

Anarchism & Elections

Your questions answered

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The Workers Solidarity Movement, along with anarchist organisations throughout the world, refuses to take part in parliamentary elections. Is it not downright weird, or even hypocritical, when anarchists claim to want more democracy than anyone else? Is this a rejection of democracy? Alan MacSimoin tries to answer some of the questions that arise again and again.

So, what's your problem with voting?

What problem? We've no problem with voting. How do you think we make decisions? We discuss proposals and then register how many are in favour and how many against; or, in plain English, we vote. We do this all the time in our own anarchist organisations, in our unions, in our community groups.

But you won't stand candidates for the Dail, Stormont or Westminster, you won't even vote in any of those elections.

We anarchists want a society where the division of people into bosses and workers, rulers and ruled, is ended. So, we have no interest in choosing who will be our rulers. It's pretty ABC, you might as well ask a teetotaller if she wants a pint of Guinness or one of Beamish.

This electoral process involves the mass of working people relying on a few representatives to enter parliament and do battle on their behalf. Our sole involvement is one of voting every few years and perhaps canvassing and supporting the party through donations or whatever.

Anarchists do not believe any real socialist / anarchist society can come about through the good actions of a few individuals. If a few can grant us freedom then a few can also take our freedom away.

Anarchism is about real participative democracy — based on delegation rather than representation with delegates being elected only to implement specific decisions. Delegates would not have the right to go against the mandate of those who elected them. Delegates would enjoy no special rights or privileges and, unlike TDs or MPs, would be subject to instant recall and dismissal if they disobey their mandate. This idea is obviously the complete opposite to the parliamentary idea. We do not seek a few leaders, good, bad or indifferent to sort out the mess that is capitalism. Indeed we argue constantly against any ideas that make it seem such elites are necessary.

So why do you call on people to vote in referendums such as the referendum on citizenship in 2003, the one you called the "racist referendum", or referendums on the European Union?

There is a big difference between voting in order to make a decision and voting for someone to whom we will hand over decision-making. That's why we threw ourselves into the referenda on children's, divorce and abortion rights. We went out knocking on doors, putting up posters, organising public meetings, speaking on TV and radio, and leafleting our neighbourhoods. Referenda are closer to anarchist ideas of direct democracy and are, while flawed, far better than electing a politician to office once every few years.

Even if you don't agree with the current system, you could use elections as a platform for your ideas.

Yes, it could certainly be argued that we could. BUT it would come at a price – and a very costly price. We would certainly get a few minutes every now and again to say our piece, we might even get the very occasional favourable mention in the newspapers. But the cost of this would be to re-inforce the clientilism and passivity which is an inherent part of the electoral system. Elections are about leaving the vast majority of people in the role of passive observer of political life rather than active participant. Anarchists want to see working class people take an active role in bringing about change in society. Participation in electoral politics has the opposite effect. The cost is too high a price to pay.

But wouldn't it help to build a mass movement if we had people in parliament?

Talk about putting the cart before the horse. What mass movement has ever been built by having TDs or MPs? To get socialists elected implies that there are already a lot of voters who understand and agree with socialism, otherwise why would they vote for a socialist candidate?

Even on a local scale, look at the election of anti-hospital closure TDs like Paudge Connolly in Monaghan. He was elected because the run down of the health service was already a burning issue and thousands had taken to streets. His election was a result, not the cause. And it didn't stop the rundown of Monaghan hospital.

The downside of his election is that it reinforced the idea that engaging in 'real politics' is the way to get things done. And our rulers just love that, it moves us back to passivity and dependence. We can support our 'representative' as opposed to putting on real pressure by means of direct action like strikes and blockades.

And why can't you do both?

For starters, electioneering almost always results in the party using it gradually becoming more moderate. In order to gain votes, the party must appear "realistic" and "practical" and that means working within the system. If you use language like 'socialism', 'class struggle' and 'revolution', it is said you will frighten off potential voters.

It's a lot easier to leave any mention of it out of your election leaflets rather than having to explain that it simply means a complete change, and not some gang of demented maniacs marching through streets awash with blood. And that's just one example. You end up trying not to offend your potential electorate, rather than trying to convince them of your radically different ideas.

History is littered with examples of parties which started off from the position of combining parliamentary and extra-parliamentary politics but which became part of the system. From Marxian Social Democracy at the turn of the 19th/20th century right through to the German Green Party in the early years of this decade, we have seen example after example of radical parties starting off from the position of declaring the need for direct action and extra-parliamentary

action. Indeed they often refer to their electoral involvement as the least important part of their strategy. In every single example, however, the parties involved have ended up considering the gathering of votes as more important than the message. The revolutionary slogans and policies eventually get watered down in order not to offend potential voters, the elected 'representative' loses touch with the real world.

And even if a political party or organisation approaches elections from a purely cynical point of view – i.e. with no illusions in the system, with no real interest in getting elected but wanting to use the tactic of standing in elections to provide them with a soapbox – and even if that political organisation manages to avoid the watering-down of its message, there is still a fundamental problem. What message is being given to the electorate – is it 'Get involved, fight back, make a difference' or is it 'Get involved and support us to make a difference'? As I've said already, it's impossible to be involved in the electoral process without re-enforcing passivity and clientelism.

The campaign against the bin tax in Dublin is a prime example of a campaign which became subservient to the electoral ambitions of various political parties. In several areas the development of the campaign was stunted by the fact that certain individuals who were going to be standing in the election wanted to be the principal spokesperson and organiser – 'leader' if you like – of the campaign in that area. So trying to combine campaigning and electoralism will inevitably lead to the campaigning becoming subservient to the electioneering.

But it doesn't have to be like that, you can't deny that the vote for Joe Higgins in Dublin West helped to beat the water charges?

Well, I can. It was mass non-payment that defeated the water charges. His own Socialist Party agrees with us on that. Getting a few individuals elected is not what scares governments. If it were, the election of anti-health cuts TDs like Jerry Cowley and Paudge Connolly would have seen hospital wards reopened and waiting lists slashed. It hasn't, draw your own conclusion.

While we are talking about Joe, I want to say that he is held in high regard by many anarchists as an honest and selfless socialist. And I say this even though Joe's existence makes it a bit harder for anarchists – it's easy to point at him and say "if only we could have a government of people like Joe wouldn't it be so much better?" And it sure would! But there's a problem. For every Joe there's a Tommy Sheridan... or a Pat Rabbinette... or someone else who thinks he or she is bigger or more important than their mandate.

And even if the power and wealth doesn't go to their heads, people may change their politics. Once elected, politicians are free to do as they please until the next election. There is no mechanism for enforcing the mandate or withdrawing support if the elected person does not hold to his/her mandate. We have to hand over our decision making to someone we have no effective control over. Society remains divided into order-givers and order-takers.

It could of course also be argued that the political system will always tolerate one or two Joe Higginses. In fact his existence as a TD serves quite a useful purpose – the establishment can point at Joe as an example which proves that their democracy works. 'After all it can accommodate views right across the political spectrum from Michael McDowell to Joe Higgins' might be their mantra. But have you ever thought about how the establishment might react if there were a dozen TDs like Joe Higgins? Or if there was any danger of a government being elected

on a radical socialist platform? How would international capital react? How long do you think it would take multinational capital to effectively shut down the Irish economy?

As Emma Goldman pointed out, “if the anarchists were strong enough to swing the elections to the Left, they must also have been strong enough to rally the workers to a general strike.” If we’re to bring about change, if we’re to take on the might of international capital we can only do so in the context of politicisation and direct involvement of the mass of working class people. It can never happen as long as the mass of people remain passive observers or supporters.

Does this mean anarchists are just negative, that we should put all our energy into anti-election campaigns?

We don’t see this as an important activity at all. Our aim is not to have elections where only 10% vote, that would be meaningless in itself. In the U.S.A. only about 30% vote in most elections and it is possible that up to 50% of the population is not even registered to vote. Only someone whose brain is missing, however, would claim this meant the U.S. was more anarchist than Ireland. Not voting may just be a sign of despair (“what’s the point”). We want working people actively organising and struggling for the alternative.

What we will do is use the opportunity of a time when people are talking a little more about politics to challenge the notion that important decisions can only be made by a very few, whether they be elected politicians or unelected business tycoons; and put across our anarchist ideas.

The amount of our energy that anarchists put in to specific anti-election campaigns is tiny compared to the amount of time we spend campaigning. Since the last election in the 26-Counties, anarchists in the WSM, as well as producing 24 issues of our newspaper Workers Solidarity (distributing 6,000 copies of each issue) and 7 issues of this magazine, have been involved in huge numbers of campaigns – Shell to Sea, Justice for Terence Wheelock, anti-racism, anti bin tax, workers’ rights, trade union work..... If you look back through issues of our paper or look at our website (www.wsm.ie) you’ll get something of a flavour. So far from spending huge amounts of energy on anti-election campaigns, the vast majority of our work is aimed at encouraging the involvement of working class people in fighting for their rights, in real political interaction in other words.

If more people abstained it would just lead to the right winning elections, more DUP and PD type politicians.

Possibly. However anarchists don’t just say “don’t vote”, we say “organise” as well. Apathy is something we have no interest in encouraging.

If a sizeable number of working class people refused to participate in the electoral charade but became actively involved in their trade unions, in community groups and in campaigns actively fighting for change, whichever party was in office would have to rule over a country in which a sizeable minority had rejected government as such. This would mean that the politicians would be subjected to real pressures from people who believed in their own power and acted accordingly. So anarchists call on people not to vote for governments and, instead, organise themselves and

be conscious of their own collective power. This can curb the power of government in a way that millions of crosses on bits of paper never will.

But, even if the present set-up isn't perfect, surely you are in favour of democratic rights?

The right to the vote is just one element in the hard won struggles of workers (and suffragettes!) over the last couple of hundred years. Democratic rights — in short the ability to organise and promote alternative ideas — were an important gain and one that is well worth defending.

Obviously it is preferable to live in a parliamentary democracy rather than a dictatorship. We don't see any significant immigration into North Korea, Iran or Belarus, but many people are prepared to risk a lot in the hope of getting into Canada, the Netherlands or Ireland. It's not just about the prospect of having a better standard of living, it's also about having more liberty.

Even the most flawed democracies are forced to make concessions that dictatorships do not, such as a certain amount of free speech, less censorship, rights for women and gays, a degree of independence for trade unions, letting people come together in organisations to seek changes in the way society is run, and so on.

However we are not naive and we do realise that none of these are absolutes. What we call 'rights' can be taken away as well as conceded. The level of freedom we enjoy is set by how much the bosses need to give in order to keep the majority content, plus the amount that is forced from them through struggle. None of the rights we now enjoy were simply handed down as gifts by our rulers, they all had to be struggled for.

In democratic societies life is better and it easier to engage in such struggles. That's why we are all in favour of defending the 'democratic rights' we now have. As Mikhail Bakunin put it "the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than even the most enlightened monarchy."

And your alternative is what?

By using direct action we can force politicians to respect the wishes of the people. For example, if a government or boss tries to limit free speech, then anarchists would try to encourage a free speech fight to break the laws in question until such time as they were revoked. In the case of environmental destruction, anarchists would support and encourage attempts at halting the damage by mass trespassing on sites, blocking the routes of developments, organising strikes and so on. If a boss refuses to introduce a shorter working day, then workers should join a union and go on strike or stop working after 7 hours.

Similarly, strikes combined with social protest would be an effective means of stopping authoritarian laws being passed. For example anti-union laws would be best fought by strike action and community boycotts. The example of the water charges in the 26 counties in the late 1990s shows the power of such direct action. The government could happily handle hours of speeches by opposition politicians but they could not ignore social protest.

As Noam Chomsky argues, "within the constraints of existing state institutions, policies will be determined by people representing centres of concentrated power in the private economy, people who, in their institutional roles, will not be swayed by moral appeals but by the costs

consequent upon the decisions they make — not because they are ‘bad people,’ but because that is what the institutional roles demands.”

He continues by arguing that “those who own and manage the society want a disciplined, apathetic and submissive public that will not challenge their privilege and the orderly world in which it thrives. The ordinary citizen need not grant them this gift. Enhancing the Crisis of Democracy by organisation and political engagement is itself a threat to power, a reason to undertake it quite apart from its crucial importance in itself as an essential step towards social change.”

So, far from doing nothing, by not voting the anarchist actively encourages alternatives. As the British anarchist John Turner, General Secretary of the United Shop Assistants Union back in the 1890s argued, anarchists “have a line to work upon, to teach the people self-reliance, to urge them to take part in non-political [i.e. non-electoral] movements directly started by themselves for themselves ... as soon as people learn to rely upon themselves they will act for themselves ...

We teach the people to place their faith in themselves, we go on the lines of self-help. We teach them to form their own committees of management, to repudiate their masters, to despise the laws of the country...” In this way we encourage self-activity, self-organisation and self-help — the opposite of apathy and doing nothing.

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