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Working-class struggle and anarchism

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Anarchism opposes the capitalist state. But by no means all anarchists identify with the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state and create a new society.

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Some anarchists do. Those are the anarcho-syndicalists, who on this issue have the same idea as Marxists do, and whose ideas this article will come back to later.

But most schools of anarchism do not. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the "father of anarchism", was opposed to unions, strikes, and class struggle. "We...wage war", he wrote, "not upon the rich but upon principles... We are socialists, not despoilers... men of reconciliation and progress".

He condemned the press for supporting workers' strikes for better wages. "It is impossible for strikes followed by an increase of wages to end otherwise than in a general rise of prices... The working men, supported by the favour of an indiscreet press, in demanding an increase of wages, have served monopoly much better than their own real interests".

He did not even see industrial capital as exploitative. In his view only financial and merchant capital were exploitative.

He seized upon a lull in trade-union activity in Britain to exclaim: "The British workers have got out of the habit of combination, which is assuredly a progress for which one cannot but congratulate them".

He saw no point in condemning the state for shooting down strikers. "Working men's strikes are illegal", he writes. "And it is not only the penal code which says this, but... the necessity of the established order. As long as labour is not sovereign, it must be a slave; society is possible only on this condition... that the workers should undertake, by combinations, to do violence to monopoly, society cannot permit".

Proudhon is credited with coining the phrase later popularised by Marx, that the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the workers themselves. At any rate Proudhon wrote in 1848 that "the proletariat must emancipate itself without the help of the government".

But Proudhon did not mean emancipation through class struggle. He meant that the workers should organise themselves into small workshop groups and trade and give credit between the groups. He claimed that by doing that "they would soon have wrested alienated capital back again, through their organisation and competition... become the masters of it all... without the proprietors being despoiled..."

By the time of Bakunin, in the 1870s, "the working-class movement", as Marx wrote, had become "so powerful that these philanthropic sectarians dare not repeat for the economic struggle those great truths which they used incessantly to proclaim". Bakunin supported unions and strikes, while opposing (as Proudhon also had) workers organising into a workers' political party.

Bakunin did not see the working class as the central agent of revolution. He considered peasants and the urban unemployed, beggars, petty criminals, etc. to be much more potent revolutionary forces. His repeated declaration that the first step in any revolution should be to have "all legal papers consigned to the flames", and all public regulation of debts and taxes abolished, was designed to appeal to the peasant for whom "the state" is nothing but the unwelcome tax-collector.

Today, anarchists identifying with Zapatismo accept the Zapatistas' strategic decision to orient to the peasants of Chiapas, an economically little-developed region in the south of Mexico, rather than the workers in Mexico's huge cities. In the book written by John Holloway to spell out Zapatista strategy in theoretical terms, the working class is redefined as "nearly everybody", and the central political priority is "the scream" of protest and rage against the existing order.

"Autonomists", in practice close to anarchism though their ideas originate from Marxist discussions, hold that the agency for change is now no longer the working class, but the "multitude". By "refusal, desertion, exodus and nomadism", the "multitude" can produce "a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism".

Revolutionary activity, for them, is not about class struggle, but about "the affirmation of the movement itself as an 'alternative society'... To conquer and control its own 'spaces'...".

The contemporary "social-ecology" anarchist writer Murray Bookchin insists that "we are no longer living in a world where revolutionary consciousness can be developed primarily or even significantly around the issue of wage-labour versus capital". "The proletariat has become - and probably always has been - an organ of capitalist society, not a revolutionary agent". Instead, he believes that "the revolutionary project" must be "a counter-culture".

"Marxism", he complains, "is linked to the... most inorganic of all oppressed classes, the proletariat". The working class expresses not universal human interests but "bourgeois egoism". "Anarchist theories and movements" are linked by an "umbilical cord" to "organic societies... the clan, tribe, polis, medieval commune... the village and decentralised towns of the past". In contrast, capitalist market society is entirely "inorganic".

Exactly how Bookchin thinks that such an unpromising society, with the majority of the population belonging to "the most inorganic of all oppressed classes", can generate a "counter-culture" except as marginal, is not clear. In practice, many anarchists following Bookchin's line of thinking do an anarchist version of the famous "revision" that Eduard Bernstein did of Marxist perspectives. For them as for Bernstein, "the movement is everything, the end is nothing". The day-to-day business of "counter-cultural" activity is an end in itself, and the final aim remains in the blurred distance.

In his own terms, Bookchin is logical. David Footman, in his book "Civil War in Russia", describes the efforts in 1917-21 of the peasant army led by Nestor Makhno. The "Makhnovshchina" was arguably the largest-scale effort ever made actually to run a significant area on anarchist lines.

Most of the "theoretical" anarchists who joined Makhno quickly quit when they saw that the necessities of battle had brought him to the same wartime expedients which they had damned as "authoritarian Marxism" when employed by the Bolsheviks: military orders, conscription, food requisitions, secret police, summary assassination of opponents (which, for Makhno, most of the time, included Bolsheviks).

Yet Makhno was a serious man of ideas, and had real support among peasants. As Footman records, "Many of [the Makhnovites'] ideas made sense to Ukrainian peasants whose one political obsession was to be rid of any outside interference. Most of their ideas make nonsense when applied to any larger or more developed administrative unit".

The Makhno movement had no idea how to organise towns. It airily told workers concerned at the fact that they had not received wages and had no food to "organise a free economic order from below". At the two workers' conferences which the Makhnovites organised in the area they controlled in October 1919, the big majority of the workers were hostile to the Makhnovites.

To peasants, or small-scale craft workers, used to living their whole lives in small collectives, it can make sense that the small collective should manage its own affairs and deal with whatever it needs from outside its area by ad hoc contracts with other similar collectives.

To the modern wage-worker, used to living in large cities, to moving from job to job and city to city, and conscious that her or his job is part of an enormously ramified chain of production, it makes no sense.

Bookchin's indictment of the working class as "inorganic" is much the same thought as Marx develops about the "emptiness" of advanced bourgeois society.

"In fact... when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities...? Where he does not reproduce himself in one specificity, but produces his totality? Strives not to remain something he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?

"In bourgeois economics — and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds — this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total

alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end..."

Only, Marx argues that the working class can and must press forward, through this "working-out", to overthrowing capital and creating the free association of producers on an extensive and rich rather than a localised and poor basis.

"The mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour. Once they have done so — and disposable time thereby ceases to have an antithetical existence — then, on one side, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that... disposable time will grow for all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time".

"It is as ridiculous", writes Marx, "to yearn for a return to [the] original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end".

Anarchism - again with the exception of anarcho-syndicalism - is essentially a variant of the "romantic viewpoint".

But working-class organisation and struggle today are at a low level. A link between the sort of trade-union activity feasible today and social revolution appears far-fetched. Even if anarchist activity is only a "romantic" protest against the capitalist order, isn't "romantic" protest at least better than dull immersion in the routine bargaining processes of the capitalist order?

It is no part of Marxism to deny the value of imaginative "stunts". But we do believe that revolutionaries must prepare for revolution by a focus on patient, long-term work in working-class struggles (even small ones).

A long view is necessary in order to see the connections.

The wage-working class in capitalist society has a twofold character. It is both the basic alienated class, having its life reduced to the margins around a process of labour for capital which sucks out its energy while returning to it only a pittance by which to keep its labour-power in trim; and the basic creative class, developing an ever-more-multifarious cooperative potency in production.

As Marx put it: "Large-scale industry... does away with all repose, all fixity and all security as far as the worker's life-situation is concerned [and enforces] the ceaseless sacrifices required from the working class... the reckless squandering of labour-powers, and... the devastating effects of social anarchy. But [also] large-scale industry, through its very catastrophes, makes the recognition of the variation of labour and hence of the fitness of the worker for the maximum number of different kinds of labour into a question of life and death. [It points towards] the totally developed individual, for whom the different social functions are different modes of activity he takes up in turn..."

Capitalist production throws the working class into constant conflicts with capital over the terms and conditions of the sale of labour-power. Even if limited to the issue of wages, those battles generate class organisations of the workers - trade unions - and ties of class solidarity. Extended to issues of workers' control over production, they pose the question of the principle of solidarity replacing the rules of the market.

The creative powers of the working class, increased through cooperation and science, demand direct self-organisation in place of the capitalist organisation where those powers appear as the property of individual capitals - where the social fact that labour produces all new value is expressed as the market fact that money buys all commodities.

A cooperative commonwealth is thus not just a benevolent scheme to relieve the sufferings of the workers, or a good plan for which the workers' numbers and economic power are necessary as a battering-ram. It is the photographic positive for which the negative is provided by the struggle of the working class, within capitalist society, to lift the burdens of its class subordination by abolishing it.

History confirms theory. Time and again, from the Paris Commune of 1871 through the Russian Revolution of 1917, the revolutionary movements across Europe after World War 1, and the Spanish Revolution of 1936 through to Portugal in 1975 and Poland in 1980-1, when the working class has gained enough self-confidence and organisation to come forward as a force challenging the existing order, it has created workers' councils

with direct democracy, imposed workers' control of production, and placed social provision for need as the guiding principle in place of profit.

Even in quiet times, when the workers' movements are unmilitant and cautious, it is almost always in their ranks that the most numerous advocates, and the best hearing, for such ideas is found.

In times when working-class organisation and struggle have run at a high level, many anarchists have gone over to anarcho-syndicalism, i.e. to much the same idea as Marxists about the centrality of the wage-working class and its everyday struggles.

The constant whirl of capitalist restructuring implies also a constant whirl of breaking-up and sidelining workers' organisations as they exist at any given time. The organisation constantly requires rebuilding. After a series of defeats, it may stumble at a low level for a long time.

And it may need to be rebuilt in a form seriously different from what it had before the defeats. After the Chartist movement of the British workers in the 1830s and 1840s, and the mostly short-lived trade union organisations associated with it, were defeated, for a long time attempts to organise a revival came to nothing. When the working-class revival came in the 1880s, its form - the New Unionism, mostly in large-scale industry, and the first Marxist groups - was significantly different from that of 1830s and 1840s.

But, so long as capital continues, the workers' movement will rebuild, and its rebuilding will include trade-union organisation, even though we cannot predict the specific forms and tempos.

While the workers' movement remains at a low level, it cannot overthrow capital and make a revolution. But nor can anyone else. The revolutionaries need to decide what long-term work they can do, in relatively quiet times and (if the revolutionaries are not very numerous) on a small scale, which will best prepare the way for mass revolutionary action in the future.

In September 1850 Marx decided that he and his comrades faced a long period when the workers' movement would be at a low level. He broke with the majority of the Communist League exiles in London, with these words:

"We tell the workers: If you want to change conditions and make yourselves capable of government, you will have to undergo fifteen, twenty or fifty years of civil war.

"Now they are told [by the majority]: We must come to power immediately or we might as well go to sleep. The word proletariat' has been reduced to a mere phrase, like the word 'people' was by the democrats.

"To make this phrase a reality one would have to declare the entire petty bourgeois to be proletarians, i.e. de facto represent the petty bourgeoisie and not the proletariat. In place of actual revolutionary development one would have to adopt the revolutionary phrase".

In other words, only by a lengthy development within capitalist society (by civil war, Marx evidently means social war, rather than necessarily military battle), does the working class become the revolutionary working class.

To adopt the "revolutionary phrase", that is, to pretend that conditions are always immediately revolutionary, is to end up recommending whatever oppositional movements, or even just protest activities, are immediately to hand, and glossing them up as more than they are, rather than cleaving to the long-term interests of the working class.

Thus activists can be drawn to anarchism today by either one of two apparently contradictory impulses: the desire for immediately "revolutionary" activity, or the resigned conclusion that revolution is so remote that all talk of strategy is pointless, and the best we can do for now is to contest and challenge the capitalist order piecemeal but in the most colourful way we can find.

A Marxist focus on the working class does not mean that we occupy ourselves entirely or even mainly with trade-union routine.

Workers do not just work. They live. Workers are drawn into a vast range of partial battles in capitalist society - tenants' and community struggles, anti-racist agitation, anti-war demonstrations, feminist activity, electoral politics - and often in a way that is specifically shaped by their working-class social identity, or can be specifically shaped that way.

In those battles, every day, even when class struggle is at a relatively low and piecemeal level, activists can and do "make socialists" - convince workers, on the basis of the experience of the struggle, that capitalist oppression and exploitation must be overthrown and replaced by a cooperative commonwealth, and that the working class is the force to do it.

Trade-union struggle is one of those partial struggles. It is not necessarily the one that "makes socialists" in the greatest numbers. But it is the one that yields the biggest, most stable, and most powerful organisations, and best enables the socialists to develop dialogue with and gain organised influence among their fellow-workers in an ongoing, relatively-permanent way.

Thus in all the partial battles, it is usually trade unions - and specifically, trade union organisations where socialists have been active - that campaigners turn to when they want large-scale organised support for emancipatory causes. That is true even when the trade unions are at a low level.

Antonio Negri once expressed well a basic idea of Marxism. "The fact that we cannot spell out the alternative does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. It exists as a murmuring among the proletariat".

Marxist tactics are about organising ourselves to hear and listen to that "murmuring among the proletariat", to develop dialogue with it, and by dialogue to raise it first to open speech and then finally to a yell of victory.

Only a minority are "made socialists", in normal times; certainly only a minority are "made socialists" with sufficient conviction and confidence to become active in a regular, ongoing way, not just in particular actions and campaigns.

Anarchists, of course, know as well as Marxists do that only a minority in normal times are consistently active. But what anarchists - again with the exception of anarcho-syndicalists - lack is a coherent idea of how the minority can act today so as best to contribute to majority action tomorrow.

Our rules were best formulated by Trotsky. "To face reality squarely; not to seek the line of least resistance; to call things by their right names; to speak the truth to the masses, no matter how bitter it may be; not to fear obstacles; to be true in little things as in big ones; to base one's programme on the logic of the class struggle; to be bold when the hour for action arrives..."

The premiss here, the long view, is that "the logic of the class struggle" tends to socialist conclusions even at times when, the class struggle being relatively muted, that "logic" expresses itself only in louder or quieter "murmurings".

If workers organise, mobilise and agitate on key issues of working-class interest, then other "adjacent" social issues will also be brought to the fore - for example, the right of trade unionists to take industrial action on "political" issues is brought to the fore by campaigns to save the Health Service.

Action and success can generate confidence and combativity that brings things near which, a short time ago, were far off and seemingly impossible. Demands and proposals which have the potential to make those links, to guide those chain-reactions, are what Marxists call "transitional demands".

Such transitional demands form the bridge between reform battles and revolutionary socialist politics.

Yes, Marxist tactics may involve a lot of routine work in trade unions and other campaigns. And, yes, some would-be Marxists get submerged in that routine work and lose sight of the revolutionary aim: that is a central reason why Marxists argue for tight revolutionary organisation, rather than just a diffuse network loosely linking individuals each immersed in her or his own trade union or campaign.

But the point is to do the routine work in a way that is constantly focused on noticing and developing the non-routine, the sparks of rebellion.

Undeniably, Marxism is more "bookish" than anarchism. It values the spirit of spontaneous revolt as much as anarchism does, but insists more on the need for those who have decided to become consistent activists to study, to educate themselves, to thrash out their ideas in a collective organisation which strives to make its policies precise.

We can base our programme on the logic of the class struggle only if we understand that logic, and we can come to understand that logic only by studying the underlying mechanisms of capitalist life - as analysed in works like Marx's "Capital" - and the history and lessons of past workers' struggles.

Looking back at the Russian revolutionary movement, Trotsky observed that it was not the revolutionary populists who started with bombs and bullets for Tsars and Tsarist officials, but those who started out with the heavy tomes under their arms and worked to educate and organise the proletariat, who eventually made the revolution.

The revolutionary populists - the Socialist Revolutionary party of Russia, established in 1898 - were essentially reconstructed anarchists. Until 1911 much of their effort, through a special subgroup, the "SR Combat Organisation", was dedicated to assassinating Tsarist officials. After February 1917 they ended up supporting the bourgeois Provisional Government; after October 1917, in their majority, as subordinates to Tsarist generals in the civil war against the new workers' and peasants' government.

Some anarchists denounce the "bookishness" of Marxists as "elitists", and claim that they themselves rely on the spontaneously revolutionary impulses of the multitude, rejecting all attempts to bring in ideas "from the outside", i.e. from books, from the documented experiences of past struggles, from the studies and debates pursued by activist minorities before mass struggles erupt.

The truth is just the opposite. The Marxist view reflects our confidence that the working class - when mobilised in full flower - can and will quickly absorb (and in the process, revive, renew, reshape) the ideas which at present can be got only from books and small discussions. It reflects our conviction that the socialist revolution will be made by a working class which has thought through and fully understood what it is doing, or will not be made at all.

No-one actually believes that anyone, worker or not, can develop a scientific understanding of capitalist society "spontaneously", without study or discussion, any more than we can learn mathematical analysis just by "instinct". The anarchist view here comes down to the idea that it doesn't matter if the workers (or the "multitude") have very little beyond an instinctive rage against the system. It is all right if all theoretical overviews remain the property of the anarchist-activist minority, the "invisible pilots" as Bakunin called them.

Finally, what of anarcho-syndicalism? This is the version of anarchism that identifies the society of the future as a federation of industries each run by the trade-union of the workers in the industry, rather than as federation of small local communes.

Unlike other variants of anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism focuses on the wage-working class. It has a coherent idea of what to do in un-revolutionary times: build up the unions which will later be the instruments of revolution.

Anarcho-syndicalism is far from "pure" anarchism. Arguing with fellow anarchists to turn away from their closed discussion circles and small bomb-throwing conspiracies towards the unions, Fernand Pelloutier, the pioneer of French anarcho-syndicalism (which was a mass movement between 1902 and 1914) wrote that:

"Nobody believes or expects that the coming revolution will realise unadulterated anarchist communism". Trade-union administration of society would be the best "transitional state" available.

Weren't the trade unions disciplined, collective bodies? Didn't that outrage the individualist sensibilities of anarchism? Well, said Pelloutier, in unions "individuals are at liberty to quit, except... when battle has been joined with the enemy". Presumably he hoped that anarchists would overlook how big an "except" that was, or would admit that pure individual autonomy cannot be an absolute principle in a society of class struggle.

Inside the mass French trade-union movement, the CGT, the revolutionary syndicalists formed a self-conscious "active minority", mostly grouped around newspapers and magazines, who deliberately strove to educate rather than just to rely on spontaneous rebellion.

Trotsky described that French revolutionary syndicalism as "a remarkable draft outline of revolutionary communism".

Unfortunately, most anarchists today are not anarcho-syndicalists. When there is a big workers' struggle, the people contributing support and proposals, organising rank-and-file groups, and so on, are mostly (for better or for worse) the various Marxist or would-be Marxist groups, not anarchist groups.

However, the "draft outline" was and is lacking in several respects.

Firstly, in anarcho-syndicalist perspectives the unions have to combine the three distinct roles played in a Marxist perspective by three distinct sorts of organisation - the workers' political party (or proto-party), the unions, and the workers' councils.

The result is a sort of pantomime-horse effect. Unions, if they are to be effective, must include as nearly as possible the whole workforce, excluding only strike-breakers. Under anywhere near normal conditions, they include many workers whose social ideas are conformist and bourgeois.

To try to make the union a revolutionary-educational force is to narrow it down and make it ineffective as a union. The activists end up with neither an effective union, nor an effective party, but something which is botched in both respects. The French revolutionary-syndicalist idea of "the active minority" was a partial answer, but only a partial one, to that problem.

Further, even the broadest unions usually organise only a minority of the workforce. Usually the worst-off sections of the working class are not, or only scantily, unionised. In revolutionary times, those worst-off sections explode into activity. Workers then need much broader and more flexible organisations than even the trade unions - namely, workers' councils.

Those workers' councils will be the foundation of the future workers' state. It should be the unions instead? But if the unions are to play the role of rulers in the future society, then what will play the role of unions? Even under a workers' state, individual groups of workers may sometimes need to assert their particular interests against the collective.

Although, as Pelloutier admitted, the anarcho-syndicalists effectively abandoned the "pure anarchist" idea of immediate abolition of all government, they did keep warning the workers against what Emile Pouget, another leader of the CGT, called "the virus of politics".

Actually, the warnings were pretty ineffective. Despite the CGT's calls not to vote, most CGT workers voted socialist. For socialists who in their majority turned out to be unprincipled parliamentary reformists, of course, since anarcho-syndicalist doctrine banned the more revolutionary activists from using the electoral arena for their own agitational, educational, recruitment efforts.

Syndicalism cannot be equated fully with "economism". Around the end of the 19th century, a section of the Russian Marxists, bowled over by the success of their new agitation on workplace economic issues, came to argue that socialists should focus exclusively or overwhelmingly on such economic issues, leaving outside-the-workplace political issues to the bourgeois liberals for the time being, and that socialist politics would then easily grow out of the extension of economic struggle. That was "economism".

The CGT put much effort into political campaigns against militarism, and indeed explicitly against "patriotism". That makes its collapse into supporting the French government in 1914 all the more revealing of the ultimate inadequacy of its strategy. But it certainly campaigned politically.

The revolutionary syndicalists in the USA, the IWW, held true to their anti-militarist principles in World War One. In their heyday they probably spent more energy on free-speech fights - defending their right to hold street meetings and to publish papers - than they did on direct economic agitation.

The syndicalists did campaign politically. But there is an overlap with "economism". The syndicalists curtailed their own political agitation by their belief that strong union organisation was ultimately enough, by itself, to make a revolution; and by their fear of the "virus of politics".

They could campaign against reactionary government measures - in 1913, the CGT established a united front with the Socialist Party, to protest against the government introducing a three-year term of compulsory military service - but they could never campaign for positive reforms to be nailed down in law! They could not campaign for votes for women, for example, because their principle was to avoid and reject voting for parliament. All their political activity was done with one hand tied behind their backs.

As Trotsky pointed out: "By the manner in which they treat the question [of the state], the syndicalists, unwittingly of course, contribute to the passive conciliation of the workers with the capitalist state. When the syndicalists keep drumming into the workers, who are oppressed by the bourgeois state, their warnings about the dangers of a proletarian state, they play a purely reactionary role.

"The bourgeois will readily repeat to the workers: 'Do not touch the state because it is a snare full of dangers to you'..."

The anarcho-syndicalists had no real idea of how to deal with the bourgeois state, other than the thought that if they could organise a full general strike then bourgeois power would simply collapse. They took great comfort in calculations that compared the numbers of the French army with the length of railway line in

France, and concluded that in a perfect general strike the army could not exert control over the railways, let alone over any other industry.

In reality, such a perfect general strike is impossible. Faced with World War One in 1914, the syndicalists knew that their cure-all of a general strike to stop war was impractical. While revolutionary Marxists like Lenin and Luxemburg, who had always rejected the anarchist myth of the perfect general strike, were able to start organising opposition to the war, the CGT collapsed into support for its own government in the war no less abjectly than the parliamentary-reformist socialists.

Only a minority among the syndicalists, people like Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monatte, remained true to their principles. And in the course of doing so, they found that they had to develop their principles, and become "political" revolutionary communists, Marxists.

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