

Angry Not Apathetic

Anarchist Federation

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What anarchists do instead of voting

The general election is here, and once again the parties are all over us like a rash, promising that they will fix things. But you don't have to be an anarchist to know that nothing changes, whoever gets in. This is why politicians are keen on new methods such as postal voting. Labour, Tory, Liberal Democrat, nationalist (Plaid Cymru, SNP, Sinn Fein), 'principled' or 'radical' (Green Party, or leftists in some alliance), or nationalist-racist (UKIP etc), the fundamentals of the system are the same.

Whether we have the present electoral system or proportional representation, or however many people vote or don't vote in an election or referendum, as we have just seen in Scotland, capitalism is at the driving wheel globally. As working class people, we are exploited whether we can take part in 'free' elections or live under an authoritarian regime. Capitalists and property owners continue to control the wealth that we create, and they protect it through the police, legal system, and military.

You can't complain

Non-voters are told that, "If you don't vote you can't complain". But voting under these circumstances is just pretending that the system we have is basically alright. It lets the winning party off the hook. The fact is, we have next to no say in the decisions that get taken by the people we elect. This is called 'representative democracy'. Anarchists organise by 'direct democracy', where we can have a say in every decision, if we want to. We don't put our power in someone else's hands, so no one can betray us and abuse it. This really could work globally! Ask us how...

Campaigning against voting

A "don't vote" campaign on its own is just as much a waste of time. The same goes for a protest vote for a leftist or novelty candidate. The time and money spent campaigning could be better used fixing some of the problems we face in our lives. Protesting, whether it is spoiling a ballot paper or marching in the street, fails to offer any real challenge. So, anarchists say, vote, or don't vote. It won't make any difference. What is more important, is to realise that elections prop up a corrupt system and divert us from winning real change.

Don't vote, organise!

We should organise with our neighbours, workmates, other people we have shared interests with, and others who don't have the privileges that some people have. We are the experts on what we need, and on the best way to run things for the common good. We need to use direct action to achieve this. Direct action is where we solve a problem without someone else representing us. By this we mean, not just protesting and asking for change, but things like occupying, sabotaging, working to rule, refusing to pay their prices or their rent, and striking (but not waiting for union leaders to tell us when we can and can't!).

For example, when workers aren't paid the wages owed them, rather than asking the government to give us better legal protection, we take action to force employers to pay. The Department for Work & Pensions has even named the Anarchist Federation and the Solidarity Federation

among groups that are a serious threat to workfare, because we have shut down programmes. This was achieved with only a few hundred people. Imagine what could be done with thousands!

Taking it back

In reality, people are understandably afraid of taking the state on. But direct action doesn't have to mean an all-out fight to defeat capitalism in one go. Anarchists do think that ultimately, there has to be a full revolution. But by confronting the system directly at any point we can start to take control. In fact, all the good things we think of as having been created by the state – free health care, free education, health & safety laws to protect us at work, housing regulations, sick pay, unemployment benefits, pensions – came about historically to put an end to organised campaigns of collective direct action that threatened their power. And where we would fail as individuals, together we can win.

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Labour and the Unions

The infatuation of the trade unions with the Labour party should be nothing other than mystifying for ordinary workers. Whether it is 'Unions Together' or TUC voter registration drives, trade union members amongst us should feel deeply insulted at being asked to prop-up the Labour party as the best available solution.

The Labour Party was set up in the early twentieth century as a political wing of the trade union movement. Despite the rose-tinted view of history, it has continually regulated workers under capitalism. It is not a case of Labour having 'lost its way' and needing recapturing. To echo the anarchist Rudolf Rocker, political parties and elections haven't brought workers "a hair's breadth closer to socialism."

The 'Special Relationship'

The TUC and parts of the left continually present us with a picture of Labour which has nothing in common with its actual actions. They tell us that we still have a 'special relationship', and that despite its failings, the Labour Party stands-up best for ordinary working people. So we should support it 'without illusions', because it is better than the Tories. Not that you would notice! All the major parties support austerity against the working class. This is irrefutable, and Labour even says as much.

What remains of the dwindling trade union movement is essentially shackled by harsh restrictive anti-union laws and a totally compliant TUC leadership. These laws tell us how to manage our affairs, seriously restrict our ability to withdraw labour, and tell us who we can and can't expel, which means that we have to accept scabbing in our own unions. They restrict free association in a way that no other organisation can under British law and are regularly condemned by the International Labour Organisation, which is hardly a hotbed of radicalism. The only time Labour repealed anti-union laws was when its hand was forced by a mass grassroots workers movement in the 1970s.

Overtuning these present laws and rebuilding a militant culture around the workplace is going to require not the politics of the ballot box, but sheer will and the determination to oppose

so-called ‘representatives’ in both the Labour Party and the TUC. Their class interests under capitalism are intimately linked; our interests begin and end with us.

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Free Education and the Liberal Democrats: A Student’s Perspective

Living in Sheffield at the time of the last election, I saw that there was massive voter turn-out and support for the Lib Dems amongst students. A tangible optimism and excitement existed in Nick Clegg’s constituency. Personally, I spoiled my ballot paper with, ‘If voting changed anything they’d make it illegal’. However, I did wonder whether a Lib-Dem rise could contest the New Labour/Conservative stalemate of neoliberal similarity.

Clegg now sports a satisfaction rating of minus-40 (Mori survey). This is well deserved. Instead of capping tuition fees he has overseen them triple to £9,000. Young people among many others who voted Lib-Dem have been left disillusioned by this, becoming disengaged from politics. What has been proven is not that young people are not interested in politics, but that politicians are not interested in young people.

Debt

I was lucky and only had to pay £3,000/year in fees. But I now owe the Students Loan Company £23,000. This increases by at least £30 a month due to interest, which started whilst I was still at university! I am persistently being hassled by them checking if I’m earning enough yet to start paying it back.

Neo-liberalisation

When I finished university I wanted to continue studying. However, funding for a social science Master’s degree is rare and most students are self-funded. I couldn’t stand the thought of incurring more debt by taking out a loan, so I gave up on the idea. I moved home and worked in a café trying to get out of my overdraft. I found out that there are no tuition fees in Sweden for EU citizens. I applied to Stockholm University and got in, paying living costs with money I’d earned in the café. I then found out I could return to the UK on an Erasmus exchange, avoiding tuition fees and even getting an EU grant!

This illustrates the lengths that you have to go to if you come from a background where higher education is unaffordable. Furthermore, it has taught me that a free education is feasible, but cannot be accomplished by relying on political parties and the establishment. The neo-liberalisation of higher education has proliferated under the Coalition. Education is becoming the preserve of the upper-middle-class. Research too must now be ‘competitive’, not expressing critical, independent thought.

To contest this, to strive for free education, the only way is to self-organise! The demise of the Lib-Dems has shown we cannot rely on any political party to deliver this. This is why we argue ‘Don’t Vote – Organise!’

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“Tories on bikes”: the Green Party in power

“F***ing Tories on bikes” – that’s how one Brighton bin worker describes the Green Party. As the largest party on the local council, with 23 seats at the 2011 election, Brighton is the only place in the UK where the Greens have had so much as a sniff of power. And look what they’ve done with it.

Despite trumpeting a commitment to the living wage (£7.85 an hour outside London, compared to a National Minimum Wage of £6.50), they tried to impose a “pay modernisation” scheme on low-paid council workers with the support of the Conservative group on the council. It meant that refuse and recycling staff at Hollingdean depot faced a paycut of up to £4,000 a year.

Acting like the worst kind of union-busting boss, the council threatened the workers that if they refused to accept the new terms, they would sack them and re-employ them ‘on a worse contract, without compensation’. Binworkers responded with a wildcat occupation of their depot, and there have been numerous strikes and wildcat stoppages since. And the attacks on the binworkers’ terms and conditions of employment continue.

Litter picking

Green MP, Caroline Lucas claims to have made her opposition to the proposals clear, and even said that she would “join the picket line if the Council forces a pay cut on low paid staff.” Well, we haven’t seen her on any picket lines. We did see her picking up litter during the strike of June 2013, despite a statement from the bin-workers asking people not to, because as they say, “any attempts to lessen the impact of a strike [by picking up litter] completely undermines our action.”

No doubt the Greens in Brighton have made “tough choices,” with their “hands tied” by central government. So is that all there is to politics – “tough choices” and a world of perpetual disappointment when your elected representatives betray you? As anarchists, we say that the problem is not with who is in power, and how they exercise that power. The problem is political power itself. As anarchist Noam Chomsky points out, “the smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum.” The Greens might be on the fringes of that spectrum, but they’re still part of the party political system, established to keep us quiet.

The end of a grassroots movement in Greece

Many leftists have been overjoyed that an anti-austerity party won the general election in Greece. For the left, including those in the UK, Syriza’s victory is seen as a turning point in Europe against economic policies based on harsh cuts.

SYRIZA (‘Coalition of the Radical Left’) started off as an alliance of various reformist left-wing currents. Its programme was very similar to Pasok, a socialist coalition of the 1980s. In fact, a large part of the old Pasok leadership is now in Syriza. Alexis Tsipras took over as Syriza leader in 2008, as the party was moving away from reformist ‘Eurocommunism’ to build a relationship with the grassroots social movements that had grown in Greece against austerity. As it was developing a presence on the streets and joining the large ‘square protests’, the party also increased its

influence in trade unions, especially the public sector, and organised among university students. It quickly positioned itself as a last hope for change for the social movement.

Syriza will now be the political wing of a repressive State apparatus – the police, the army, the judiciary – that is historically riddled with right-wingers and fascists. It has already formed a coalition with a right-wing anti-immigration party and will continue to make compromises to stay in power. As the party is quite small with 35,000 members, around 10,000 will be moved into government positions in an attempt to counter the right-wing, well away from the grassroots initiatives that carried them into office.

Greek radicals with longer memories will remember that after Pasok was elected it rapidly dropped the radical programme that helped it to power. In any case, it was all but wiped out in later elections. Now here we are again with more leftist promises from Syriza. As one Greek anarchist Spyros Dapergolas remarked about the importance of people sticking to grassroots organising, “Everything else is a recipe for failure, disappointment, loss of time, and, of course, political and individual corruption ... what power and state always create.”

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What the Suffragettes Did For Us

It's election time again, and anarchist women are once more being lectured on doing our duty to those who died for our vote.

For the record, the suffragettes' demand was that women should be balloted wherever men were. They weren't fighting for every woman in perpetuity to be guilt-tripped into supporting any political system that used the ballot box to legitimise itself. They trusted future women to make their own decisions. Sylvia Pankhurst, for one, lived to reject parliamentary democracy as an “out of date machine” and refused to cast a vote or stand for election herself. This election, she'd be angry with every party's participation in cuts to essential women's services, not the women who spoil their ballots or stay away.

More than the vote

There was a lot more to the suffragettes than just the vote. They were about women's solidarity, our ability to work and fight together, to write and speak from our own experience, not just on the vote but on sexual, social and vocational freedoms, like fair pay and reproductive rights. Being denied the vote was an insult to women as intelligent, rational human beings, regardless of how much use the vote itself was. Using the vote was almost beside the point compared to what it would mean for women to have the vote, to not be seen as mere extensions of their husbands.

Getting the vote was a victory largely because of what women achieved through the process of fighting for it. The speeches, publications, smashed windows, battles with police, martial arts training, imprisonments, hunger strikes, resistance to force-feeding and refusal to give in: these did more to raise the status and confidence of women, as public and political people, than the vote itself ever has. Much more than having women MPs or careerists who have cynically used women's struggles to promote themselves.

Telling us that we have to vote because votes for women were hard won, is condescending, paternalistic shit. Working class men also fought for the right to vote, but are much less criticised if they suggest that there are more effective means of change than the ballot box. For women,

voting is turned into an issue of conformity rather than conscience, in direct opposition to who suffragettes were and what they fought for. The suffragettes never intended their campaigning to stop with getting the vote. Many continued fighting when their leaders were co-opted. They weren't satisfied, and they didn't intend us to be.

Co-option

The suffragettes achieved their aims because they were a radical, inspirational and effective direct action movement. They achieved incredible things for themselves and for future generations of women. Yes, they deserve our respect and our gratitude. But more than that, they deserve our study and our effort to comprehend the full enormity and complexity of their struggle. They deserve better than to be reduced to a single-issue sound-bite.

So this polling day, whether you vote or organise or both, consider honouring the suffragettes' memory by not using them as a stick to beat women with when they treat their vote exactly as the suffragettes did: as their own, to use or not, on their own terms.

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So, is Russell Brand right then?

Celebrity sexist Russell Brand has recently added 'revolutionary' to his CV, and he's written a book about it. He has also turned out in person to support things like the successful housing struggle of the New Era Estate residents in London. If you can stomach the man himself, he seems to offer something to people sick of inequality, war-mongering and political hypocrisy. Brand agrees with anarchists on many things and refers to himself as an anarchist in his new book 'Revolution'. He won't be voting in the election for pretty much the same reasons that anarchists won't be. The Spanish revolution inspires him as the best social experiment in history, as it does us. So, we should say what we think about him.

Money, money, money

Brand genuinely does see political parties as all the same, and electoral politics as a sham which serves the rich and powerful. But he seems unaware of what lies behind inequality. This is how he has come to the conclusion that society should be run by small, decentralised 'groups', which don't act against anyone else's interests, and which help each other out when needed. Great! But they would apparently still use money.

You can't have both equality and money! The whole point of money is to have more of it than someone else. And no, we wouldn't all be trading turnips for sheep in an anarchist society. We'd give and receive freely. So, although Brand has face-palmed Marx's 'From each according to (their) ability, to each according to (their) need', he doesn't understand what Marx meant. Money doesn't enter into it.

Talking about a revolution

So how does he think this 'revolution' will happen? Unfortunately, Gandhi is explicitly his model. It isn't so much that Brand is a pacifist, but that he glosses over violence by thinking that

if enough of us rise up, the state won't be able to do anything about it. Aside from talking to the prominent anarchist David Graeber, he doesn't seem to have thought about this stuff seriously. So where he agrees with Graeber that we should take-over the functions of the state and make it redundant, he disagrees that we will need to defend the revolution. In fact, he says he has no ill will towards the police or army. Well that's OK for this white, male revolutionary, who these days is rich and healthy too. In fact, when it comes to political freedoms in general, he is a little vague and places his faith in human nature and 'Love', as opposed to properly thought-out social structures.

Also, although Brand talks of 'social recalibration', his is a purely economic revolution, not one which would change other aspects of our damaged society. For example – and Brand, who claims to be challenging his own sexism, should take note – it would mean a believing stance towards rape survivors, instead of towards Julian Assange, such as he takes in 'Revolution.'

So, genuinely angry at Capitalism as he is, Brand is not qualified to be a spokesperson of the revolution. He will be using the royalties from 'Revolution' to set up a self-managed business for recovering addicts. But revolution has to be made by people oppressed by class, race, gender, sexuality, ability and lack of opportunity, all acting together. We should use as little violence as possible, but we have to defend the gains we make, which the people on the New Era Estate can do with or without Russell Brand.

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