# European Mining History, 19th and 20th Centuries: Work in Progress

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# Miners and the Rise of Anarcho-Syndicalism in the Ruhr

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I.

Though revolutionary or anarcho-syndicalism was the most relevant alternative conception of union organisation until the centralisation process started at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century and let the social democratic associations prevail, it permanently remained – except for the Romanic countries – a relatively marginal current in the workers' movement. Due to its organisational weakness and minority character, the German syndicalist movement was also but in individual cases in a position to act as collective lobby at company level and provide its members with material benefits. This amorphous and spontaneously developing movement could only temporarily obtain greater social relevance because the traditional milieus changed or disintegrated since 1918/19 due to segmentation processes [Langewiesche, Lösche/Walter]. Thus, social protest movements could appear as a faultless counterpoise to social democracy and the "Freie Gewerkschaften" that were considered as compromised because of its approval of the war policy of the imperial regime and its give-and-take attitude in economic affairs during the "Burgfrieden". In addition to the "artisan-workers" that so far predominated numerically [Boch 1985], syndicalism could also integrate the anti-bureaucratic protest potential of oppositional union members and the hitherto mostly unorganised, less skilled "mass workers" in metal industry and mining. In this "revolutionary" period between the "symbolic collapse" caused by the First World War [Winter] and the stabilisation of the Weimar Republic in 1923/24, it gained a membership of 60 000 in the middle and more than 100 000 at the end of 1919 because the immediate satisfaction of vitally important material

needs by means of "direct action" became more urgent than protracted wage bargaining [Bock 1989, Chalmers].

But in view of the divergence of union membership chosen by the same occupational groups in a similar social and economic environment [Altena 1999, Boll 1992, Tenfelde 1979], just setting up a chain of causation "workplace situation X leads to workers' movement Y" that only focuses on "macro-economic developments" and is still prevalent in research doesn't suffice to explain which factors promoted or prevented an organisation of workers in anarchosyndicalist groups.

Concerning miners, their particular affinity for direct forms of action and organisation is primarily traced back to their corporatist trade associations that were based on local fellowships. As the social homogeneity of the workforce in the Ruhr mines changed due to the rapid increase in the number of workers as well as the size of companies and grown group relationships were therefore threatened, the miners opposed the anonymous and undemocratic decision-making of union leadership and employers' confederations about wages and working conditions that were deemed insufficient in the post-war era. [Rübner 1994, Tenfelde 1979] Though the local associations of the "Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands" (FAUD) in its strongholds in the western Ruhr area, i.e. Hamborn and Mülheim, came likewise into (significant) being in the course of the "November Revolution", they differed in their social composition. On the other hand, the syndicalist movement in Dortmund had a certain tradition emanating from the pre-war time, whereas it was confronted by a powerful left-communist rival organisation in Gelsenkirchen and absolutely insignificant in Essen.

More substantiated conclusions about the "motives, causes and recruiting successes" of anarcho-syndicalism are therefore only to be expected from a study of the different forms of workers' radicalism and "real proletarian life" [Altena 1989, Lucas 1976, Peterson] that also takes into account the local dimension and social integration in the above-mentioned cities as an interdependent entirety, i.e. population statistics, economic structures, living conditions, household situation, gender aspects, sexuality, social welfare, leisure activities and delinquency [cp. Hartewig, Welskopp]

The dissertation project in hand about the syndicalist movement in the Ruhr 1909-1933 therefore follows the cases made in the studies of Erhard Lucas [Lucas 1976] and Larry Peterson, but aims to transcend their focus that is solely orientated by the Hamborn region and the period from the end of 1920 to 1924. Thus, it wants to show inter alia how the different tendencies of Rhenish-Westphalian syndicalism (afterwards splitting up organisationally into the left-communist "FAU Gelsenkirchen" (FAU/G) and the FAUD) interacted in its (re)forma-

tion phase, and to what extent the use of the "Hamborn type" is also suitable for other cities as basic mode of explanation for the rise of the syndicalist movement as a mass phenomenon [Bock 1989]. Further on, it looks into the question how syndicalism in Germany continuously built and reformulated a collective identity and could thereby secure its organisational stability and capacity to act also after 1923/24 [Anthony P. Cohen]. By this inclusion of newer research approaches that are based on cultural studies, it should be avoided to focus too heavily on the schematical description of formally established organisations as well as their manifestos and ideologies that only prescribe meaning; as meaning is only constituted by communicative actions that could be institutionalised and than create social group structures.

## II.

The decline of large scale industries like coal and steel as well as the considerable increase of the unemployment rate since the beginning of the 1980s led to a structural change that deprives the unions of their most important membership strongholds and therefore their social power positions. This demonstrates again that centrally organised mass associations with a dominant bureaucracy of full time officials are regularly challenged by the rank and file in times of crisis and change. The search for alternative forms of organisation is then put on the agenda and recently brought about the formation of grass roots unions following in many ways the concepts of revolutionary syndicalism - especially in countries like France and Italy. Nevertheless, this social movement is still neglected by scientific historiography to a large extent; basically due to its marginality in comparison with the historically more "effective" and "successful" organisational forms of political party and centralist union that led it appear to be an allegedly "pre-modern" type of movement and at best of indirect relevance. Except for the new but hardly modified edition of Hans Manfred Bock's pioneer work "Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus von 1918 bis 1923" [Bock 1993] and the more recent study of Hartmut Rübner about the FAUD [Rübner 1994], the majority of works dealing with German anarcho-syndicalism were "mainly influenced by the cognitive interest of the antiauthoritarian student movement", therefore published in the 1970s and 1980s [Nelles 1995] and hardly accepted by academic research [inter alia Vogel].

However, the ideological basis, organisational sociology and social composition of the syndicalist movement in Germany can now be considered to be researched relatively well - at least at the macro-historical level - due to historical papers about particular FAUD groups that

were released in the last years [inter alia Klan/Nelles, Kuckuk, Mallmann, Mümken, Rübner 1996, Weberskirch; cp. Graf 1990, Graf 2001, Linse 1969, Dirk Müller 1984, Dirk Müller 1985, Schönhoven 1984]. But still lacking are research projects about anarcho-syndicalism that take up a micro-historical perspective as well as analyse the particular social environment in which the local activists operated and thus would allow to make statements about its precise factors of constitution. This desideratum applies especially for the syndicalist movement in the Ruhr that is researched only rudimentally [Gesau, Lucas 1976, Andreas Müller, Olsen, Tenfelde 1979] in spite of its relative strength in terms of membership and plentiful source material, for example in the archival inventories at the state archives in Düsseldorf and Münster.

#### III.

The first activities of the localist "Freie Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften" (FVdG), the forerunner organisation of the FAUD, in the Ruhr can be dated back to 1905, the year of a miners' general strike that took place against the explicit wishes of the leaders of the "Bergarbeiterverband" (BAV) and led to the appearance of an opposition within its ranks. But only conflicts inside the Dortmund social democratic party brought it about that the FVdG could gain ground there. In 1908 and 1909, radical SPD members from Brackel – the miner Karl Besser among them – invited Fritz Kater<sup>2</sup> to public events; a subsequent attempt to exclude several members of the opposition from the party led to the formation of the first FVdG group in the Ruhr by Besser and his comrades. It closely cooperated with the "Anarchistische Föderation Rheinland-Westfalen (AFRW)" [Linse 1969] and blasted the "boundless despotism" of the BAV officials but failed completely in its attempt to influence a strike at the Lucas mine in November 1910. In the following years up to the First World War, several other associations were constituted – particularly in Dortmund (first mentioned in 1910) and its vicinity<sup>3</sup> – but their total membership didn't exceed 450 until the proscription of the whole organisation in August 1914. Efforts to take organizational advantage of the lost miners' strike in 1912 didn't gain ground and met determined resistance by social democrats and "Freie Gewerkschaften" alike [Tenfelde 1979; cp. Holton, Dirk Müller 1985]

During the war, just a few groups like the ones in Brackel and Lütgendortmund could maintain a minimal form of cohesion; at Gewerkschaft Deutscher Kaiser in Hamborn, the syndicalists acted clandestinely [Mitteilungsblatt der Geschäftskommission der Freien Vereinigung deutscher Gewerkschaften, Der Syndikalist, Gesau]. Then the situation caused by war and

"revolution" and especially the strike movement in spring 1919 for the socialisation of the mines and the six hour working day promoted the "Freie Vereinigung" into the rank of a mass organisation due to a massive and rapid influx of new members at the expense of the "Freie Gewerk-schaften".

Since 1916, the food scarcity in the Ruhr aggravated dramatically and led to an increasing number of food riots and strikes. The staff of the mines had to work extrashifts and was fundamentally restructured due to the intensified employment of women, adolescents, dequali-

fied skilled workers, forced labourers and prisoners of war. The BAV was nonetheless conforming to the government and supported its war policy as return service for the acknowledgement by state and employers what cost it the confidence of the rank and file. It stuck to this strategy also after the abdication of the emperor, tried first of all to ensure the coal supply and rejected a socialist transformation of the economy.

In the western Ruhr, it were then especially the young, unskilled and non-unionised migrant labourers from Poland who bore the strike movement for a working day of seven hours that started at Deutscher Kaiser in December 1918 and extended to the region around Duisburg and Hamborn. In view of their uncertain future, they asked for efficient and immediate answers and therefore joined the FVdG thousandfold – the reception of syndicalist theories played a minor or no role at all. [cp. Weinhauer] After a conference in Mülheim at the 28th December ended this industrial action – the negotiations were led inter alia by the syndicalist Heinrich Heiling -, it spilled over to the rest of the Ruhr and connected with the demand for socialisation. In January 1919, the workforce of the Victoria mine in Lünen drove away the hated manager and chose a works council to run the company themselves; one of its members was the foreman Schürken who belonged to the KPD and the FVdG. The miners made great efforts to increase the output and thus demonstrate that they could do without managers.<sup>5</sup> In the following weeks, the demand for a working day of six hours came to the fore and was enforced in nearly all mines in March. A conference of miners' delegates<sup>6</sup> in Essen decided at the 30<sup>th</sup> March to found an "Allgemeine Bergarbeiter-Union" and call for a general strike since the 1<sup>st</sup> April if their demands were not met. In the course of this industrial action that saw the FVdG enter into a "unity of action" with the KPD and the USPD<sup>7</sup> and was finally put

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Founded in 1897, it organised a waning number of local social democratic unions but broke ranks with the party at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and gradually adopted syndicalist positions.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Leader of the FVdG/FAUD Business Commission

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The "Einigkeit" (organ of the FVdG) mentions groups in Wickede (since 1910), Berghofen, Hörde, Lütgendortmund (since 1911) as well as Langendreer (since 1911), Bochum and Hamborn (since 1912).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> About 250 former members of the BAV among them

down militarily, further regional union organisations developed whose programs and aims were similar to that of the already organisationally stable FVdG. After the miners founded an own federation in August that counted more than 34 000 members at the end of the year, these associations with a social revolutionary self-conception merged to the "Freie Arbeiter-Union (Syndikalisten)" one month later (and thereby gave the example for the foundation of

the FAUD as a nationwide organisation in December). In spite of repeated separation attempts by the Berlin Business Commission, it was initially supported by syndicalist as well as left-communist and unionist tendencies; however, fluid theoretical crossings between these ideologically different tendencies remained in existence even after the break-up since 1920. The development of the FAU/G with its strongholds in the northern coalfield seemed to depend essentially on leading activists like Hermann Flieth (Lütgendortmund) and Nikolaus Holz (Hamborn) "switching sides".

The "March Revolution" in 1920 was therefore the last occasion where the FAUD could exert greater influence by its participation in the "Red Army" as well as several executive councils and action committees (for example in Dortmund, Duisburg, Essen, Mülheim and Oberhausen) [Colm, Gesau, Rübner 1994, Tenfelde 1979].

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> In this situation, the workers' and soldiers' council in Essen picked up the demands for socialisation to calm the miners and established a commission of nine for its preparation, but the latter one was not acknowledged by the government and remained practically noneffective.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> According to Hans Mommsen an example for the continuation of the traditional form of articulation of interests

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Many members and local "opinion leaders" belonged also to these parties.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> That means about 8% of Ruhr miners. Its strongholds were the districts of Hamm, Lünen, Castrop, Dortmund, Eichlinghofen and Oberhausen.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> In addition to the FVdG and the Allgemeine Bergarbeiter-Union the Allgemeiner Arbeiterverband, the Allgemeine Deutsche Arbeiter-Union and the Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union

### IV.

The dissertation project supposes that not only political and social functions can be traced in the formation of social movements - a central element of the dynamics of contemporary societies [Touraine] -, but cultural and communicative strategies as well. According to the definition of culture as a contingently structured accumulation of practices that construct socially relevant meaning [cp. Geertz], it follows thus more recent assumptions of cultural studies and social science. Currently, the position prevails that mass movements were socially contoured more diffuse than assumed so far and didn't solely follow theoretically discussed guidelines – in contrast to prior research which located the formations of groups according to ideological and programmatic orientations. Therefore it is of particular interest to answer the question how the respective social and individual processes of inclusion and exclusion, the development of specific cultural codes as well as symbolic and performative communication strategies constituted reality and made the local FAUD groups only identifiable in social and political life. By this widening of the perception of political, social and cultural aspects of the history of development of the Weimar Republic as an example for times of change in the early 20th century, it should be contributed to further research about analogous phenomena in other periods and cultural areas. The choice of the Ruhr as region of research is thereby not only owing to the fact that a study about the anarcho-syndicalist movement there is a particular desidaratum, but affords also a good opportunity to approach this topic from a comparative perspective and analyse different cities that each showed other and interacting shapes of proletarian radicalism.

This should take place in form of a case study about Dortmund, Essen, Gelsenkirchen, Ham-

born and Mülheim. The two latter cities with its remarkly low level of union organisation could be characterised as centres of syndicalism in the western Ruhr where ephemeral mass movements developed after 1918. In Dortmund where the "Freie Gewerkschaften" dominated, the first local groups of the FVdG were – as mentioned above – already constituted in 1909/10 and could maintain their relative strength until the national socialists were given power - in spite of the rivalry of the more individual anarchist "Freibund" that rejected organisational structures at the beginning of the 1920s [Andreas Müller]<sup>11</sup>. A different situation

presented itself in Gelsenkirchen where the absolute majority of the syndicalist membership separated as FAU/G soon after the foundation of the Rhenish-Westphalian FAU in September 1919 [Goch, Peterson], and Essen where "only" 246 metal workers were organized in the FAUD in December 1919 and where the local group "defected" to the Allgemeine Arbeiter-Union (AAU) one year later [Protokoll über die Verhandlungen vom 12. Kongreß der FVdG, 1919, Bötcher].

To present the development processes of anarcho-syndicalism at the Ruhr, particularly during the postwar reorganisation in the range of politics, society and culture [Dülffer/Krumeich, Duppler/Groß, Mommsen, Winter/Robert], as comprehensive as possible, it's necessary to choose the period between 1909/10 and 1933 – from the constitution of the FVdG and the AFRW in the Ruhr until the proscription of the FAUD in 1933 – as research phase.

Acting on the assumption that the FAUD as largest organisation in the anarchist spectrum could survive particularly as a (counter)cultural community of ideas [Rübner 1994] and with recourse to the analysis and interpretation of group development and group organisation processes that were carried out within the scope of research about "new social movements" [Ottersbach 2003, Rucht 1994, Rucht u.a. 1997, Snow/Benford, Tarrow 1994], the project studies the formation of minority social milieus by means of the local anarcho-syndicalist associations in the said cities. This means to focus on an examination of initiatives outside the factory, like the women's [Regin 1989] and youth movement [Linse 1976, Regin 1986], the free-thinkers [Kaiser] and cultural education groups (like the "Gilde freiheitlicher Bücherfreunde" (GfB)).

The question should thus be answered which role the alternation of generations at the level of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> In Hamborn, the FVdG/FAUD could only muster five to six members in December 1918. One year later, the number had risen to nearly 10 000, among them 8 000 miners. In Mülheim, the syndicalist organisation consisted mostly of metal workers, especially from Thyssen. Protokoll über die Verhandlungen vom 12. Kongreß der FVdG, 1919

Dortmund and Hörde combined, the FVdG/FAUD had about 16 000 members at the end of 1919, half of them miners. In the works council elections in 1922, the syndicalists got two thirds of their votes in the eastern Ruhr, i.e. the districts Dortmund I and II. Protokoll über die Verhandlungen vom 12. Kongreß der FVdG, 1919

FAUD functionaries played for their integration as "mediators from below" [Altena 1998] between the governmental and non-governmental sphere in the context of an increasingly codified and formalised relationship between capital and labour und expanding social policy – and which conflicts (that developed own communicative dynamics) arose at grass-roots level about the everyday organisation of decision-making and implementation procedures. So it has also to be clarified how the practice of the women's leagues – especially in comparison with other anarchist women's organisations like Mujeres Libres in Spain [Ackelsberg, Bianchi, Nash] – could be classified in light of the resistance they met by the "virile syndicalism" [Shor] as an absolutely male-dominated movement [cp. Hagemann].

According to assumptions that were made more recently in cultural studies and socio-scientific movement research (the paradigm of "symbolic communication"), the emergence of groups that not only represent rationally formulated collective interests could not be deduced from a preconceived common ideology, a relatively distinct social composition and institutional representation alone. Organisations define themselves less than expected by the community of goals than by the community of their means [Weick]. This necessitates the formation and perpetuation of a collective identity und its social localisation by symbolic and communicative actions. Once established, they have to be consistently reformulated and adapted to changing contexts; collective identity is thus seen as a process that develops both inside the organisation and in everyday conflicts with others [Maier, Melucci].

This means for the project to present these actions by its respective manifestations, i.e. representative forms of action, rituals and ceremonies as well as commemoration legitimisation strategies, the manner of constructing and communicating a symbolic and cultural (media) identity by the interplay of internal and public perception [Handelman] and communicative and symbolic processes of inclusion and exclusion in socio-cultural space [cp. Lehnert for the role of enemy concepts].

Thereby the project tries to answer a question that was a long time disregarded by historians of syndicalism – [van der Linden 2001] how the particular groups constituted and identified themselves at local level, ensured their internal cohesion, coped with everyday reality [McAdam] to integrate a disappointed population, disputed about the cultural codification and encodification of their experiences and individually as well as group specifically ascribed meaning and separated from other political and social forces. Accordingly it has also to be verified which significance locally exposed opinion leaders really had [Nelles 1995, Fiedler/Potter] and how in view of domestically and socially divergent demands the means applied – for example physical nonviolence – furthered the separation of groups [Jochheim, Weick].

Finally, the question should be resolved how far the syndicalist movement against the background of local and regional scope reconciled the theoretical "conclusion that socialism [is] after all a cultural question" (Rudolf Rocker) – and therefore requires a complete moral regeneration of individual and society – practically with their thinking and acting at grass-roots level [cp. Willemse].

## V.

In order not to confine oneself to an only descriptive paper about the anarcho-syndicalist groups, it's essential to approach the basic question after the constitution of social meaning and collective identity as well as its modification processes from a comparative perspective of interacting internal and external perception, of internal and external communication. The project focuses therefore primarily on the study of the local network of formal and informal relationships into which the particular organisations were integrated [Nelles 2001] and that determined their identity and scope to be able to analyse how symbols and symbolic actions were used in public and interpreted from outside [McAdam].

The source material examined comprises therefore not only the congress minutes and periodicals of the FVdG/FAUD and the "associated organisations", the Föderation Kommunistischer Anarchisten Deutschlands (FKAD) and the lesser anarchist groupings, with which their organisational work and theoretical self-conception can be traced, but also the publications of rival workers' organisations like the left communists and unionists; this material should be compared with the corresponding press announcements of the workers' parties KPD and SPD, the Freie Gewerkschaften as well as from a middle-class origin. Furthermore, descriptive sources should be used in which symbolically communicative actions and everyday events are wrote down, particularly the numerous and hardly analysed inventories of governmental origin from regional and municipal archives like police reports and administrative as well as statistical material about the local situation. Because all these sources conventionalise reality and didn't reflect it absolutely authentic, even are commentaries and therefore reflections of events themselves, the materials have to sifted intensively and critically to try to

make good for the lack of evidence emanating from the workers themselves.

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