

The Old Illusions of the New Anarchists

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In the last years of the twentieth century, anarchism found new life as a political force in North America and Europe. In the face of the collapse of the eastern European regimes and the shift of social democratic and labour parties to neo-liberalism, it provided a radical alternative for young people wanting to build a better world. The new anarchism emerged from radical ecological movements and organisations like Reclaim The Streets. It was strongly anti-State and anti-authoritarian, often seeing in the traditional Left as big an enemy as capitalism.

Despite the variety of its forms, all anarchism is opposed in principle to the state: both to putting demands on the capitalist state and to the creation of a new working class state. This stems from its rejection of authority, which ranges from an individualist opposition to ALL authority through to the insistence of anarchist communists on restricting working class organisation to only the weakest federation of locally autonomous bodies. The new anarchism, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, stressed maximum autonomy for the individual and spontaneity in struggle.

Most anarchists correctly understand that the state's purpose in capitalist society is to defend the capitalist class. But they refuse to recognise that prior to social revolution the class struggle makes it essential for workers to attempt to force this state to make concessions to the working class (shorter working day, minimum wage, taxes on wealth, democratic rights and so on). They even reject partial demands which destabilise and help break up the state (transitional demands).

Thus, for consistent anarchists, standing or voting in elections – even where the candidate uses this platform to agitate for revolution – is anathema, because it consolidates illusions in the state and authority. This means that anarchists systematically absent themselves from the main times when society as a whole is debating political issues. Instead, they issue abstract denunciations of all politicians, calling on people not to vote. This has led the most consistent anarchists to reject the fight for reforms, such as re-nationalising utilities or even calls for taxing the rich, defending democratic rights or supporting oppressed nations' struggle for independence. How can they oppose such elementary advances for the working class? Because to demand that the state act is to recognise the legitimacy of the state.

Against the trap of the ballot box, anarchists counterpose a do-it-yourself reformism at a local level, which necessarily lacks all the resources in the hands of the national state or even the municipality. Thus, this reformism is necessarily petty in scale and conducted on the margins, or behind the back, of society. It can never really challenge reformism from within the struggle for the practical improvement of the life and conditions of the great mass of the workers, peasants, and urban poor.

Last, but not least, anarchists fail to recognise that in a state based on democratic workers' councils, the working class could rule society. How the highly centralised power of capitalism can be smashed by anything other than a centralised organisation of the working class is a question anarchism has never answered and never will. Anarchists wish to abolish the state in the first act of the revolution, failing to

see that the loss of centralised state power by the capitalist class will not end their resistance. A long and bitter civil war is to be expected for which centrally coordinated bodies, a central council of the delegates of local workers' councils, a government, an army, will be needed. This is nothing more nor less than the dictatorship of the proletariat that the anarchists reject in horror, and even fought against arms in hand in Russia between 1918 and 1921.

Their whole outlook is utopian ? taking no account of the practical everyday needs of working people. In practice, many anarchists do, indeed, support trade union struggles and even local-level reformism, despite their ?authoritarian? and bureaucratic leaderships. Likewise, when great issues are at stake in elections, such as the threat of fascism in the 1930s, mass anarchist forces have capitulated to ?politics? and even entered a bourgeois government in Spain in 1936.

Anarchists make a fetish of ?direct action? ? blockades, sit-downs, fights with police. They often refuse to participate in ?peaceful? mass mobilisations which do not involve such tactics. By doing so they evade the task of challenging the reformist leaders and winning their supporters to truly mass ?direct action? ? political strikes, boycotts, occupations, organised self-defence.

The different strands of anarchism have different approaches to trade union activity. The new anarchism makes the sectarian error of rejecting the unions as organisations of struggle, in fact turning its back on the working class. Others make the error of wanting to build their own ?pure? anarchist unions, again ignoring the task of influencing the members of existing mass organisations. Equally wrong is the opportunist practice of the ?workerist? wing of the anarchist movement who approach trade unions uncritically.

Above all, by rejecting the organisation of working class parties ? not just bureaucratic parties, but also parties based on working class democracy ? anarchists oppose the most important tool for overthrowing capitalism.

As with the role of the workers' state, anarchism fails to understand the role of a revolutionary party. When a revolutionary party is described as a vanguard, this means providing revolutionary leadership to the mass working class, not imposing the will of a small elite on the majority. Only genuine democratic centralism can provide coherent leadership and organisation to the mass working class movement while remaining accountable. A revolutionary party can also bring the most class-conscious workers together to act collectively and challenge the reformist ideas of trade union leaders and bourgeois parties.

While anarcho-syndicalists promote the utopia of one big union and one big strike to put the economy in the hands of the unions and turn society into a free federation of local communes, some of the more post-modernist influenced anarchists have turned to a guerrilla war of tiny direct actions against capitalism, co-ordinated via the alternative media. Some have even come to the fatalistic conclusion that destroying the ?beast? is impossible and that the best that can be done is to find enclaves in which they can live out their utopia. In fact, any local alternative communities can be attacked and liquidated by the state long before they become a threat to capitalist rule.

The solution that anarchism has traditionally posed to the question of organisation is the federation of autonomous collectives or communes. But federalism is a weak and problem-riddled idea. With no agreement by separate collectives to follow regional or national decisions, a minority can effectively hold the majority to ransom or, worse, simply go their own way. This would not only be disastrous in a situation of civil war but also in the effective organisation of the production and distribution of goods. From the negotiated ?co-ordination? of completely autonomous producing units, a market would inevitably emerge in the sphere of distribution, giving rise in turn to propertied classes and a distinctly ?non-autonomous? outcome ? class rule. Federalism is itself a utopian solution to the very real problem of how the working

class must organise, from the smallest action committee to society as whole.

The theory of anarchism is littered with ideas of spontaneous and un-led social revolutions. But without a conscious revolutionary leadership, history has shown all such attempts pass power back into the hands of the capitalists. Faced with the mass anarchist unions (the CNT) joining a bourgeois government, and the practical tasks of civil war, more radical anarchists such as the Friends of Durutti during the Spanish Civil War recognised this weakness in anarchism and broke with its programme, calling instead for a revolutionary junta and working class rule.

The influence of new forms of anarchism has destructive effects on the ability to organise mass actions. Many oppose voting, insisting instead on 'reaching a consensus'. This means either that the lowest common denominator - the most limited proposal - carries the day or that those with the loudest voices are privileged in the debate. Democratic co-ordination of mass organisations and of demonstrations is replaced with 'affinity groups' in which a small group of friends find themselves with the same weight in a discussion as the mass organisations of the working class. Most destructive has been the banning of working class parties from participation in movements like the Social Forums - a move supported by the NGOs and indeed some of the reformist parties themselves, as well as by anarchists on the grounds of 'rejecting politics' or stopping 'authoritarian organisations'.

Nor can the anarchists agree on the methods of struggle to be employed, as can be seen from their ferocious debates on violence on demonstrations. Some see all violence as ruled out in principle because it is inherently authoritarian - this trend has the merit of being consistent in its refusal to recognise reality. Others invest violence with near-mystical powers, liberating the individual from paralysing respect for the state and private property. Here, opinion ranges between the mutually opposed strategies of non-violent direct action and symbolic property destruction ('trashing') or even provocation of the state forces. Neither strand understands the role of violence in the revolutionary struggle - as something to be prepared and wielded by the mass movement through the formation of a mass, organised working class and popular fighting force.

Last but not least, anarchism has been unable to develop a programme that large numbers can give assent to and which coordinates their individual actions into a coherent strategy for destroying capitalism and its state. This means that there are nearly as many variants of anarchism as there are anarchists. It means anarchism has repeatedly hybridised with other political currents, most often with populism, but also with bourgeois liberalism, nationalism, even Stalinism (sections of the autonomist movement in Germany and Italy).

At every level - theory, strategy, tactics, organisation and practice - anarchism is a dead end for the working class.

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