

Follow the leader?

Thinking about anarchism

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1993

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A CYNICAL EYE is directed at anarchists whenever they speak of organisation. Is not anarchism the opposite to organisation? The simple answer is NO. Is it then the opposite of large or complicated organisation. The answer is equally simple, NO. So where do such mistaken ideas come from?

Anarchists want an end to the present system and its replacement by a socialism that is indivisible from freedom. Being just as realistic and practical as anyone else they know that the bosses are well organised and have the forces of the state at their disposal. To bring about such a fundamental change will require a very high degree of organisation. So where do the accusations that anarchists are incapable of organisation come from?

It is not just that our opponants will tell lies about us. Of course that happens, one only has to read the papers of Leninist groupings who take great delight in using the word 'anarchy' to describe chaos. These groupings do not have the excuse of ignorance, their misrepresentation is a case of petty and childish slander. But this hardly explains the confusion as their readership is not exactly massive. However similar misrepresentations in the Independent, Press, Herald, Times, Star, Examiner, Newsletter, Irish News, Echo, on radio and TV do have such an effect that the anarchism = chaos idea is widely accepted by those who have not yet met an anarchist.

ARE RULERS NECESSARY?

This is not to claim that there is a conspiracy by broadcasters and newspaper editors to tell lies about anarchists. That would be quite an absurd proposition to put forward in Ireland today. Our numbers do not yet inspire so much fear in the ruling class that they would go to such lengths. The reason is that anarchists reject the view that there must always be a division of people into rulers and ruled. The rich and powerful (and those who would like to be rich and powerful) cannot accept this. In their eyes, because of their own sense of superiority and self-importance, to live without rulers could only lead to chaos. The working class, they believe, are too stupid to run their own lives, let alone the whole of society. They are absolutely convinced that the absence of a small ruling group can only lead to disorder.

So then, what type of organisation should we seek to build? Two forms are possible. The first is the one we are all used to whether it be the Dáil, in our trade union or even in a campaigning group. This is a structure where the decisions are made at the top and most of the electorate/members have no effective say in the decision making process. We are expected to simply obey. Though the handful of people at the top may have been elected we have no real control over them. In no way are they really accountable to the rest of us.

PACK OF LIARS

In recent years the best example was the Fianna Fáil slogan of "Health cuts hurt the old, the sick and the handicapped". As soon as they got their behinds onto cabinet seats they proceeded to savage the health service, breaking all their election promises. And when health workers, other trade unionists and concerned individuals took to the streets in protest we were told that our behaviour was undemocratic, that we should abide by the democratic election result!

Organisation based on a small leadership telling everyone else what to do is always opposed by anarchists. We have no desire to be ruled, ordered round or dictated to. But is this not an

unrealistic position that takes no account of the real world? Back in 1912 miners in South Wales began a discussion¹ about structures in their union. They looked at both sides of the leadership issue. Although that was eighty one years ago, what they found still provides food for thought today and it is worth quoting from. (The language of their document reflects both the sexist ideas of those times and the lack of women in the mining industry).

THE GOOD SIDE OF LEADERSHIP

“1. Leadership tends to efficiency

One decided man, who knows his own mind is stronger than a hesitating crowd. It takes time for a number of people to agree upon a given policy. One man soon makes up his mind.

2. He takes all responsibility

As a responsible leader, he knows that his advice is almost equivalent to a command, and this ensures that his advice will have been carefully and gravely considered before being tendered.

3. He stands for Order and System

All too frequently, ‘What is everybody’s business is nobody’s business’, and if no one stands in a position to ensure order and system, many things are omitted which will cause the men’s interest to suffer.

4. He affords a standard of goodness and ability

In the sphere of public usefulness there is a great field of emulation. The good wishes of the masses can only be obtained by new aspirants for office showing a higher status of ability than the then existing leaders. This tends to his continued efficiency or elimination.

5. His faithfulness and honesty are guarded

Hero worship has great attractions for the hero, and a leader has great inducements on this side, apart from pecuniary considerations to remain faithful and honest.

THE BAD SIDE OF LEADERSHIP

1. Leadership implies power

Leadership implies power held by the leader. Without power the leader is inept. The possession of power inevitably leads to corruption. All leaders become corrupt, in spite of their own good intentions. No man was ever good enough, or strong enough, to have such power at his disposal, as real leadership implies.

¹ The Miners Next Step, Unofficial Reform Committee. Tonypany, Wales. 1912.

2. Consider what it means

This power of initiative, this sense of responsibility, the self respect which comes from expressed manhood, is taken from the men, and consolidated in the leader. The sum of their initiative, their responsibility, their self respect becomes his.

3. The order and system

The order and system he maintains is based upon the suppression of the men, from being independent thinkers into being 'the men' or 'the mob'. Every argument which could be advanced to justify leadership on this score would apply equally well to the Czar of all the Russias and his policy of repression. In order to be effective, the leader must keep the men in order, or he forfeits the respect of the employers and 'the public', and thus becomes ineffective as a leader.

4. He corrupts the aspirants to public usefulness

He is compelled, in order to maintain his power, to see to it that only those who are willing to act as his drill sergeants or coercive agents shall enjoy his patronage. In a word, he is compelled to become an autocrat and a foe to democracy.

5. He prevents solidarity

Sheep cannot be said to have solidarity. In obedience to a shepherd they will go up or down, backwards or forwards as they are driven by him and his dogs. But they have no solidarity, for that means unity and loyalty. Unity and loyalty, not to an individual, or the policy of an individual, but to an interest and a policy which is understood and worked for by all.

Finally he prevents the legislative power of the workers

An industrial vote will affect the lives and happiness of workmen more than a political vote. The power to vote whether there shall or shall not be a strike, or upon an industrial policy to be pursued by his union will affect far more important issues to the workman's life than the political vote can ever touch. Hence it should be more sought after, and its privileges jealously guarded. Think of the tremendous power going to waste because of leadership, of the inevitable stop-block he becomes on progress, because quite naturally, leaders examine every new proposal and ask first how it will affect their position and power. It prevents large and comprehensive policies being initiated and carried out which depend on the understanding and watchfulness of the great majority. National strikes and policies can only be carried out when the bulk of the people see their necessity, and themselves prepare and arrange them."

LEADERS OR IDEAS?

Clearly the bad side of 'leadership' outweighs the good. The strong leadership or rule of individuals stifles self-activity and creates passive dependence. This is not to deny all forms of leadership. Anarchists do seek to become a leadership, a leadership of ideas rather than one of 'prominent

personalities' or unaccountable representatives. We seek to make anarchist ideas the most widely accepted and supported within the working class.

A rejection of the 'leadership' idea does not mean that there is no co-ordination, efficiency or organisation. Neither does it deny that some people will know more about particular issues, be better speakers or have more forceful personalities. Anarchists work for 'bottom-up' forms of organisation, that is with the rank and file membership involved in taking decisions.

Such a form of organisation excludes the possibility of a 'leadership' emerging which would make decisions "on behalf of the members". When decisions are taken, accountable delegates should be appointed by the rank and file to implement these decisions. This means that the organisation remains under the control of the members, and not under the control of any 'leadership, no matter how well intentioned they may be at the outset.

PARTY OR CHURCH?

Some "socialists" operate with the idea that there is a "crisis of leadership", that the working class need a leadership which will, of course, be the Party of these "socialists". Without the Party they can't change anything. The Party is to be the brains, the vanguard of the class. Within the Party the 'best' members make up the Central Committee, and the 'best' of these becomes the leader.

The process leads to a strict hierarchy in which policies and instructions come from the top. Not totally dissimilar to the way the Catholic church works. Democracy gets pushed into the background, if it doesn't get lost completely (as happened in the Communist Parties and many of the Trotskyist ones).

This sort of set-up will lead workers nowhere except to more exploitation and dictatorship as it did in Russia and China. Anarchists, reject the 'top-down', or capitalist, form of organisation because we know that the means you use will determine what you end up with. A hierarchical and authoritarian organisation can only result in a hierarchical and authoritarian society.

Those who would dismiss our objections as 'nit picking' and our alternative as 'inefficient' or 'unworkable' usually do so because they regard their 'leadership' as all-important. They pay lip service to Marx's statement that the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself but either don't understand what he said or they disagree with it but won't say so because to disagree with Marx is regarded as a type of heresy in many left wing circles.

Anarchists have no objection to organisation. They are all for it. They were a major force within the first international socialist organisation, the International Working Mens Association. They were the driving force behind building trade unions in many countries including the USA, Argentina, France, Italy, Portugal, Korea, Russia, Switzerland, Poland and many others. More books have been published about the Spanish Civil War than any other, so how is it that Leninists still claim that anarchists have never been capable of organising when each and every one of those books will tell you that the anarchist CNT union had over one million members? Surely this would not have been possible without a high degree of organisation!

All right, says the cynic, but what about today? Things are more complex and complicated and anarchist forms of organisation could no longer work.

We only have to look across the sea to Spain once more. The National Confederation of Workers (CNT-AIT) with several thousand members, the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) with at least 20,000 members, the CEEP, better known as 'La Co-ordinadora' which organises

80% of the dockers and the Agricultural Labourers Union (SOC) with about 20,000 members all operate on anarchist organisational principles. They have found no need to abandon these principles. Neither has the 15,000 strong Central Organisation of Workers (SAC) in Sweden, nor have the anarchist influenced unions in other countries. (For a report of a recent international conference attended by some of them see Workers Solidarity no. 34.)

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Retrieved on 10th October 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 38 – Spring 1993.

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