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SYNDICALISM —IN ACTION—

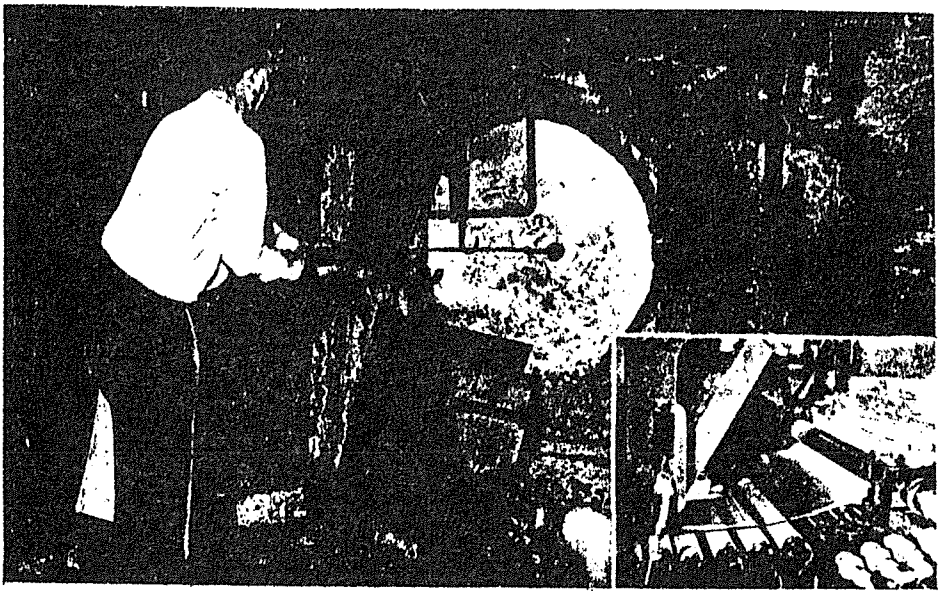
How the Italian Glassblowers
became their own Employers

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By **ODON POR**

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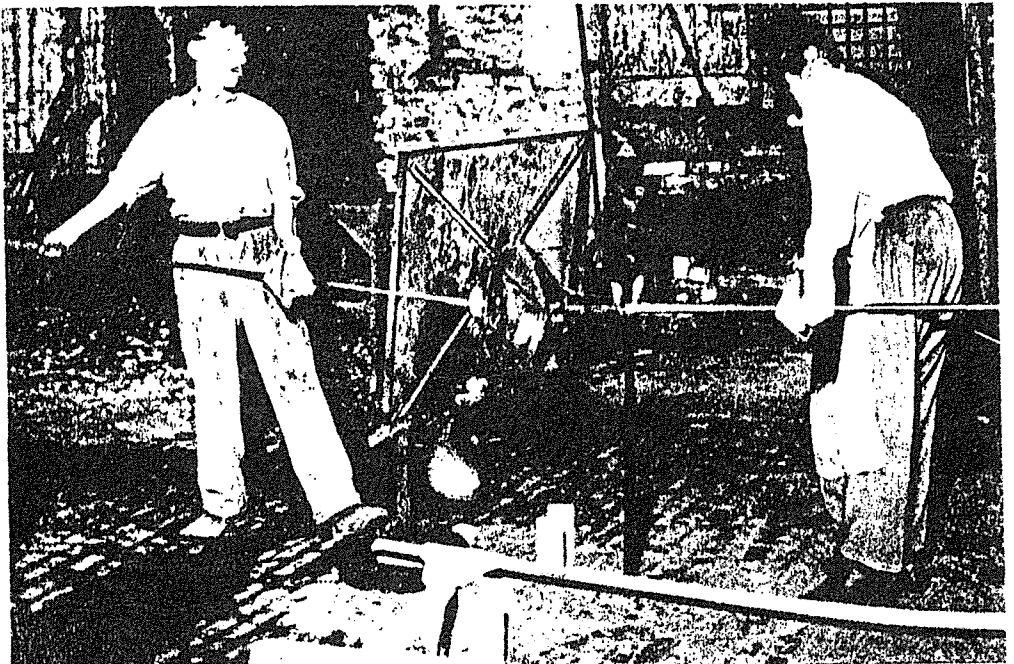
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THE CRAFTSMAN'S MAGIC

Chance

The flattened bubble is inserted into the furnace again and spun, and as it spins it flattens out into a large thin disc. *Inset:* Modern methods of glass making are on a larger scale. Here is a strip of sheet glass emerging from the furnace into rollers.



AN ONION-SHAPED BUBBLE OF GLASS

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This account of the Italian glass-blowers' movement was written in 1910 by an early Syndicalist organiser named Odon Por and issued by "Wilshire's Magazine". It is an optimistic but fascinating glimpse into early Italian Syndicalism which between 1900 and 1920 grew to the point where it challenged capitalism and though subsequently militarily defeated by armed landowners and mercenaries organised into Blackshirt militia backed by the State, built pockets of resistance that were never wholly defeated during the long cold night of Mussolini.

"The Syndicalist movement imbued the glass-blowers with that higher sense of solidarity that calls for some productive work; their professional organisation, on the other hand, gave a definite form to their work, and made them capable of realising their productive aim. In their struggle against their enemies the higher sentiments of sacrifice got the upper hand, subduing all egoistic tendencies".

Though not all concerned were Anarchists, the account forms an integral part of our series of Pages from

Anarchist History series of the Kate Sharpley Library. The Library and Archive exists to preserve and illuminate aspects of anarchist history and thought, and by doing so challenge the "official" history of anarchism put forward by people allegedly within but almost invariably outside our movement.

We are available for consultation and host a massive collection of anarchist pamphlets, books, newspapers, magazines and documentation from all over the world, to be open to subscribers at a date to be arranged.

We are named after an anarchist militant who was active in the pre-WWI catering shopworkers fight and the anti-war struggle of 1914-18. She doesn't appear in any of the "official" histories yet as George Cores wrote (in the first booklet we reproduced), "most of the work which was done was due to the activities of working men and women, most of whom did not appear as orators or as writers in printed papers". This pamphlet is about a great many others.

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THE ITALIAN GLASS BLOWERS TAKEOVER OF 1910

How will Syndicalism expropriate, operate and perfect the Trusts? This is the most vital problem before us: all the others are conditioned by it and of secondary importance. To my own knowledge so far, however, there is but one movement that has as yet practically succeeded. This has arrayed the awakened professional consciousness and the moral and economic solidarity of a certain class of workers against the vast financial and political resources of Capital. It has destroyed the last remnants of the creed that Capitalism or the efficiency of the capitalists is essential to industrial progress, and has demonstrated that a working class, conscious of its industrial and social duties, is perfectly able to operate and perfect large industrial organisations, for the good of the collectivity. *Here is the story.*

Until 1900 the Italian bottle-blowers were united in a very primitive form of organisation, a species of Mutual Aid Society, admitting among its membership only the masters and the highest class workers in the bottle-blowing trade. Due to their weak resistance to capitalist exploitation, the economic condition of the bottle-blowers was most distressing. With their terribly exhausting work, in their 'race to death' to use their jargon - they earned hardly enough to keep them alive. The vigorous activity agitating the Italian proletariat in 1900 stirred also the bottle-blowers. The same

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year they organised many local unions and called into existence the Federation of the Italian Bottle-Blowers. About 1,000, or 90 per cent, of the Italian bottle-makers joined the Federation at once, and the funds of the Mutual Aid Society were transferred to its treasury.

The first convention of this Federation, in 1901, resolved to submit a collective contract to the employers. The chief demands were a universal wage scale involving sensibly higher wages than hitherto paid, the eight hours day, and the closed shop. The contract was to be between the Federation, representing the organised workers collectively, and the directors of the bottle works. The Federation was to become also a sort of employment agency for the federated workers.

The secretary of the Federation at once opened negotiations with the employers. Four factories united in the GlassTrust, with its home factory in Milan, and three independent factories accepted the collective tariff for the year 1901-1902. Another corporation "The Glass", with two factories, however, would not negotiate with the Federation, denying its rights to represent the bottle-workers. Its true reason for refusing to sign the collective contract was the fact that it was the only concern in Italy holding an option on the Boucher bottle-blowing machine, which promised a revolution in the bottle industry.

The Federation at once called a strike on The Glass, and the bottle-blowers were out of work, or more than a third of the members of the young organisation. The strike lasted three years. During this time the bottle-workers not only paid more than 500,000 lire over their regular strike assessments into the treasury of the Federation, but furthermore, by a special arrangement, they made places for a number of strikers at the furnaces of the Trust by reducing the normal and contract work day from eight hours to six, and decreasing by this their own wages by 25 per cent. The Trust agreed to this arrangement only on condition that the Federation kept on boycotting the Glass until it came to terms with the Trust. It was to the interest of the Trust to bring this concern to terms,

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especially because the option that it held on the patent blowing machine menaced the Trust very seriously.

The strike was waged with great steadfastness. In many places the strikers pushed their heroism so far that, faint with hunger, some even fell unconscious on the streets. The Trust, being materially interested in the strike, renewed its contract with the Federation for the years 1902-1903.

About the end of 1902 the Federation fell foul of the Trust by launching the idea of a co-operative bottle factory. The Federation figured that with a final and definite effort to raise money it could establish a co-operative factory that would give work to the strikers. The Trust laughed at this proposed experiment, but as soon as it became a reality they began to feel uneasy about it, and with the view of destroying the Federation they tried to provoke a strike in their own factories. By this time the Trust had lost all direct interest in the strike of the Federation against The Glass, for on the one side, it hoped to introduce the blowing machine in its own factories, and on the other, The Glass was ready to come to terms. The Federation wisely refused to be provoked to strike, having all its financial and moral resources engaged in giving birth to the co-operative, and knowing that it could not sustain another big strike. The Federation therefore signed a new contract with The Trust for the year 1903-1904, to the great disappointment of the latter, even though this contract secured less advantages to the federated workers than the agreements of the previous years.

All this time the strike against The Glass was still on, that corporation lost about half a million lire during the strike, because on the one hand, with the few Italian and foreign strike-breakers it could secure, it produced only inferior goods, and in small quantity, and on the other hand, the Boucher machine proved to be impractical. Finally, The Glass gave up the fight and merged its two plants with the Trust in the spring of 1904.

The Trust discharged the scabs in one factory and employed

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federated workers there, while it kept the scabs in the other factory, excusing itself to the Federation with the statement that The Glass had signed a contract with the scabs previous to its surrender to the Trust, The federated workers were victorious and the strike was called off.

Meanwhile, the first co-operative factory was opened, employing 150 strikers, and working at full blast. The young Federation came out of the struggle of three years tempered, reinforced, compact and ruling practically all bottle factories in Italy. Conscious of its strength, it imposed upon the Trust a new contract for the year 1904-1905, reaffirming its rights and demands.

Its aim was to provide work for the strikers. The money needed for the first plant was put up by the federated workers. Some sold their last belongings, some raised a loan on their little house or small patch of land, some took their last pennies out of the savings banks - all contributed in some way to the erection of the federal factory, The Co-operative bought an old bottle factory in Leghorn (Livorno), rebuilt and modernised it, and in October 1903, the fire in the first furnace was lit. Soon the need of a second furnace was felt. The strikers and the bottle-blowers, after their regular daily work, transformed themselves into masons, mechanics and helpers, and set to work on the construction of the second furnace. They worked day and night, hardly drawing any pay for their enthusiastic efforts, and finished the construction of the furnace in 47 days, which under normal circumstances takes at least six months of uninterrupted work, and all this was done by the sentiment of solidarity, without the urging of a capitalist employer and without professional technical aid.

The first business year of the Co-operative showed a net profit of 15,000 lire, surprising when we consider the difficulties which every new enterprise has to meet.

All seemed to be quiet now. The Trust, still incredulous as to the final success of the Co-operative, still indulged in its dream of

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concentrating the whole Italian glass industry under its own leadership. A rude shock awakened it. The Co-operative, instead of going bankrupt, set out to establish a great branch factory in Imola, the Socialist municipal council of which voted 100,000 lire to the Co-operative as a premium for establishing a bottle factory. The Trust got frightened. It at once changed its attitude with the intention of destroying the Federation and the Co-operative, First of all it refused to sign the collective tariff for the year 1905-1906, declaring that it would not renew the contract unless the Co-operative formally gave up its intention of erecting the new factory in Imola, and unless it ceased to interfere commercially with the Trust, Besides this direct declaration of war, the Trust, which had in its directorate two members of the Italian Parliament, tried to induce the Government to declare illegal the act of the Municipal Council of Imola. Neither the Federation nor the Co-operative nor Imola gave in, The Trust thereupon refused definitely to comply with the demands of the organised workers, who then called a boycott upon the Trust.

“Three cheers for Imola!” was the reply of the federated workers. They redoubled their efforts to make the factory in Imola ready and give work to the new masses of unemployed federated workers. Those who had not yet subscribed shares for the Co-operative factory in Imola hastened to do so. Those who had done so, doubled and trebled the sum. In Milan the bottle-blowers subscribed 11,000 lire, thus splendidly expressing their confidence in their leaders.

Through the boycott many bottle-blowers were out of work, and even the new factory in Imola was not big enough to employ them all. It was absolutely necessary to provide work for the unemployed comrades, and the best way seemed to be to erect a third factory. More money was put up to establish a factory near Milan, in Sesto-Calendo, where the bottle-blowers subscribed 30,000 lire for the Co-operative. This was not enough. A fourth factory was needed, and in order to supply the demand for more labour, the Co-operative leased another factory near Naples, and put it in working

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order within a few months.

The boycott on the Trust brought better results than were expected. A few Italian bottle-blowers went back on their organisation, and scabbed in the factories of the Trust, and despite its great efforts to secure foreign labour very few foreigners came to Italy to work. Of its eleven furnaces only three were working at the end of 1905, producing inferior goods that the market refused to buy. The Co-operative had four furnaces in operation turning out excellent goods and unable to fill the orders pouring in from all parts of Italy. At the end of the year the Co-operatives had all its four factories in operation, with six furnaces, working 24 hours a day, and closed its yearly business with a net profit of 45,000 lire. It employed now all the federated bottle-blowers striking, numbering about 1,500 men, while at the beginning it could place only 150 men; besides this number, 400 federated workers were working under the federal tariff in an independent capitalist factory.

Thus the beginning of 1906 marked a great victory for the bottle-blowers. The hard struggle that lasted five years brought its well-earned results. The Co-operative factories worked at full capacity, no federated worker remained unemployed, the material conditions of the co-operators improved very sensibly, and all this was accomplished without compromise, without bowing to the Trust, without asking aid of any other class of workers. The number of co-operators, which at the beginning was 100, reached about this time a thousand, and their capital had increased to half a million lire from 50,000 lire. The daily production, which at the beginning was five tons per day, increased to seventy tons, or in other words the Co-operative produced 90,000 bottles and seven-and-a-half railway carloads of demijohns per day, which was more than other Italian concern.

On the other hand the Trust operated but two factories with foreign and Italian scabs, reducing its normal production to one-half, and the goods produced in these plants were so under the standard of the Co-operative that many customers of the Trust went over to the

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enterprise of the workers. The Trust finally resorted to a most desperate move against the Co-operative, in initiating a bitter commercial fight. It cut prices 30 per cent, under the cost of production. In this battle the Trust lost a couple of million lire, while the Co-operative lost but a half million lire. The Trust, backed by the strongest bank of Italy, could easily afford such a sum for the realisation of its cherished scheme of finally getting control of the Italian bottle market.

But the Trust figured wrong once more. In this commercial struggle the technical superiority of the Co-operative factories earned a decisive victory over the unlimited capital at the disposal of the Trust. Capital was beaten decisively in this struggle, and was utterly helpless before the will of the organised workers operating their own factories. Each of the factories of the Co-operative produced a special type of bottles of such perfect quality that though it charged higher prices for them than the Trust, it sold every product before it was ready for shipment. The policy of price cutting proved a total failure. During this commercial struggle the Co-operative erected its fifth factory in Asti, the centre of a great wine district, adding another furnace to its enterprise, making a total of seven completely modern furnaces. The Trust abandoned its scheme of destroying the Co-operative by under-selling it, but still entertained the hope of re-establishing its power by introducing the newest bottle-blowing machine, invented by Owens, an American bottle-blower.

In 1906 the Co-operative employed 2,000 workers, who were all shareholders, and belonged to the Federation of the Italian Bottle-Blowers. Its capital was 750,000 lire and the plants represented an investment of two million lire. The production of the Co-operative embraced a little more than half of the national production, or about twenty-five million pieces of bottles per year, not counting the demijohns. The net profit for the year was 300,000 lire. The Trust and one independent factory produced the remaining smaller half of the national production.

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The Federation increased its membership very considerably, the number in 1906 being 2,000. Keeping pace with the general technical and industrial development, the Federation is gradually becoming an industrial union, and upon a recent referendum vote it decided to admit into its fold not only the glass-blowers, but also all workers engaged directly or indirectly in bottle-making like the workers at the gasometers, the carpenters, the mechanics and so on. About 1,500 scabs, organised in part in 'yellow unions' and in the employ of the Trusts, are now negotiating for admission to the Federation, realising that they cannot afford to keep out of this powerful organisation. The Federation, together with the Co-operative, has succeeded in uplifting the conditions of its workers to such a degree that the scabs have come to recognise their weakness in keeping out of these organisations, and intend now to join in the battle led by them, the clear-cut aim of which is to expropriate the Trust and the independent factories and put the whole Italian bottle industry into the hands of the bottle workers.

What is behind all these dry figures? What does the whole struggle mean, and what factors are responsible for its success?

Two factors especially contributed to the success of this struggle: one, the technical efficiency of the glass-blowers, their professional consciousness, and the other their moral solidarity. Both characteristics were evolved by their socialist training. The Syndicalist movement imbued the glass-blowers with that higher sense of solidarity that calls for some productive work; their professional organisation, on the other hand, gave a definite form to their work, and made them capable of realising their productive aim. In their struggle against their enemies the higher sentiments of sacrifice got the upper hand, subduing all egoistic tendencies. They forgot their immediate interests, and worked with all their manhood, careless of the tomorrow, for the liberation of their whole class from capitalist tyranny. They were dominated by the socialist vision, by that great sense of human fraternity, and proved by tangible facts their moral superiority. These sentiments were realised in a marvellous social discipline in the co-operative

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factories, a discipline that guaranteed a continuous process of production, and fired each worker to work at their best. In all five factories of the Co-operative there is not a single overseer, and the technical and business managers are all bottle-blowers.

The moral solidarity created by the struggle awakened the conscience of the workers in all directions. They gave up drinking, the classical glass-blower vice, thus creating peace within themselves and their families. They renounced their legitimate dividends, and turned over all the net profits of their Co-operative to mutual aid funds, and, as said before, they gave up their last pennies toward the establishment of the various branches of the Co-operative. Putting the question, "Do you ever hope to draw dividends?" to a gathering of a few shareholders, I got the unanimous answer: "Never!"

These workers have no intention whatever of becoming capitalists. They refuse to become parasites on the body of the whole working class. They want to free themselves from the capitalist yoke, and set an example to all other workers.

With the profits of their enterprise they aid the socialist movement and the socialist press. Another part of the profit goes to an old age, invalid and widow fund, and still another fund provides for the education and bringing up of the orphans of the organised bottle-workers. They improved the conditions of their own life and work, making both healthier and less irksome, accomplishing their duty toward themselves, for a progressive working class must elevate its material level in order to make itself fit for fulfilling its social mission.

The solidarity of these working men as expressed by their marvelous social discipline and their great interest in their own work paralysed the activities of the capitalists, who were unable to compete, despite the unlimited millions at their disposal. The Trust was cut off from the labour market, the work of the few scabs did not satisfy its customers. The Trust in vain now menaces the

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Co-operative with the Owens machine, for the Co-operative is also ready to introduce it, despite the tremendous expense involved, as soon as the practicality is satisfactorily demonstrated; then the Owens machine, even if it is a success, blows only certain types of bottles, while the Co-operative specialised itself in part of types of bottles that the machine cannot make; further, the Co-operative is technically and financially ready to change the whole or part of its production from the bottle branch to other branches of the glass industry. In this effort it will certainly be aided by the Federation in the other branches of the glass industry.

This movement represents a new fact. The trade or industrial union of the workers has found within itself all the elements of resistance against the aggressive attack of the Trust, and holds all the factors for progressing with irresistible force toward the positive conquest of the means of production, expropriating the Trust by erecting new factories or forcing the capitalists to give up their plants to the associated workers.

The Federation of the Bottle-Blowers of Italy has found within itself the material, technical, commercial and moral capacities for getting hold, within a very short time, of a large part of the production of the Italian bottle industry.

There is no other group of workers in the world that has accomplished as much, The bottle-makers of Italy are the pioneers of the coming final struggle that will decide the contest between the exploiters and the exploited.

These workers have placed in the stead of individual and associated capitalist initiative, the collective effort and efficiency of their organised class, and it justifies us in entertaining the hope of a most productive force, for collective professional and moral training is the bedrock upon which the future society must rest.

Epilogue

The outbreak on World War was disastrous in most countries for world Syndicalism. The workers were caught up in nationalist frenzy and patriotic populism took over from class solidarity. However, there were exceptions to war fervour and one such country was Italy. It was perfectly obvious Italy had nothing whatsoever to gain from becoming involved in what was already, by the time she was dragged in, seen to be meaningless mass slaughter. As workers were kidnapped to fight they became increasingly rebellious, and the fact that some Socialist leaders, whether of the majority or the minority, were bought by Allied agents to stir up the populace with calls for intervention only helped push these leaders (among them, Benito Mussolini) out of the Socialist camp. A series of military disasters did not help the ruling class, and when the war was over, the workers knew exactly what to do. They took over industry, expropriated the land, seized the property of the Trusts, burned the title deeds to housing. The upper class was terrified.

A group, called the Fascisti from the Roman symbol of law and order, the fasces (bundled sticks) had been formed by the poet D'Annunzio, to rekindle patriotic enthusiasm by the recapture of Trieste lost during the war. Workers were not interested but a squadron of young landed gentry was enrolled and trained. Mussolini (with mysterious rich backers since mid-War) realised the potential of this formation, uniting gentlemanly thugs and mercenaries against the workers, not just as a scab force but as a revolutionary force for the conquest of power, similar to Bolshevism as regards party organisation, but serving the interests of the rich. They smashed labour halls, working class dwellings, co-operatives, trade unions, syndicates, newspapers, all with the protection of the police, until finally Mussolini personally was put in power by

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the right-wing Catholic Centre parties as a "saviour" Prime Minister (and then staged a mock March on Rome to take power already given him).

Social expropriation was already proceeding when the Fascisti, who had little success in fighting the presumed enemies of Italy abroad, turned on Italians (with the aid of the police and Regular Army). Much is heard of the humiliations heaped on bourgeois Liberals and Socialist deputies - there were heavy doses of castor oil, academic dismissals, house arrests, and the occasional murder, but the well-off or famous got off comparatively lightly, especially when compared to other subsequent Fascist dictatorships elsewhere. Those who suffered most were the workers. They were treated like a conquered nation. Every single asset was taken from them. Thousands were driven into emigration to work as second-class citizens. There were mass rapes and floggings. Land was grabbed back by the landlords and peasant holdings seized. Trusts like those in glassblowing ruthlessly grabbed back factories, destroyed co-operatives and the syndicates. The dream of guild socialism had been peaceful takeover by self-managed co-operatives, and this had percolated into syndicalism as a practical alternative to revolution. It worked. but capitalism had not been crushed.

The Italian workers proved they did not need the capitalists nor the State. The Fascists proved, however, that capitalism and State could not be got rid of that easily. There was no alternative but resistance and struggle. Social dominance had to be blown up.

Mussolini's Fascism took many forms in different lands. Sometimes it was racialist, sometimes not. It was mostly Nationalist, usually dictatorial, sometimes observing democratic forms. In some countries it was clerical and sacerdotal, but in others anti-clerical materialist. A new twist is to be 'libertarian' but right-wing, or to denounce violence as 'fascism of the left' when in reality violence is incidental to fascism and anti-fascism alike. Non-violent and constitutional fascism exists. What is called Fascism is invariably forcing the working class down, substituting different ideologies that transcend class boundaries for class struggle, and reinforcing or restoring the rule of the privileged.

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Introduction

After the brutal suppression of the Paris Commune (1871) the French well-to-do recovered from the fright which the workers takeover of Paris had given them, and a horrific and indiscriminate massacre ensued. Arbitrary shootings, torture, mass graves, deportations to the prison hells of New Caledonia, long terms of imprisonment, combined to terrorise the workers into submission. The Anarchist movement hit back with a series of individual attacks which, while they gave it a stigma with reactionaries to this day, had the effect of allaying the stupor upon the working class and arousing consciousness, the reverse effect from that of nationalist terrorism which seeks to foster a war mentality.

The result of the individual counter-terrorism of the 1880s and 90s was the syndicalist movement of the turn of the century. The working people had lost their fear and it was the turn of their enemies to tremble. It explains why pre-World War I French syndicalism was higher in solidarity and consciousness than British trade unionism. Its goal was not just for better conditions, but for the takeover of industry. This idea of Syndicalism as a higher expression of trade unionism was introduced to many different countries, especially, though not entirely and not always, by the Anarchist movement. Syndicalism had more in common with Anarchism than either with State Socialism, since the first sought to by-pass the State and the second to smash it.

The ideas of self-management, guild socialism, co-operative production, council communism and collective ownership were all part of the syndicalist upsurge of the early part of the twentieth century. Reformist trade unionism, municipal socialism and State Socialism even where it had a glimpse of power, were regarded as

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part of “socialism”, a broad church. Many thought of “the movement” as one in which they were prepared to back whichever horse was likely to win the race against capitalism.

“Wilshire’s Magazine”, one of several English Syndicalist papers, gave this account of a takeover of the Italian glass-blowing industry. A very similar situation existed among the marble workers of Carrara, in Northern Italy, an anarchist stronghold. But in 1900 the Italian workers were in an upsurge. This account shows the dawn of that upsurge. In the epilogue we have the sad task of telling of the long dark night that followed. But what the Italian glass-blowers and marble masons did in the 1900s point a lead to workers today, just as the epilogue points a warning as to what they should expect to face if they do.



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AREAS AFFECTED BY THE
1910 TAKEOVER

