the largest union being the OKT in Omsk. This has ten local unions each with between a handful and 400 members. They organise air traffic controllers, rail workers, technicians, electricians and others. Members of sections in other towns include teachers, miners, broadcasting staff and chemical workers.

On the 30th September 2000 the SKT held a conference in Omsk at which it adopted a new charter. This included traditional elements of syndicalism such as direct democracy and independence from political parties. A draft of political goals included workers self-management and they adopted the red and black flag as their union banner.

The SKT also attended the protests in Gothenburg in June against the EU summit there. They took part in the international program organised by the Swedish anarcho-syndicalist SAC union with union activists and political activists from Nepal, Bangladesh, Chile and South Africa .

According to Alexander from SKT the most important thing at the moment is to fight against the extremely low wages and to fight for wages being paid at all and the defence of the worker's rights.

Over the last two years SKT has successfully stopped a law that would drastically decrease workers rights in the whole of the Russian Federation. According to Alexander the independent unions play an important role since only they have the guts to oppose the corruption in society. The traditional unions have become a part of the establishment.

The existence of syndicalist unions like the SKT demonstrate that we can run our unions without the sort of bureaucratic structures that are currently typical of Irish Trade unions. While most of the left in Ireland sees struggle in the unions as being about getting their members elected to key positions we do not. Instead we want to contribute to building a rank and file movement that can force through the sort of democratic reforms needed to transform our unions into ones with the democratic structures and radical program of unions like the SKT. Such syndicalist unions would then have a major part to play in the revolutionary transformation of society.