

Italian Syndicalism and Fascism

Iain McKay

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According to Bob Black (in **Anarchy after Leftism**, page 64), the “*Italian syndicalists mostly went over to Fascism*” and references David D. Roberts 1979 study **The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism** to support his claim. Peter Sabatini in a review in **Social Anarchism** makes a similar statement, saying that syndicalism’s “*ultimate failure*” was “*its transformation into a vehicle of fascism.*” [**Social Anarchism**, no. 23, page 99] What is the truth behind these claims?

Looking at Black’s reference we discover that, in fact, most of the Italian syndicalists did **not** go over to fascism, if by syndicalists we mean members of the USI (the Italian Syndicalist Union). Roberts states that:

“The vast majority of the organised workers failed to respond to the syndicalists’ appeals and continued to oppose [Italian] intervention [in the First World War], shunning what seemed to be a futile capitalist war. The syndicalists failed to convince even a majority within the USI ... the majority opted for the neutralism of Armando Borghi, leader of the anarchists within the USI. Schism followed as De Ambris led the interventionist minority out of the confederation.” [page 113]

However, if we take “*syndicalist*” to mean the intellectuals and “leaders” of the pre-war movement, it **was** a case that the “*leading syndicalists came out for intervention quickly and almost unanimously*” [page 106] after the First World War started. Some of these pro-war “leading syndicalists” **did** become fascists. To concentrate on a handful of “leaders” (which the majority did not even follow!) and state that this shows that the “*Italian syndicalists mostly went over to Fascism*” staggers belief. What is even worse, as we will show below, the Italian anarchists and syndicalists were the most dedicated and successful fighters against fascism. In effect, Black and Sabatini have slandered a whole movement.

What is also interesting is that these “*leading syndicalists*” were **not** anarchists and so **not** anarcho-syndicalists. As Roberts notes on page 79, the “*syndicalists genuinely desired — and tried — to work within the Marxist tradition.*” According to Carl Levy, in his account of Italian anarchism, “[u]nlike other syndicalist movements, the Italian variation coalesced inside a Second International party. Supporters were partially drawn from socialist intransigents ... the southern syndicalist intellectuals pronounced republicanism ... Another component ... was the remnant of the Partito Operaio.” [“*Italian Anarchism: 1870–1926*” in **For Anarchism: History, Theory, and Practice**, page 51]

In other words, the Italian syndicalists who turned to fascism were, firstly, a small minority of intellectuals who could not convince the majority within the syndicalist union to follow them, and, secondly, Marxists and republicans rather than anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists or even revolutionary syndicalists. Anyone familiar with the history of syndicalism knows that not all syndicalists have been anarchists. There have been Marxist syndicalists too (such as Daniel DeLeon and Bill Haywood in America

and James Connelly in Ireland) as well as revolutionary syndicalists who considered revolutionary unionism as a theory in itself. Anarchist supporters of syndicalism are **anarcho**-syndicalists and it is hardly fair to use **Marxist**-syndicalists to discredit “syndicalism” (given that the syndicalism in question is anarcho-syndicalism).

According to Carl Levy, Roberts’ book “*concentrates on the syndicalist intelligentsia*” and that “*some syndicalist intellectuals ... helped generate, or sympathetically endorsed, the new Nationalist movement ... which bore similarities to the populist and republican rhetoric of the southern syndicalist intellectuals.*” He argues that there “*has been far too much emphasis on syndicalist intellectuals and national organisers*” and that syndicalism “*relied little on its national leadership for its long-term vitality.*” [Op. Cit., pages 77, 53 and 51] If we **do** look at the membership of the USI, rather than finding a group which “*mostly went over to fascism,*” we discover a group of people who fought fascism tooth and nail and were subject to extensive fascist violence.

Red Years

To understand the rise of fascism we must look at the near revolution which occurred in Italy after the end of the First World War. In August, 1920, there were large-scale stay-in strikes in Italy in response to an owner wage cut and lockout. These strikes began in the engineering factories and soon spread to railways, road transport, and other industries, with peasants seizing land. The strikers, however, did more than just occupy their workplaces, they placed them under workers’ self-management. Soon 500,000 “*strikers*” were at work, producing for themselves. Errico Malatesta, who took part in these events, writes:

“workers thought that the moment was ripe to take possession once [and] for all the means of production. They armed for self-defence... and began to organise production on their own... It was the right of property abolished in fact... it was a new regime, a new form of social life that was being ushered in. And the government stood by because it felt impotent to offer opposition.” [Life and Ideas, page 134]

During this period the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) grew in size to nearly one million members and the influence of the Italian Anarchist Union (UAI) with its 20,000 members grew correspondingly. As the Welsh Marxist historian Gwyn A. Williams points out “*Anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists were the most consistently and totally revolutionary group on the left...the most obvious feature of the history of syndicalism and anarchism in 1919–20: rapid and virtually continuous growth...The syndicalists above all captured militant working-class opinion which the socialist movement was utterly failing to capture.*” [Proletarian Order, pages 194–195]

Daniel Guerin provides a good summary of the extent of the movement:

“the management of the factories...[was] conducted by technical and administrative workers’ committees. Self-management went quite a long way...the self-management system issued its own money... Very strict self-discipline was required... [and] very close solidarity was established between factories... [where] ores and coal were put into a common pool, and shared equitably” [Anarchism, page 109]

Over the occupied factories, flew “a forest of red and black flags” as “the council movement outside Turin was essentially anarcho-sindicalist.” Railway workers refused to transport troops, workers broke into strikes against the orders of the reformist unions and peasants occupied the land. Such activity was “either directly led or indirectly inspired by anarcho-sindicalists.” [Williams, Op. Cit., pages 241 and 193]

However, after four weeks of occupation, the workers decided to leave the factories. This was because of the actions of the Socialist party and the reformist trade unions. They opposed the movement and negotiated with the state for a return to “normality” in exchange for a promise to extend workers’ control legally, in association with the bosses. This promise was not kept. The lack of independent inter-factory organisation made workers dependent on trade union bureaucrats for information on what was going on in other cities, and they used that power to isolate factories, cities, and factories from each other. This led to a return to work, “in spite of the opposition of individual anarchists dispersed among the factories” [Malatesta, Op. Cit. p. 136]. The local syndicalist union confederations could not provide the necessary framework for a fully co-ordinated occupation movement, as the reformist unions refused to work with them; and although the anarchists were a large minority, they were still a minority.

Black Years

This period of Italian history explains the growth of Fascism in Italy. As Tobias Abse points out, “the rise of fascism in Italy cannot be detached from the events of the **biennio rosso**, the two red years of 1919 and 1920, that preceded it. Fascism was a preventive counter-revolution ... launched as a result of the failed revolution... made up of cost-of-living riots, strikes, land seizures and factory occupations that followed the Armistice.” [“The Rise of Fascism in an Industrial City”, page 54, in **Rethinking Italian Fascism**] The term “preventive counter-revolution” was originally coined by the anarchist Luigi Fabri.

As Malatesta argued at the time of the factory occupations, “[i]f we do not carry on to the end, we will pay with tears of blood for the fear we now instil in the bourgeoisie.” Later events proved him right, as the capitalists and rich landowners backed the fascists in order to teach the working class their place. Tobias Abse correctly argues that the “aims of the Fascists and their backers amongst the industrialists and agrarians in 1921–22 were simple: to break the power of the organised workers and peasants as

*completely as possible, to wipe out, with the bullet and the club, not only the gains of the **biennio rosso**, but everything that the lower classes had gained ... between the turn of the century and the outbreak of the First World War.*” [Op. Cit., p. 54] This attack on organised labour involved the destruction of USI affiliated *Camera del Lavoro* (local trade union councils) along with those of the social democratic trade union. Given this violence and that the USI had nearly one million members, if we accept Bob Black’s claims that *“Italian syndicalists mostly went over to Fascism”* then, logically, we must draw the conclusion that the Fascist violence was (in part) being directed by the syndicalists against themselves! Of course, this was not the case.

In fact, rather than becoming fascists we discover that the USI was at the forefront of the struggle against Fascism. Even in the dark days of fascist terror, the anarchists resisted the forces of totalitarianism. *“It is no coincidence that the strongest working-class resistance to Fascism was in ... towns or cities in which there was quite a strong anarchist, syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist tradition”* [Tobias Abse, Op. Cit., page 56].

Arditi del Popolo

The anarchists participated in, and often organised sections of, the **Arditi del Popolo**, a working-class organisation devoted to the self-defence of workers’ interests. The **Arditi del Popolo** organised and encouraged working-class resistance to fascist squads, often defeating larger fascist forces (for example, *“the total humiliation of thousands of Italo Balbo’s **squadristi** by a couple of hundred Arditi del Popolo backed by the inhabitants of the working class districts”* in the anarchist stronghold of Parma in August 1922 [Tobias Abse, Op. Cit., page 56]).

The Arditi was the closest Italy got to the idea of a united, revolutionary working-class front against fascism, as had been suggested by Malatesta. This movement *“developed along anti-bourgeois and anti-fascist lines, and was marked by the independence of its local sections.”* [**Red Years, Black Years**, page 2] Rather than being just an “anti-fascist” organisation, the Arditi *“were not a movement in defence of ‘democracy’ in the abstract, but an essentially working-class organisation devoted to the defence of the interests of industrial workers, the dockers and large numbers of artisans and craftsmen.”* [Tobias Abse, Op. Cit., page 75]

However, both the socialist and communist parties withdrew from the organisation, The socialists signing a “Pact of Pacification” with the Fascists in August 1921. The communists *“preferred to withdraw their members from the Arditi del Popolo rather than let them work with the anarchists.”* [**Red Years, Black Years**, page 17] As Abse notes, *“it was the withdrawal of support by the Socialist and Communist parties at the national level that crippled”* the Arditi [Op. Cit., page 74]. The leaders of the authoritarian socialists preferred defeat and fascism than risk their followers becoming “infected” by anarchism. Thus *“social reformist defeatism and communist sectarianism*

made impossible an armed opposition that was widespread and therefore effective; and the isolated instances of popular resistance were unable to unite in a successful strategy.” [Red Years, Black Years, page 3] Therefore:

“The anarchists’ will and courage were not enough to counter the fascist gangs, powerfully aided with material and arms, backed by the repressive organs of the state. Anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists were decisive in some areas and in some industries, but only a similar choice of direct action on the parts of the Socialist Party and the General Confederation of Labour [the reformist trade union] could have halted fascism.” [Red Years, Black Years, pages 1–2]

After helping to defeat the revolution, the Marxists helped ensure the victory of fascism.

Syndicalism and Italian Fascism

As can be seen, far from “*mostly*” going over to fascism, the Italian Syndicalist Union (and so the vast majority of self-proclaimed syndicalists) was at the forefront of resisting fascism and experiencing fascist violence. Bob Black’s reference to support his claim is discovered to be lacking in substance, referring as it does to a few pre-war Marxist-syndicalist intellectuals and “leaders” who could not convince the majority in their own organisation of their new found nationalism and left it. Far from showing that the “*Italian syndicalists mostly went over to Fascism,*” it, in fact, shows the opposite — the syndicalists who later became fascists could not convince the majority of the USI of their ideas. The USI, rather than embrace nationalism, remained true to its syndicalist principles and resisted fascism. Like the anarchists, the syndicalist organisation experienced repression and, ultimately, destruction, at the hands of the Fascist gangs. Hardly what would be expected if they “*mostly went over to Fascism.*”

Rather than show a failure of revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalism, the events in Italy provide yet more evidence of the failure of Marxism as a revolutionary theory. Not only were the syndicalists who became fascists mostly Marxists, the Socialist and Communist Parties helped defeat both the revolution and the resistance to fascism. Unfortunately, rather than look at the actual history of the rise of Italian Fascism and its relation to syndicalism, Bob Black (and others) seem intent on slandering a whole movement based on the actions of a handful of so-called “leaders.”

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Bob Black's Response

Dear BF

Your anonymous writer faults me for observing in Anarchy after Leftism that *"the Italian syndicalists mostly went over to Fascism"*, referencing David D Roberts, *The Syndicalist Tradition and Italian Fascism*. As proof, he quotes Roberts as writing that *"the vast majority of the organised workers failed to respond to the syndicalists' appeals and continued to oppose intervention"* in the First World War. Obviously this statement does not contradict mine. It is about war, not fascism. The war was over before the fascist movement began. And it is about the "organised workers", not about the members of the USI, which had only 100,000 members in 1914, and lost some of them when the interventionists split.

Contrary to Comrade Anonymous, the split was not between a cabal of intellectuals and "leaders" — in quotation marks, as if to imply that they were not what they really were, the syndicalist leaders — and the rank and file. True eggheads and officials split, but they were not alone: *"The split was complex, penetrating to the rank and file level and even dividing individual unions, but the result was a further loss in working class support for the syndicalists."* (Roberts, p.113). You may not like what Roberts has to say, but I didn't misrepresent his position. Denounce him, not me.

Even if Comrade A. were right, what does this fiasco say about syndicalism? Syndies assure us that their cumbersome hierarchies of bottom-up organising and accountability to the base are both the means to and the forms of a free society. Yet the Italian leaders and thinkers were almost all for a war which, the Comrade implies, almost all the rank and file were against. Syndical organisation is thus a self-refuting failure.

Comrade A. also asserts *"that these 'leading syndicalists'"* — he ignores the follower syndicalists — *"were not anarchists and so not anarcho-syndicalists."* When did I ever say they were? But this is quite a change in the *Black Flag* party line. Two years ago you opined, *"In reality there is not such thing as just 'syndicalism' and anarcho-syndicalism and revolutionary syndicalism are the same thing"* ("What is Anarcho-Syndicalism?" spring 1997). If this is so, then no doubt remains that the *"Italian syndicalists mostly went over to fascism."*

The article is almost entirely an exercise in irrelevance. I was not referring to the official positions taken by one small organisation in 1915 or 1919, but rather to the ultimate political trajectory of those Italians who had once considered themselves syndicalists. A modest but militant minority did put up a fight against fascism so long as that was possible. But many accommodated themselves to the fascist version of the corporatism espoused by all syndicalists. There was more to it than opportunism:

syndicalism and nationalism (and then fascism) had been converging since before the war. Roberts makes this clear, but consider another opinion from another historian, A. James Gregor, *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship*, p. 108:

“Thus, by 1919, Italian nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism shared substantial similarities” such as “their doctrinal emphases on mass mobilisation, mimetic example, elite rule, mythic suasion, and collective development and modernisation... To these ends, both nationalism and revolutionary national syndicalism advocated an ethic of discipline, sacrifice and labour for a nation still caught up in the psychology of underdevelopment.” In other words, fascists shared with syndicalists then what they share with syndicalists — including anarcho-syndicalists — to this day: a dedication to work and workerism, productivism, industrialism, and sacrificial moralism. We post-leftist anarchists reject this heritage.

yours in slack

Bob Black

A reply to the reply

Comrade A replies-

Is Comrade B taking the piss? He claims “it is about war, not fascism” and so his comments concerning the “*syndicalists*” are correct. Given that the pro-war syndicalists were the ones to become National Syndicalists and fascists, his point is lost on me. Surely if the majority of syndicalists (i.e. members of the USI) in Italy had gone over to fascism (and its ‘National Syndicalism’) then they would have supported the Nation in World War One? In fact the majority of USI members rejected the arguments of those syndicalists who were later to become fascists in 1914 — Comrade B’s argument simply does not hold water. If, as he says, “syndicalism and nationalism (and then fascism) had been converging before the war” then the majority of USI members were not aware of this when they voted for an anti-war position (and so anti-nationalist) at the start of the First World War. Nor were the fascists when they attacked the USI after the war.

The article did indicate that most USI members rejected the pro-war syndicalists — “the majority did not even follow” the syndicalist “leaders” in supporting the war. Comrade B wonders “what does this fiasco say about syndicalism”? I have to wonder what planet Comrade B is on. The organisation voted in its national congress an anti-war position and the pro-war minority left. Rather than being a “self-refuting failure” this example shows Comrade B’s arguments to be self refuting — and that he cannot get basic facts right.

Moving on, Comrade B takes issue with the suggestion that he implied that syndicalists he mentions were anarchists. Here he is taking the piss. After all, his comments are in a book about anarchism and the failings of “Leftist” anarchy. Is it not safe to assume that he was discussing the failings of anarchists rather than “Leftists” (i.e. Marxists)? Perhaps I am wrong, perhaps in order to refute Anarcho-syndicalists you must discuss the failures of Marxist-syndicalists? What next, a refutation of communist anarchism by discussing the failures of Leninism?

Comrade B states that a “modest but militant minority did put up a fight against fascism”. In fact, the USI (which had grown from the 70,000 left after the pro-war factions left to nearly 1 million members) was the majority syndicalist organisation in the country (the pro-war, National Syndicalist Union AIL was a fraction of its size). It was USI members who took part in the Arditi Del Popolo. It was the USI which took part in the general strike against fascism. It was the USI which was crushed by fascist gangs. And Comrade B still claims that the “Italian syndicalists mostly went over to fascism”. Amazing.

He quotes another academic that by 1919 “Italian nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism shared substantial similarities”. Yes, but only if you look at the pro-war syndicalists who had left the USI years before (hence Gregor’s reference to national syndicalists)! What did the USI stand for by 1919? It had taken an anti-war position, supported the class struggle and taken a leading role in the strikes and occupations of the post-war period. For this the USI was attacked and crushed by the fascists. So much for “similarities” between the USI (i.e. revolutionary syndicalism) and Italian Nationalism (and so fascism).

Comrade B ends with a diatribe against “syndicalism” (including anarcho-syndicalism) and what they apparently believe in. I do not (and none of the anarcho-syndicalists I have met) subscribe to his list. Perhaps Comrade B confuses a desire to see the end of wage-labour by self-management with a glorification of work? If so, then that is his business. Personally I agree with Kropotkin on the necessity of attractive “work” (i.e. productive activity) and reducing the hours we have to do this to a minimum. Every anarcho-syndicalist I have met shares this vision of work transformed into attractive, productive activity and minimised — and the first step towards this is occupying the workplace and placing it under self-management (where appropriate, of course, many workplaces should be turned into something more useful). I get the impression that Comrade B thinks that nobody reads his works, otherwise he would not suggest other anarchists glorify work and not be aware of the importance of his arguments in “The Abolition of Work”. It is a shame he underestimates his influence in our movement so.

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