

Building Towards the Anarchist Revolution:
The Anarcho-Syndicalism of Common Cause

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Anarchist politics are making a dramatic resurgence in Canada. Anarchist groups are increasingly prominent at large protests across the country, from the G20 Summit in 2010 to this past summer's student protests in Quebec.¹ In addition to these emergent trends, there has long been an anarchist group active in Ontario. Common Cause was founded in September 2007, as a federation of anarchists from "Hamilton, Toronto, Ottawa, Sudbury, Windsor and Kitchener-Waterloo."² The goal of Common Cause is to "promote anarchist methods of organization" by cooperating with working class people at the "crucial points" of struggle, and to ultimately foster the public's capacity for a "social revolution."³ As a tool for promoting this agenda, Common Cause created *Linchpin*, meant to be a bimonthly publication. It will, therefore, be the purpose of this paper to provide an academic summary of *Linchpin*, through the perspective of anarcho-syndicalism. In order to accomplish this, the main tenants of anarcho-syndicalism must first be established.

The works of 20th Century anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker form the basis of this framework. Known as a "leading figure" in the global anarcho-syndicalist movement and a "moving spirit" behind the International Congress in Berlin (1922), Rocker is well regarded within the syndicalist movement.⁴ His work is an ideal focal point for eliciting the core perspectives of the anarcho-syndicalist movement. Amongst many particular arguments, three broad themes emerge as Rocker's principles of anarcho-syndicalism, each of which will be used in turn to assess the clarity of *Linchpin*'s arguments. First, Rocker asserts that anarchists seek the

¹ Patrick McGuire, "You Can Protest, But Don't Wear a Mask," Huffington Post, November 2, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/vice%20/mask-ban-canada_b_2067236.html (accessed November 6, 2012).

² "Editorial," *Linchpin*, November 2007, 2.

³ "As We See It," *Linchpin*, November 2007, 2.

⁴ Nicolas Walter, introduction to *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, by Rudolf Rocker (London: Pluto Press, 1989), ix.

“abolition of economic monopolies” and of institutions of social and political coercion, namely the state.⁵ Anarcho-syndicalists, Rocker continues, would then advocate for a “free association of all productive forces” to replace the abolished capitalist system.⁶ Additionally, a “federation of free communities” will organize the newly stateless society.⁷ Referencing each of these arguments in turn, this paper will contextualize *Linchpin* through Rocker’s anarcho-syndicalist framework.

All anarchists are united around Rocker’s first assertion, we believe that the means of social and political coercion and “economic monopolies” must be abolished.⁸ The primary institution to be abolished is the state and its adjoining agencies. By their very definition these are institutions of organized violence, claiming the right to use ‘legitimate’ force. To advocate for the abolition of the state is, necessarily, to assume that a state is not prefigured by the existence of human society. This is, in fact, exactly our position. Rocker argues that the state is a “caricature of a genuine society” and that its most pernicious effect is to turn humans into “caricatures of their true selves.”⁹ Similarly, the growing influence of “economic monopolies” - read as corporations - serves to further undermine the autonomy of individuals. Personal freedom ends when one is forced to “submit to economic dictation.”¹⁰ When a person relies on selling their labour for survival, they are no longer free and instead are compelled to obey their employer. This is a source of enormous alienation, as people must market their creative forces for the profit of others. As such, they are never able to enjoy the full benefit of their talents,

⁵ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 9.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism*, (London: Freedom Press, 1988), 10.

work becomes burden rather than an expression of genuinely free production. As will be shown, the critique advanced by Common Cause adopts much the same framework. First, *Linchpin*'s use of concrete examples to systematically undermine the validity of the Canadian state will be examined. To follow this, *Linchpin*'s consistent rejection of contemporary economics will be reviewed.

To encourage the wider public to renounce the Canadian state, *Linchpin* has sought to undo years of propaganda and miseducation. This miseducation encourages a false sense of identity wherein people believe their state and the community in which they live have correlating interests. Quoting from the Haymarket case, which erroneously convicted eight anarchists of a terrorist attack, *Linchpin* reveals how easily the judge's statement: "convict these men,... and you save our institutions, our society," goes unquestioned by the general public.¹¹ Here the judge has assumed that without the state's coercive authority society would cease to exist. Comments like this prove that, unfortunately, parroting the tired old discourses of the powerful occurs only too common. People of power and influence are always guilty of assuming that it is only they who hold society together. Furthermore, it must be noted that agents of the state are appropriating the language of social movements, in order to insulate their power from criticism. Police speak of themselves as an identity group "subjected to harassment and violence."¹² Through this, the police, who regularly abuse real minority groups, try to evoke sympathy by claiming to be victims of hate crimes. Yet, this reveals the hypocrisy of the state's authority. If the police, as agents of the state, are truly subject to widespread hatred because of their identity, then there exists a sharp divide between the interests of the public and the interests of the state. Diligent

¹¹ David Brons, "The History of May Day," *Linchpin*, May/June 2008, 2.

¹² Meagan Ross, "Hamilton Police: Dissent Now a Hate Crime," *Linchpin*, June 2010, 4.

work must be conducted to undermine the assumption that the state represents a social good, and to breakdown the psychological grip of the state upon the mass public.

Linchpin seeks to undermine such arguments by using concrete examples. Foremost among these is the plight of the poor, those ground down by the state's authority. Laws and state orders which protect property rights, consequentially "criminalize the poor."¹³ Though the law might be applied equally, and everyone who has dollar is protected in their right to that dollar, property law can never be applied equitably as it disadvantages those without resources. It is not the rich who must squat on private land for shelter or steal bread to survive. In short, a law that protects property also defends anyone against a feeling of obligation to feed their starving neighbour. The duty of police, by enforcing the law, is to "maintain the existing social order" and all of its inherent inequalities.¹⁴ The state is, therefore, responsible for ensuring that an underclass will always exist, without this coercive authority everyone would have greater opportunity for personal improvement. However, so long as the state persists, so will social inequality. These conditions not only make "mass rebellion" of the disadvantaged possible, but rather, make it "almost inevitable" as the poor are continually ground down.¹⁵ By inciting anger amongst those disadvantaged by this unfair system to fight for an equitable society, we can hope to overthrow the existing order. However, while engaging in these activities, we must be prepared for the state's violent repression.

In response to even the relatively moderate reformism of the recent Quebec students' movement, the state has displayed its willingness to deploy incredible violence. Reacting to a

¹³ Devin K, "Sound of Da Police," *Linchpin*, January/February 2008, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Patrick Murtagh, "Learning from the Greek Uprising," *Linchpin*, February/March 2009, 4.

protest overpowering apparently weak police presence at a Liberal Party convention in Victoriaville, QC, the state employed extreme violence to quash activists. Riot police utilized a chemical agent “unlike regular tear gas” that induced vomiting, designed to debilitate the crowd rather than to disperse it.¹⁶ Having disabled large portions of the protest, police then proceeded to “shoot plastic bullets” into the crowd, making sure to aim their laser sights for the protesters’ heads.¹⁷ As anyone could expect, this brutality resulted in severe bodily harm to the protestors. Eyewitnesses reported a man with a “collapsed eye socket” and another with a “gaping wound” in his skull; the latter would “remain in a comma for many days.”¹⁸ The barbarity of these scenes speaks most powerfully of the lengths to which the state’s power extends in defending its own position of authority. Moreover, it most clearly highlights the division of interests between the state and those unfortunate enough to be born under its influence. The state has no proven moral authority, yet it employs violence vastly disproportionate to the original ‘offense’ against those it pretends to serve. These episodes of terror are the clearest indication that whatever authority is vested in the state ultimately rests on its ability to employ enormous physical violence. In order to establish a truly just society, such an institution must necessarily be destroyed.

It is state oppression and state repression which keeps the corporate-capitalist model viable. The use of violence can crush proponents of justice, as in Victoriaville, but the state is also capable of acting as a normalizing agent. The state is able to perpetuate corporate-capitalism by providing an education grounded in the values of private ownership of property and preparing

¹⁶ J. Gagnon, “The Battle of Victoriaville,” *Linchpin*, Spring/Summer 2012, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

students for careers in a corporate workforce. This normalization is nowhere more evident than in the case of indigenous people forced into the Canadian residential school system. Under order from the Canadian state, in collusion with various church officials, indigenous people were taught “to become a settler” through a process of “physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual” assimilation.¹⁹ This assimilation enabled the “massive theft” of indigenous land, upon which “[c]apitalism in the Americas” was built.²⁰ Such theft was eased by the state’s ability to normalize the idea of private ownership in a formerly communitarian people. This state-capitalist symbiosis persists today. Corporations rely on “draconian immigration laws” to provide a low-wage workforce, unable to appeal for rights.²¹ Were the state to enforce equal rights for every human within its borders, corporations would be unable to exploit the labour of so-called ‘illegal’ immigrants. Instead, businesses are able to extort these workers with the fear of deportation. Thus they ensure a compliant and cheap workforce. This unseen coercion is a form of structural violence; it compels action by individuals which they would not have undertaken on their own. Yet, because the violence is indecipherable from the structures of society, it continues unnoticed. As such, states remain concerned over a protest breaking a few windows in an office building - of a \$640 million corporation - while one in six Ontarians work “at or close to the minimum wage.”^{22 23}

It is, therefore, necessary for struggle to end corporate-capitalism. This resistance takes many forms; Rocker advocates methods of “immediate warfare by the workers,” which would

¹⁹ Rev, “Residential School Apology: An Anarchist View,” *Linchpin*, August/September 2008, 3.

²⁰ Andrew Fleming, “When Property Doesn’t Apply,” *Linchpin*, November 2007, 8.

²¹ Lucian, “From Service Hell to the Revolt of the Precarious,” *Linchpin*, January/February 2008, 5.

²² Brandon Gray, “The G20 in Context: Reformism in Retreat, Anarchism in Action,” *Linchpin*, December 2010, 5.

²³ Claire Voltarin, “United We Eat Divided We Starve,” *Linchpin*, Summer 2011, 6.

include actions such as local and general strikes, wage struggles, boycotts, propaganda and even “armed resistance.”²⁴ Such tactics are effective tools for disrupting the “smooth flow of products and people” upon which corporate-capitalism relies.²⁵ However, while these tactics are often effective, they are usually very localized efforts and are therefore unlikely to result in destruction of the system as a whole. To overcome the pervasive power of corporate-capitalism, in conjunction with the authority of the state, it is necessary to reclaim the public spaces off of which they leech their existence. As such, when we advocate for the occupation or blockages of “major highways and bridges” the suggestion is only to reclaim that which is public from those who seek to appropriate it for their own private gain.²⁶ Yet such actions face state repression, as was the case for Mohawk protestors in 2008.²⁷ This unflinching defensive reaction by the state, on behalf of business, reveals to more and more people the symbiotic relationship of the state and corporate-capitalism. It represents a system which sacrifices the “general interests of human society” for the interests of individual property owners.²⁸ This system must be torn down, and in its place new and radically democratic organizations will be created.

The form of organization which a post-revolutionary society adopts is hugely controversial amongst different perspectives of anarchism. Yet, it is also the most important aspect of an effective critique. Proposals must be forthcoming if our perspective is to gain traction in wider portions of the public. A coherent theory must establish systems to coordinate at least two broad aspects of society: economic structures and social organization. Rocker argues

²⁴ Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 116.

²⁵ “(Road)blocking Capitalism,” *Linchpin*, May/June 2008, 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jason Maracle, “More ‘Justice’ for Indigenous in Ontario,” *Linchpin*, May/June 2008, 1.

²⁸ Rocker, *Anarchism*, 8.

that “free association of productive forces” is needed, working in concert with a “federation of free communities.”²⁹ The model of economic coordination is what most distinguishes the theory of anarcho-syndicalism from other forms of anarchism.

Rocker conceives of a two-tiered system of worker organization, with both levels employing unions as the structural core. First, he advocates the formation of Labour Chambers. This body will be a freely joined federation, formed through the cooperation of all unions within a “city or rural district.”³⁰ These organizations are similar in principle to the Chambers of Commerce which are common throughout Canadian cities. However, whereas a Chamber of Commerce represents the interests of business, Labour Chambers are formed in the interests of the workers. Because these Chambers are tied to specific localities, their function, post-revolution, becomes more analogous to the current local governments. As such, they are of lesser importance to economic organization and will be reviewed below. The principle body for economic coordination is the Industrial Alliance. This is formed through a federative alliance of all trade unions within any given industry.³¹ For example, auto-workers’ unions from each factory or the teachers’ unions from every school, freely agree to come together in equal partnership. The main task of this Alliance will be to “calculate the total requirements” of the society, in terms of food, electricity, clothing and necessities, and then to “adjust the work of production” to meet those needs.³² Using phrases like ‘meeting needs’ often implies social austerity, though this is certainly not Rocker’s intent. Rather, what Rocker desires, is a reorientation of the values which underpin production. The current paradigm encourages

²⁹ Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 9-10.

³⁰ Rocker, *Anarchism*, 33.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 34.

thinking of production as an end with inherent value, rather than just a “means to insure... material subsistence.”³³ Believing in industry as an ends encourages production of massive waste, never questioning its necessity. While Rocker’s model was established during an era of industrial expansion, the current mode of economic growth - in North America - is in the service sector. Fortunately, Rocker’s position is still useful to us. The unions which were once found only in factories and amongst the trades will be expanded to all sectors of the economy. Those working in retail, food and other service sectors must stand in solidarity and claim ownership of their places of employment.

Linchpin provides substance to the Industrial Alliance model. Currently the primary ambition concerning industry, is that workers must control the factories in their communities.³⁴ This requires the elimination of management positions.³⁵ Workers will direct production and distribution of goods for themselves, not only empowering them in the workplace but also eliminating the unnecessary and non-productive managerial class. Moreover, anarcho-syndicalism demands a “socialization” of the economy.³⁶ This is not meant as a state take over. Rather, the economy will be reoriented to serve social good, supporting “communities and our environment” and not “big business and big government.”³⁷ In this model, money and profit are less important than the processes through which decisions and actions are achieved, only the means will justify the ends.³⁸ The value of a community will not be judged under the rubric of productive output or GDP. Instead, value will be placed on the quality of life in each community,

³³ Ibid., 8.

³⁴ Mick Black, “Fighting Back Makes a Difference,” *Linchpin*, April/May 2009, 2.

³⁵ Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 94.

³⁶ Black, “Fighting Back,” *Linchpin*, 1.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Mick Sweetman, “Austerity, Crisis, Class War: Fighting for the Right to Strike,” *Linchpin*, Fall 2011, 1.

social and economic mobility, the safety of the environment and the strength of relationships between neighbours, coworkers and families.

One of *Linchpin*'s primary objectives is to facilitate a political climate in which this kind of radical reorientation can occur. The cornerstone of this program is the "horizontal... networking" of labour unions.³⁹ Creating these bonds between unions represents the first step towards the Labour Chambers envisioned by Rocker. Intimate networks of unions, willing to stand in solidarity, will also be necessary in the resistance and struggle building up to the revolution. Such unity is necessary in order to fulfill *Linchpin*'s goal of an "unlimited Ontario-wide general strike."⁴⁰ However, reluctance to build this general strike comes from unexpected corners. There is a growing recognition that unions have broken their "traditional alliance[s]" and that their leadership is willingly undergoing a "complete subordination to the agenda of capital."⁴¹ Betrayal of the working class is rooted in the highly centralized nature of unions. Union leaders see themselves as representatives, rather than as delegates of the workers and they fail to remain true to their comrades in bargaining. This must be combated by forming a "militant base" within workers' unions.⁴² These militants must hold union leaders accountable for their actions, to provide unflinching criticism from within the organization and to educate their comrades, with the aim of inciting demands for radical change.

While discussing these ambitions, it is important to bear in mind that anarcho-syndicalists are not advocating a universal system. Rather, it must be remembered that each locality has

³⁹ Mick Sweetman, Andrew Fleming and James Redmond, "Sweetheart Deals & Solidarity Unionism," *Linchpin*, November 2007, 6.

⁴⁰ "Build the General Strike!" *Linchpin*, June 2010, 4.

⁴¹ Sweetman et al., "Solidarity Unionism," *Linchpin*, 4

⁴² Sweetman, "Austerity," *Linchpin*, 2.

“special conditions” which have determined its “historical development.”⁴³ These developments are significant and will play a large role in shaping both the form of the revolution and the subsequently restructured society. For instance, the geographical and linguistic differences between the current borders of the Canadian and the French states will result in different post-revolution organizations. The area of France is characterized by a relatively heterogeneous culture, there exists a shared experience amongst almost all people within the region. However, the dispersion of the Canadian state over such a large area has resulted in a situation where the only unifying identity between a person from Halifax and a person from Vancouver is likely to be the artificial notion of being ‘Canadian,’ - an idea imposed through the force of the state. Therefore, following the revolution, a ‘french’ identity may still persist in the newly formed Labour Congresses and Industrial Alliances, with special reverence being held for the likes of Proudhon or Voltaire. It is, however, unlikely that a ‘canadian’ identity can survive a revolution. Instead, smaller regional identities are the most probable outcome.

As such, the only universal principle is a recognition of the power society has as a “creator” of humans.⁴⁴ It is organization into social units which creates a human from the animal *homo sapiens*. The structure of that organization informs what kind of humans will be produced, whether cruel and petty or kind and loving. We must demand and engage in the building of social structures which facilitate the “full development [of] all capacities and talents” of each person.⁴⁵ The primary purpose of Labour Chambers is to advance this cause. These Chambers will be local centers of education and in conjunction with other Chambers they will administer

⁴³ Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism*, 105.

⁴⁴ Rocker, *Anarchism*, 21.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

“social capital.”⁴⁶ Their role in organizing education is fitting, as reproduction of social institutions should fall to those most actively engaged in the institution on a daily basis. The training of masons, for example, will be conducted directly by the masonic union members delegated to the Labour Chamber. The skills learned here will then be put to use in the worker-operated and community based factories and businesses.

Communities must be organized as locally as possible to ensure accountability for decisions and encourage an active role for all. It is the position of *Linchpin* that “directly democratic assemblies” be convened in neighbourhoods, which will “federate” and form wider communities.⁴⁷ The decisions regarding each neighbourhood will then be made by those whom are most directly effected. In addition to creating self-rule, this federation of neighbourhoods will also foster a stronger sense of community than is currently present, by necessitating that neighbours actually “talk to each other directly” about important matters.⁴⁸ All this is not to say that there will be no positions of authority, only that they will be very limited in their number, scope and duration. An example of an authoritative position that may need to be created could include a committee for establishing water services in a neighbourhood. Several steps can be taken to prevent the entrenchment of these positions and avert returning to state-like bureaucracy:

[M]embers elected to positions in the organization should: never be paid more than the average wage of the members, have no special prestige or privileges, have short, regularly-rotated, well-defined and narrow (minimal power) mandates and they should be easily removed by the members if they abuse their responsibilities.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 33-34.

⁴⁷ Wes, “True Democracy,” *Linchpin*, November 2007, 6.

⁴⁸ Bruce Darden, “CUPE’s Winter of Discontent,” *Linchpin*, Winter/Spring 2012, 2.

⁴⁹ Marley B, “Practising Anarchism: Norwegian Anarchists Talk in Hamilton,” *Linchpin*, August/September 2008, 4.

Ensuring that the state does not reemerge through a burgeoning bureaucracy will require attention for any actions contrary to these guidelines.

Linchpin continues its intensive advocacy for direct action to achieve these changes. Moreover, the publication is careful to detail the activities which Common Cause is pursuing, to help those who are socially disadvantaged by the current system. In typical fashion, Common Cause has affiliated itself with several organizations actively engaged in social justice. Primary amongst these organizations are the recently formed solidarity networks. Springing up in several North American cities, including Hamilton and London, the purpose of these organizations is to form solidarity with individuals being evicted from their homes or who are “experiencing wage theft” (generally in the form of employers withholding pay).⁵⁰ Using extrajudicial non-violent tactics, these networks seek to prevent evictions, have pay restored and generally improving quality of life, through coordination with working and lower class people. Actions typically take the form of network members gathering and with consent and input from the wronged party, the network will present the offender with a list of demands, most often, they will not disperse until all demands are satisfactorily met.⁵¹ These tactics are important for building the revolution, both by openly rejecting the state’s authority as arbitrator and defender of property, and serving to build a unified movement against economic exploitation.

Common Cause has also been creating resistance to the resurgence of racist movements in Ontario. When it was announced that the white supremacist organization ‘Blood and Honour’ intended to hold a rally in London, Common Cause allied with other anti-racist groups to disrupt

⁵⁰ Peter Marin, “Fighting to Win: Steel City & Solidarity Networks,” *Linchpin*, Fall 2011, 4.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the rally. As the roughly 100 anti-racists converged on the supremacist rally, which had moved to “an underground parking garage,” a Blood and Honour member started a “brief scuffle” between the two groups.⁵² After a two-hour “siege,” and a “thorough thrashing” for several white supremacists, those who had remained in the garage “fled with their tails between their legs.”⁵³ These actions represent Common Cause’s efforts to break the forces of oppression wherever they form, and to promote an inclusive society.

The story of Common Cause is one of vindication. What began as an abstract argument against the Canadian state, was tested and affirmed in the brutal police crackdown against protestors in Victoriaville, QC. This knee-jerk reaction, against attempts at moderate reform, reveals to the public one part of a symbiotic relationship between the state and corporate capitalists. A relationship made more apparent through the hypocrisy of any state repressing activists, while allowing corporations to continue earning obscene profits through exploitation of the vulnerable classes. Through its publication, *Linchpin*, Common Cause has also contributed to the planning of the post-revolution society. Free association of the productive classes through Industrial Alliances will serve to replace the monopolizing structures which characterize modern society. In association with these organizations, Labour Chambers will foster the development of strong and independent workers. Moreover, the ideals of direct democracy and citizen participation will find a new home, both in workplaces and neighbourhoods, serving to bring communities closer together. Anarcho-syndicalism, as advocated by Common Cause, is a radical and deep reorientation of society. Its success will not come from academic theorizing, the world will only change through community building, direct action and education. Common Cause has

⁵² “Racist March Shut Down in London,” *Linchpin*, Spring/Summer 2012, 2.

⁵³ Ibid.

helped organize the public, both intellectually and physically, against the state and corporate-capitalism. Direct action, taken to help union workers and the poor, and to prevent further fragmentation of the social fabrique, has vaulted Common Cause into the heart of a struggle, not only for a better Ontario, but a better world.

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