

Anarchism as a problem of anarchism?

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In the last month, several texts have appeared on various online resources¹² about rethinking anarchism or trying to think of a future in the case of a collapse of authoritarianism in Belarus or Russia. The texts are filled with rather dubious appeals, ranging from a rejection of anti-capitalism to a transition from anarchism to general ideas of self-government, direct democracy and the struggle for human rights.

The writings themselves, which attempt to redefine anarchism, do not represent anything new. There are often people in the anarchist milieu who attribute the failures of anarchism to anarchism itself, the discrediting of the movement by the state, sectarianism, and some other issues. Sometimes this kind of criticism leads to a split in the movement and the formation of a new “real anarchism” (which usually comes full circle and returns to the “your anarchism is wrong, only we know the way to victory” form of critique).

Critics of contemporary anarchism in the post-Soviet space often ignore the history of the movement over the past 30 years. Some of them believe that anarchism started in the mid-twenties, while others suggest that the anarchist movement is in permanent crisis, and that it has no impact whatsoever on the political agenda. In this context, we will talk a little bit about the history of anarchism in Belarus and the really serious problems that the movement has encountered in the last 30 years (including the problems caused by the “new” solutions in the texts mentioned earlier). We won’t even try to look at neighboring Russia and Ukraine, since the conditions for anarchists in these regions may have been very different from the so-called Belarusian realities at this or that historical period.

The Belarusian working class and anarchism

One of the key points that appears so often in another revision of anarchism is the talk of the working class. How much of the old theory about the proletariat is still relevant to the modern world? It gets to the point where some call the working class passive and conservative. It is often those who have not really experienced the reality of working life who tend to talk about the passivity of the working class. Today, not only workers in factories but also those in offices have to fight their bosses for wages, decent working conditions, and against outright exploitation. This is not done as part of any political movements, but in one-off actions that sometimes lead to the desired success. The absence of politics within the labor movement is first of all due to repression by the Belarusian state, which is becoming more and more difficult to overcome as the dictatorship in the country becomes more and more consolidated. Today, any political opponent of Lukashenko runs the risk of losing his job rather quickly if he displays any liberal or anarchist views.

This situation was not always the case, and we saw that the relatively inactive working class of the USSR became extremely involved in the political affairs of the country after the collapse of the empire, which determined the economic development. It was in the short period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and Lukashenko’s election that the most active period of workers’ organization in Belarus occurred. Following in the footsteps of the Bolsheviki, Lukashenko fairly quickly took control of the workers’ movement in the form of the Federation of Trade Unions, destroying in parallel any other independent workers’ organizations. Among anarchists few peo-

¹ avtonom.org

² a2day.org

ple know that in the early nineties the anarcho-syndicalist trade union in Homel united several thousand people, and in 1992 an unauthorized meeting of anarchists was held in the city, which ended in clashes with the police.

Unlike parts of the contemporary revolutionary anarchist movement, which has managed to bury the working class on more than one occasion, Lukashenko and his circle are well aware of the criticality of maintaining industries under constant political pressure. In 2020, after numerous strikes across the country, the dictator turned his enormous efforts to restoring control at factories, up to and including his famous personal trip to MZKT, during which he was booed. The organizers of the actions and strikes were fired, and people were shut in their workplaces to prevent solidarity between different groups.

And in many ways it worked. Solidarity with the workers of the big industries came to a halt rather quickly. It was easy for the riot police to disperse small rallies at the entrance of the MTZ and other factories. Relatively little pressure was able to destroy the solidarity, after which the suppression of the workers' movement was a matter of time. In their turn, the office workers, in particular, a significant number of the wealthy working class in Belarus, represented by IT-workers, preferred to continue working and not to stop production, which was also critical for the Belarusian economy (in the case of a major strike in the IT sector, Lukashenko would have suffered a serious economic loss).

What is the point of all this? The point is that the working class in Belarus, as well as in many other states, remains an extremely important social group in determining the political direction of the country. The attempts to reduce the significance of the working class in Belarus, as well as in other countries with the possible revolutionary movement, can lead to an even greater marginalization of the ideas of freedom and equality, and turn anarchists into arrogant ideologists, who believe that only chosen people are able to make a revolution.

The working class (of which many Belarusian anarchists remain a part) continues to have revolutionary potential in our region. And it makes no sense for us to rush to bury the workers, as leftist intellectuals and some anarchists in the West have done. Instead, we need to develop ties with those parts of the working class that are ready to act today. Show solidarity with these people and strive for freedom together.

Is it time to forget about anti-capitalism?

Another topic that theorists of the new anarchism constantly address is capitalism. Or rather the struggle against capitalism, which has been the foundation of anarchism throughout its history. The revolutionary anarchist movement exists in constant connection with the struggle against capitalism and the state, which for many anarchists are different manifestations of authoritarian politics and economics.

The main argument of critics of the struggle against capitalism is that anarchism has failed to develop a full-fledged alternative to capitalism throughout its existence, so it is time to shelve the idea until better times. How capitalism acquired its contemporary forms is of little interest to such critics.

And capitalism, in turn, is a dynamic system that is constantly changing: to a modern market economy ideologue, political and economic ideas may seem somewhat primitive. Capitalism has never been in its final form and adapting the economy to the new challenges of the times changes

what the exploitation of workers looks like. Parallel to this, capitalism remains a political ideology with a huge amount of bigotry that denies many scientific and social facts.

To expect that in such a system some political movement can develop a ready-made alternative to modern capitalism is naive at the very least. Our anti-capitalism is first and foremost a process of searching for new solutions to the economic and social organization of society. We will only be able to develop such systems to the scale of a country or continent in a revolutionary period.

Instead of anti-capitalism, critics suggest that everyone should start a business and generate profits for the cause of anarchism. We don't have to go far to find examples of what the anarchist movement among businessmen will be like – we can look at the historical development of savage capitalism in the United States.

Moreover, within the anarchist movement, there have long been proposals to create production cooperatives as an alternative to the traditional business model. Some such cooperatives generate enough profit to support comradely initiatives, while others fight an aggressive market in which morality toward workers often gives way to profit or the trivial survival of the enterprise in the face of competition. Today's anarcho-entrepreneurs often underestimate the capitalists at their own game.

The reason for the capitalization of anarchism, according to such critics, is the contemporary problem of finding funding for various anarchist projects. Collecting enough money from the members of a small group to buy some equipment, rent premises, and other things is quite a difficult task. In addition to business, anarchists are encouraged to apply for grants, to organize crowdfunding and to rely on Western funds in their activities.

Here, too, critics of contemporary anarchism prefer to ignore the experience that already exists. The problems of financing the movement have existed for many years, and attempts to cope with them in one form or another have long existed in the so-called developed countries. Beginning with small businesses and ending with large projects that depend on those very grants and political support from foundations. Such "solutions" have brought a huge number of problems for anarchists. For example, in many EU countries (Germany, France, Denmark, Sweden, etc.) it has become the norm to pay money to some participants in self-organized projects, and theorists of leftist ideas are speaking exclusively for substantial fees. The latter in turn have created a separate class within the political movement, living on grants, which produces a pamphlet or even a book of an academic nature every few years and gives life lessons to other activists. The extent to which these people benefit and develop the movement itself can be judged by the state of the movement in Western Europe, which has lost touch with various revolutionary groups, including the working class.

As for spaces tied to monetary rewards: they often become an example of the modern capitalist workplace, in which we are not in it because we think work is important, but solely because of money. Inside the critical leftist infra-structure today are a huge number of people who have long since abandoned the ideals of freedom and equality, but continue to work because it brings in money.

Political foundations and grants are perceived by some anarchists as easy money. But then again, we have enough examples of money being used to control political movements. It is extremely rare for monetary aid to come without any conditions. Long-term projects require the formation of a network of donors, many of whom have their own political agendas that activists are well aware of. Some anti-racist and anti-fascist organizations have fallen into decline and

lost their radical roots in the hope of preserving jobs and existing projects due to this very soft power.

It is a mistake to think that the resources attracted will turn into a real political force. Unlike traditional parties and the state, anarchism relies on grassroots self-organization with its own organizational dynamics. Critics of anarchism can be told about this by the Belarusian liberals, who have relatively large resources from EU grants, but are unable to turn these resources into anything more.

For anarchists, organizing is not only an ideological issue, but also a voluntary one. The anarchist movement is largely built on people who have decided to participate in the political life of society not for rewards, but for their belief in freedom and justice.

Anarchism is a bad word

The debate about abandoning the concept of “anarchism” and moving on to something else within the anarchist milieu itself has been going on for decades. Some people believe that anarchism has been too discredited by the state in almost all regions. In Belarus, the main opponents of anarchism after the October Revolution were, of course, the Bolsheviks, who quickly engaged in propaganda against the Left Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists. Drunken sailors, chaos makers, and animals were all the Bolsheviks’ narrative against the anarchists who participated in the revolution against tsarist Russia.

The rejection of anarchism and the shift to abstract values for all that is good and against all that is bad is again nothing new. Some leftist movements in Europe, for example, which have lost perspective on many fronts and are engaged in political purism, are doing this. The rejection of a clear political ideology, among other things, is one of the reasons for the crisis of the left movement in many European countries.

To abandon anarchism today in favor solely of self-organization and some other basic principles without a complete ideology is to abandon the long history of the formation of the political culture of anarchism itself. This is what the state structures are trying to achieve, after all, the propaganda is aimed not only at discrediting the movement, but also at creating an atmosphere in which everyone is afraid/unwilling to be associated with the movement.

In Belarus, anarchism has shown its relevance again over the past 10 years during the protests against the law on parasitism and the uprising of 2020. Ideological clichés are very quickly shattered by reality if anarchists engage in street politics: not only our comrades, but also participants in local chats and mass protests saw anarchists not as drunk and useless, but as a full-fledged political force in the streets. And to do this, we did not have to give up our black flags or our self-name or our anti-capitalism. We boldly took our principles to the streets when we struggled, and people respected and accepted this. It was our political views and principles that brought so much attention to anarchism. It was not our enormous resources, our soft positions on difficult issues, or our rejection of certain forms of social struggle. Anarchists, unlike many liberals, stood at the factories with solidarity pickets in the early days of the protest, but did not forget to participate in other actions. Anarchists took an active organizational role in neighborhood initiatives, women’s marches, direct actions, and other forms of resistance to the regime. And at none of these moments did anyone come up with the idea of abandoning this very anarchism.

How is it that at such a critical moment for the post-Soviet space we hear voices calling to betray the struggle for freedom that has been going on for generations in our region in favor of a mixture of left-liberalism and social democracy? How can such ideas be discussed and even appear in the public arena when dozens of anarchist comrades are imprisoned?! No, in an atmosphere of imperialism, state terror and war, we remain committed to revolutionary anarchism and will continue to fight for a society without the state, capitalism and other forms of oppression.

Why is repression not taken into account?

It is unclear why discussions about the problems of the anarchist movement very rarely take into account state repression. In Belarus, anarchism has been under pressure from the dictatorship since at least 2010, when anarchists and other so-called extremists began to receive special attention from GUBOP/KGB and other state terror organizations. The task of surviving in such an atmosphere becomes the main one for the entire movement. And until 2020, the anarchists not only survived, but also continued their activities.

Belarusian anarchists had a special courage unknown to many anarchists in the West. Risking their own freedom and future, they continued to carry out educational activities and actions. Anarchist organizations existed in the country until the last moment, in spite of the laws prohibiting this kind of activity. The anarchists continued to break forward in spite of all this.

You should not compare the success of the revolutionary movement in Spain or the modern protest movement in France with the situation in Belarus. We live in a society where the state does everything possible to prevent political activity of its citizens. And it does not matter whether we are speaking about anarchism, socialism or liberalism. Lukashenko's dictatorship does not tolerate any form of dissent. In such an atmosphere, it is already an achievement to continue to exist and be active. Serious growth of the anarchist movement in the country occurred during short periods of relative political liberalization. Moreover, the longer a dictatorship exists, the more it is able to control resistance and any form of opposition. With today's systems of citizen control it becomes more and more difficult to remain undetected on the state's radar.

No matter how much we try to ignore it, repression works. The state is capable of suppressing political movements with violence. And this fact cannot be denied. No matter how many resources we could obtain from foundations or NGOs, we would still be forced to stay underground. And the modern Belarusian underground is not the revolutionary romance of the early 20th century, but a completely different environment. The state is constantly learning how to repress revolutionary movements, and we cannot continue to deny this. Anarchism in Belarus, just as in Russia, needs new organizational forms, not for progress and growth, but at least for survival. Today, the Belarusian anarchist movement is in decline not because of a lack of resources or stereotypes about anarchism, but because of state violence, which is trying to destroy anarchism in any of its forms. And it doesn't really matter what you call yourself. In any case, repression will catch up with you sooner or later.

Instead of a conclusion

Surprisingly, anarchism in the modern history of Belarus has already gone through many phases of development. For example, not many people know that the Green Party in Belarus was organized by some anarchists, who thought they could use the money of the European Greens for radical politics in our country. The money, as well as the struggle for power, pretty quickly turned these anarchists into politicians, and the Green Party gradually became just another opposition party.

Working for grants also ruined some of the anarchists, who gradually fell back into the mire of consuming grants for the sake of consuming grants.

Collaboration with NGOs in the final years before the 2020 protests led many anarchists to switch from street activism to professional NGO work, which takes up an enormous amount of time and effort. Such work is often not aimed at radical transformation, but at the reformist logic of transforming a dictatorship into something better. It is difficult to count how many comrades over the years have been swallowed up by the NGO sector, grinded up and spit out without the strength to participate in any political life. NGOs don't just exist for all the good and against all the bad, they also have political goals as a form of social interaction.

All in all, if you are thinking about rethinking anarchism, you should not ignore the history of the anarchist movement, which is very likely to include all your solutions and make it clear in practice how much this or that proposal makes sense in the current situation. I don't have a universal solution to the problems the anarchist movement has faced over the last 10 years (and it's unlikely that such a solution can be simplified into a text for an online platform), but I can say with confidence that the anarchist movement now more than ever needs people ready to invest their time and lives in the revolutionary struggle. Not blogging and commenting on networks, but working on the streets with people. Anarchism needs agitators, organizers and activists capable of working together and achieving common goals. Not only can we not overthrow Lukashenko without people, we cannot even survive in today's political field.

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