

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Anarchy and Covid-19

Anarcho

June 5, 2020

A standard reproach against anarchism is that it would not be able to withstand crises as well as hierarchies. This is often the underlying assumption of Marxist diatribes against Anarchism – although these usually invoke euphemisms to avoid admitting that what is really being suggested is that they and their party should be in power. Hence the assertions on the need for a centralised “workers’ State” to organise defence against the counter-revolution (i.e., anyone who disagrees with them), plan the economy, and so on – skilfully avoiding discussing the grim inefficiencies and tyrannies of the Bolshevik regime or the various counter-examples which show the opposite (most obviously, the response of the CNT-FAI to Franco’s coup).

The coronavirus crisis – like any crisis – sees people “rally to the flag” and be more willing to view those in power in a good light. This happened in the UK with the serial lying, incompetent, self-serving, waffling, racist, sexist, homophobic lazy waste of space known as “Boris” but better called Johnson (and not only because that is his surname). It even happened with Trump – although his bump in the polls was both smaller in size and shorter in duration. Still, Trump does serve a purpose

Anarcho

Anarchy and Covid-19

June 5, 2020

Retrieved on 24th April 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

– making even Johnson and his response to the crisis seem better by default.

Which raises a question – what would an anarchist society, an anarchy, do in the face of a coronavirus crisis?

This is no idle question for addressing a serious issue and the concerns it generates in the general public (i.e., people we want to become anarchists) should be something anarchists do. We must apply our ideas to real events if we take our ideas seriously and seek to see them applied – rather than an excuse to sound ultra-radical.

Now, there may be a tendency for some anarchists – as with “crime” (i.e., anti-social behaviour) – to simply say that a free society would not have any. This, as with crime, is not very convincing and, for example, Kropotkin did not suggest that. He argued, like other anarchist thinkers, that anti-social behaviour would, indeed, be vastly reduced in a decent society, but it would never disappear completely. Therefore any which remained would be dealt with via free arbitration between the parties in conflict, as well as community solidarity and self-defence conducted as humanely as an illness would be.

The same can be said for Covid-19. Yes, a free society would be one based on workers’ control, so it is unlikely that it would be lacking in safe and hygienic working conditions. It would not have the same pressures from bosses to cut corners to maximise profits (and in non-mutualist anarchies there would be no market pressures to do likewise). It would not experience the hollowing out of society and its various institutions (not least health-care) that neo-liberalism has produced nor would it have people with low-paid, insecure jobs who have to drag themselves into work because they have bills to pay but, by so doing, spread the virus. It would not have obscurities like billionaires having a net worth far in excess of the costs of paying their workers decent sick pay for months.

Likewise, without the profit machine, we would not have the extra worry of an economic collapse due to firms going under

a gym, for example, could be run by its members in their leisure hours after their few hours in necessary productive activity.

Of course, all the pious comments in articles published the likes of Guardian on how “we” can use the crisis to rethink our priorities, to end the neo-liberalism which has hollowed out our social infrastructure and weakened our ability to respond to this crisis and create a better world will not come to anything. Capital has never responded to nice words, logic, evidence or some such. It only changes when it feels that the alternative is worse. Due to lock-down, a social movement which can place pressure from below onto it and its minion, the State, is much harder to create, but until that is done we can expect the crisis to be exploited to bolster private power and wealth, as well as strengthen the State machine. Hard to create, yes, but still necessary: for we cannot go back to “business as usual”.

This is not the place to list demands. The crisis is developing far too fast and people on the ground will see needs and opportunities better than anyone else can (and definitely more than any one at the top of a distant hierarchy with no links to or interest in the masses they claim to represent). Likewise, this discussion of crisis management in an anarchist society may seem a bit vague yet this is as it should be, for who are we to lay down today how a free society would operate in the future? All anarchists can do now is sketch the outlines and apply our principles in the organisations and struggles we take part in. We are all shaped by the hierarchies we are born into and it is only by fighting against them that we are able to free ourselves from them both physically and mentally. Only the struggle for freedom will make people able to be live freely.

Faced with a crisis like this, we can be sure that a free people and their associations and federations will manage far better than waiting for a few politicians or bosses to act for them. Covid-19 shows how waiting for orders from above can get you killed.

available supply of provisions and other commodities. The labour associations in every city and community take this work in hand for the purpose of equitable distribution. Workers' committees in every street and district assume charge, cooperating with similar committees in the city and state, and federating their efforts throughout the country by means of general councils of producers and consumers."

Liberate for work? Or, more correctly, liberate from work? After all, one of the reasons for the change in work priorities is to reduce the working week from over eight hours a day to under four, perhaps even more.

Many who denounce workers' control by suggesting that most workers hate their jobs and that demand would not inspire a revolution miss the obvious: workers' control, like expropriation, is the start of the process and not the end. Some workplaces will be closed (as the work they do is no longer needed) or turned to more useful tasks (as when the CNT converted workplaces to produce weapons in July 1936), yet the first stages will be expropriation and workers' self-management with the view to transforming work (the workplace, working conditions, the technologies used, etc.) as well as the structure of industry we inherit from capitalism. We need to start where we are and we need to recognise change will take time – with some changes taking longer than others.

However, the current crisis has exposed that essential work actually only involves part of the working population. Much of the non-essential work relates to the requirements generated by capitalism, the State machine, etc., and would be ended in a sane society. Many of the non-essential "jobs" which provide a service people like (even if not essential to providing the basic necessities we need) could be run by user and interest groups:

because of lack of income as their customers stay indoors or because workers are self-isolating and so not coming into work. Nor would an anarchist society suffer from the irrationalities of the stock market (and the impact of financial crisis on the real economy in spite of nothing changing in terms of workplaces, workers, etc.) or the short-termism of the market economy. There would be no concerns about workplaces having enough custom to survive – "economic" activity (the provision of goods and services) would decrease in an anarchy affected by an epidemic as people get ill and self-isolate, but this would not have the devastating effects they have under capitalism. Workplaces would not be going bust, so workers would not be made redundant and then be evicted because they could not pay their rent, etc. The same analysis of capitalism's regular economic crises and the extra uncertainty markets create are applicable in a pandemic.

The crisis has also shown the limitations – undesirability! – of modern capitalism's extended supply chains, not least for food. The centralised, industrial food creating – as described in *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser, for example – would not exist, for as Kropotkin stressed in *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, a free people would seek a diversity of work experiences and so integrate industry and farming with the aim of providing locally as much as possible (this, he stressed, did not mean the end of interregional or even international supply chains but rather their reduction to goods which cannot be best produced locally). This means that the vast – and potentially fragile – supply chains would not be rare (i.e., limited to those which need them rather than driven into all areas by profit and market power considerations). Likewise, more resources would be available as many of the wasteful things created today (the arms industry, armies, bureaucracies, law, enforcing property rights, etc.) would not exist – resources would be utilised for real social and individual needs (like decent healthcare).

So the social and economic context would be better. Nor would we have a compliant media interested in bolstering private power and its minions – so information would not be spread based on how to make Trump or Johnson look best. Nor would it be concerned about the authorities using the crisis to their own ends, as there would be no hierarchical authorities (the difference between being an authority and having authority is very clear now with numpties like Trump and Johnson in office).

All this is would be the case, I am sure, but the very nature of life is such that we cannot predict the future, and even the most unlikely events can occur so best plan for the worse. As such, to proclaim that an anarchy would be unaffected by pandemics is like proclaiming that an anarchy would never face earthquakes, hurricanes, or the occasional anti-social arsehole.

So how would an anarchy deal with a crisis like this?

The most obvious thing to note is that a free society would still have scientific experts and their groups and federations, as well as groups providing emergency and health services (and their federations). and as these would be volunteer associations, many more people undoubtedly would have taken part in them compared to our society which is marked by an extreme division of labour. This means that there would be a social and economic infrastructure in place – including federations of communities and productive associations, along with health, scientific and emergency ones– which will make decisions and plans. So, to take an obvious example, there would be something like the World Health Organisation although the equivalent body would be based on a union of health workers' federations. Likewise with Emergency Services such as Fire Fighter Federations and so on.

These would not have to deal with needless hierarchies and the fragile egos of those in charge, as is now the case. Malatesta put it well in Anarchy:

“Furthermore it must be considered that the task of increased production would be enormously facilitated by the addition to the ranks of labour of vast numbers whom the altered economic conditions will liberate for work.

“Recent statistics show that in 1920 there were in the United States over 41 million persons of both sexes engaged in gainful occupations out of a total population of over 105 millions. Out of those 41 millions only 26 millions were actually employed in the industries, including transportation and agriculture, the balance of 15 millions consisting mostly of persons engaged in trade, of commercial travellers, advertisers, and various other middlemen of the present system. In other words, 15 million persons would be released for useful work by a revolution in the United States. A similar situation, proportionate to population, would develop in other countries.

“The greater production necessitated by the social revolution would therefore have an additional army of many million persons at its disposal. The systematic incorporation of those millions into industry and agriculture, aided by modern scientific methods of organization and production, will go a long way toward helping to solve the problems of supply.

“Capitalist production is for profit; more labour is used today to sell things than to produce them. The social revolution reorganizes the industries on the basis of the needs of the populace. Essential needs come first, naturally. Food, clothing, shelter – these are the primal requirements of man. The first step in this direction is the ascertaining of the

and its “contribution” to production remain. And yet the economy is tanking... why? Could it be because labour is the real wealth creator, that only it makes a contribution, that the so-called “wealth creators” are monopolisers of a surplus produced by labour alone? In other words, could it be that the so-called “wealth-creators” are no such thing? That while we could manage fine without bosses, landlords, shareholders and the rest that they could not manage without us workers? The coronavirus shows that this is the case – that capitalism is rooted in exploitation.

So while there are still landlords, stockholders, capitalists, etc., for some strange reason the economies of the world are plunging as labour is in lock-down. Their “contributions” to production amounts to zero when no workers actually work. With the lockdown, only essential workers are allowed out and, strangely enough, these are not CEOs, stock market Wiz-Kids, and other elements of the 1%, but mostly low-paying jobs which require physical labour –warehouse workers, shelf-stackers, delivery drivers, rubbish collectors, hospital workers of all kinds, care home workers, lorry drivers. While doctors and nurses are highlighted in the media, there are far more heroes out there – and most are near or on the minimum wage.

Key workers are not highly paid bankers, CEOs, politicians and the like. They could all self-isolate permanently and we would somehow manage...

Which raises the abolition of work: it would appear that a great many jobs are not really needed after all – they are often driven by the needs of profit-grinding and, while a source of needed income under capitalism, do not actually make sense or are needed for satisfying human needs. David Graeber has discussed this in *On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs: A Work Rant* which he later expanded upon in a book on the same subject. This, in turn, suggests that a sensible social system could eliminate most jobs and cut the working week for what remains. As Alexander Berkman noted in *What is Anarchism?*:

“But let us even suppose that the government were not in any case a privileged class, and could survive without creating around itself a new privileged class, and remain the representative, the servant as it were, of the whole of society. And what useful purpose could this possibly serve? How and in what way would this increase the strength, the intelligence, the spirit of solidarity, the concern for the wellbeing of all and of future generations, which at any given time happen to exist in a given society? ...

“What can government itself add to the moral and material forces that exist in society? And so the rulers can only make use of the forces that exist in society – except for those great forces which governmental action paralyses and destroys, and those rebel forces, and all that is wasted through conflicts; inevitably tremendous losses in such an artificial system. If they contribute something of their own they can only do so as men and not as rulers. And of those material and moral forces which remain at the disposal of the government, only a minute part is allowed to play a really useful role for society. The rest is either used up in repressive actions to keep the rebel forces in check or is otherwise diverted from its ends of the general good and used to benefit a few at the expense of the majority of the people ... Social action, therefore, is neither the negation nor the complement of individual initiative, but is the resultant of initiatives, thoughts and actions of all individuals who make up society; a resultant which, all other things being equal, is greater or smaller depending on whether individual

forces are directed to a common objective or are divided or antagonistic. And if instead, as do the authoritarians, one means government action when one talks of social action, then this is still the resultant of individual forces, but only of those individuals who form the government or who by reason of their position can influence the policy of the government ...

“Even if we pursue our hypothesis of the ideal government of the authoritarian socialists, it follows from what we have said that far from resulting in an increase in the productive, organising and protective forces in society, it would greatly reduce them, limiting initiative to a few, and giving them the right to do everything without, of course, being able to provide them with the gift of being all-knowing.”

In short, just because the State monopolises certain useful activities, it does not mean that an anarchist society will not provide them. Indeed, Kropotkin argued in *Modern Science and Anarchy* that humanity will be forced to find new forms of organisation for the social functions that the State performs through bureaucracy and that “nothing will be done as long as this is not done”. These would be based – at least initially – on the organisations we forge in our struggles against exploitation and oppression today:

“Developed in the course of history to establish and maintain ... the ruling class ... what means can the State provide to abolish this monopoly that the working class could not find in its own strength and groups? ... what advantages could the State provide for abolishing these same privileges? Could its governmental machine, developed for

for themselves when best to act and, crucially, be in a position to subject them to swift recall and replace them with someone else.

It is quite staggering how the last few years have shown that “good government” has always been underlined by those in power not being complete arseholes. Theresa May clinging on after 2017, Johnson and his lying and prorogation of parliament, the increase in the powers of the executive (usually nodded through by a compliant Parliament), the constant abuses of position by Trump, the failure of his impeachment... all show that our liberties are less secure than many think – permissions, at best, not freedom.

Similarly, with the right trying to “reopen” the country in order to “save the economy”. In short, save the rich’s economy... by killing poor people. The obvious point is to ask how can the economy do well with many in the workforce sick or dead? With the Health Service overwhelmed? Yes, many people are in difficult circumstances, but there are many forms of direct action (such as rent strikes) and alternative policies which could be demanded. Unfortunately, the ones being raised in the media and picked by politicians are all driven by the need to keep the working class in its subordinate role as wage workers. And it is of course unsurprising to see those who dismissed mass unemployment as “a price worth paying” during the 1980s under Thatcher or dismissed poverty wages as irrelevant now show deep concern over their social and personal impact in order to get people back to the daily grind in order to make profits for capital and, hopefully, avoid Coronavirus at the same time. Which shows how fundamentally anti-human capitalism is.

Which raises an obvious question: why is there an economic crisis at all? Why do we need people to go back to work? After all, the right keep informing us that the “wealth creators” are the elite few, the wealthy, the capitalists, the entrepreneurs, the landlords. They all remain. Their property

“anti-government ideologues”). So it has come to pass and the opaque procedures produced by outsourcing adding to the bureaucratic mess.: designed to allow corporations to fest on public funds, it has proved to be fatal for so many health workers due to the delays and confusion it produced. In addition, instead of maintaining the needed stockpiles of supplies required to respond to crises, the companies in the supply chains have maximised profits by minimising stocks by use of Just-In-Time production systems which have proven to be unfit for purpose now. So private bureaucracies are just as bad as so-called public ones.

Yet this awareness of the bureaucratic and unresponsive nature of centralised structures should not mean we can ignore or, worse, excuse the individuals perched at their top. In a pyramidal-structure independence of thought and action is discouraged, so the impact of leaders is increased. Having a Trump or a Johnson at the top, surrounded by nodding dogs who are in their positions solely due to their willingness to brown-nose and obey, means they will not act unless their master indicates a course of action and they also have to spend valuable time and resources spinning the actions and inactions of the dear leader (or spouting increasingly risible nonsense defending their favourites when they break their own clear lockdown guidelines, as with Johnson’s political advisor Dominic Cummins). And their lying, sloth, incompetence, their inappropriate and delayed decisions have cost lives, not least because many below them would not act until appropriate orders came from above.

It is easy to see that Trump and Johnson, to name the two most obvious examples, made things worse, much worse. And, yes, a group or federation in an Anarchy could elect such an incompetent into a post of responsibility or as a delegate but unlike the current regime these people would have very little actual power and those who work with them would have been raised from birth to question and, if need be, ignore them, judge

the creation and upholding of these privileges, now be used to abolish them? Would not the new function require new organs? And these new organs would they not have to be created by the workers themselves, in their unions, their federations, completely outside the State? ...

“... independent Communes for the territorial groupings, and vast federations of trade unions for groupings by social functions—the two interwoven and providing support to each to meet the needs of society ... groupings by personal affinities ... infinitely varied, long-lasting or fleeting, emerging according to the needs of the moment for all possible purposes ... These three kinds of groupings, covering each other like a network, would thus allow the satisfaction of all social needs: consumption, production and exchange, communications, sanitary arrangements, education, mutual protection against aggression, mutual aid, territorial defence ... Unnecessary for maintaining the economic life of society, it would likewise be [unnecessary] for preventing most anti-social acts.”

This network of associations – based on community, economic and scientific interests – would exist without the bureaucrats, politicians and capitalists and would be the basis for a response to such a crisis in a free society. Nor would we have a society in which education is skewed to enrich some and marginalise the many, and so we would have an educated and well-informed population with a better grasp of science (as everyone would combine “Brain Work and Manual Work”, to use Kropotkin’s expression from *Fields, Factories and Workshops*). A free society with a better educated and more informed population would ensure the science is understood and

followed. This means that calls for a lock-down from recognised experts in the field would be more easily believed, understood and agreed.

In short, there would be the organisational structure in place to allow for a genuine societal response to the crisis: it would not be a case of individuals being “left alone” to deal with it themselves in isolation. As such, those on the right who have been vocal in urging State authorities to revoke stay-at-home policies are not presenting a libertarian response to the crisis – quite the reverse for they are based on completely ignoring scientific expertise and the reality of the class nature of modern society.

It is all fine-and-well to for some to proclaim that it is up to “individuals” to determine how they respond to the crisis in terms of self-isolation, but this in the abstract and ignores the class nature of modern society in favour of an abstract individualism which actually obscures the limitations this kind of system places on individual choice. Simply put, people need to eat and in a capitalist society the bulk of the population sell their labour to bosses to be able to do so. This means that their “choice” amounts to turning up at work when ordered to by their boss or starving. This means workers not self-isolating because they have to work to pay the bills. So, in practice, it is not their choice on how much they self-isolate but that of their bosses and landlords. To ignore this obvious point is to join the Trumpian death cult, which is willing to sacrifice untold thousands to capital.

This means that, in a class society. such calls – assuming they are issued in good faith – are limited because they ignore private power (by design). However, the issue is broader: for rather than call upon the initiative and action of all, such “individualism” is reduced to the initiative and action of the few who own (or control on behalf of that few). Rather than leave people alone to solve their problems, those who have few or no resources have a corresponding ability to act. So if the State –

else. The sensible ones contacted their local hospitals directly and arranged supplies. In contrast, we have seen best practice done locally and then spreading sideways and then, sometimes, upwards. If people had not shown initiative, but had rather waited for orders from above, we would be in an even worse position (as the Bolsheviks showed, command economies based on fear do not work very well). Nor should we forget that centrally mandated orders are dependent on local forces being able and willing to implement them.

Still, to be fair, centralised hierarchies can act quickly at times. For example, when the UK became the European nation with the highest death-rate the government did take swift action: it stopped showing the International death rate comparison in its daily press conference (apparently after seven weeks it was, for some unexplained reason, no longer considered accurate). Likewise with issuing an official reply to the devastating account in the Sunday Times on the “38 days when Britain sleepwalked into disaster”.

In short, we are seeing the limitations of centralisation that anarchists have long pointed out.

It also shows the problems with privatisation. The UK government has long sought to impose “market forces” onto the NHS and have accelerated outsourcing of work to private companies since squeezing into office in 2010. The impact of austerity policies is obvious, as is the “reforms” of 2012 Health and Social Care Act. After promising no “top-down restructures” during the 2010 election campaign, the Tories did precisely that. This provoked much protest, including nearly 400 public health experts in October 2011 signing an open letter asking members of the House of Lords to reject these reforms warning they would “undermine the ability of the health system to respond effectively to communicable disease outbreaks and other public health emergencies” (strikes outwith certain government-defined issues related to wages and pensions are illegal thanks to legalisation passed by governments run by

machines to the peasantry... It was one of the countless examples of the manner in which the Moscow system 'worked,' or, rather, did not work."("The Crushing of the Russian Revolution," in Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, *To Remain Silent is Impossible: Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman in Russia*)

Goldman rightly noted that "[o]nly free initiative and popular participation in the affairs of the revolution can prevent [such] terrible blunders" based on "the workers' economic organisations [being] free to exercise their initiative for the common good" rather than "awaiting orders from Moscow for their distribution." (*My Disillusionment in Russia*) This is the sort of activity which centralisation precludes in favour of empowering a few at the centre:

The economic changes that will result from the social revolution will be so immense and so profound, they will so alter all the relations based on property and exchange, that it will be impossible for one or even a number of individuals to elaborate the social forms to which a further society must give birth. This elaboration of new social forms can only be the collective work of the masses. To satisfy the immense variety of conditions and needs that will emerge on the day when property is swept away, we shall need the flexibility of the collective spirit of the community. Any kind of external authority will be merely an obstacle, a hindrance to the organic work that has to be accomplished; it will be no better than a source of discord and of hatreds. (Kropotkin, "Revolutionary Government", *Words of a Rebel*)

This is confirmed to a large degree by the coronavirus crisis. In the UK the media reported how companies and individuals volunteering their services in the crisis – for example, clothing companies seeking to supply PPE – met with bureaucratic inertia, their messages ignored or politely answered and nothing

as Malatesta argued – reduces social initiative to the few at the top of the public hierarchies (as mediated by the inevitable bureaucracies), so property reduces initiative to the few at the top of the private hierarchies (as mediated by the inevitable bureaucracies, although they are not called that in polite circles).

An anarchy would be able to draw upon all the initiative and forces within a society that are channelled and often lost in hierarchical structures like the State and private companies. Likewise, we would not have capitalists seeking to profit from the situation. This means we would have the initiative of free people without its skewing towards bolstering narrow private interests. (Needless to say, seeking to stop an epidemic would be in everyone's wider "private" interests). For example, transport workers would undoubtedly decide to limit activities to the minimum needed, workers in distribution centres would insist those entering them have appropriate protective clothing, etc.

An anarchy would have a social organisation which would not have the shackles of authority placed upon it – whether that authority be economic (capital) or political (state). While the State is one form of social organisation, it is not the only kind. As can be seen from the response to this crisis, its hierarchical and centralised nature can obstruct the information and initiative needed to respond quickly to issues. Indeed, the notion that state-socialism with its centralised planning could handle a crisis like this is an extremely optimistic claim as, being unexpected (unplanned!), the planning machinery (bureaucracy) would have to rip-up all its previous plans, continually restart the process and all the while workers would await appropriate orders (assuming, of course, its personnel are not affected by the virus along with those commanded to implement the changes). Only a federal system rooted in autonomy and initiative from below would be able to change the complexities of this challenge – or, indeed, a complex modern society in normal times.

This crisis provides some evidence in favour of anarchist solutions. The more decentralised and federal States have generally responded faster and better than the centralised ones. In the UK, for example, the so-called leadership dithered, sent out contradictory messages and only acted after individuals, groups and companies as well as local and devolved governments took the initiative. Then there is the contrast between countries:

“Ministers don’t like to be reminded of it, but Germany has done far, far better than the UK, and England in particular. Its decentralised model for testing was streets ahead of Britain’s top-down centralised approach.” (Larry Elliot “How England found itself at the wrong end of the Covid-19 league table”, *The Guardian* 18 May 2020)

Those governments which genuinely following the science (rather than invoking it as an excuse), those which consulted widely with local councils, trade unions and other bodies, those which had not eviscerated social society by unneeded austerity or weakened intermediate organisations (like local councils or unions) to impose neo-liberalism, all did better. See, for example, Denmark’s low death rate and its process of opening schools based on meaningful discussion with unions and local councils to England’s (and it is England’s rather than Britain’s) central diktat based on picking an arbitrary date, the demonisation of teachers’ unions and their concerns over safety and dubious invoking of “the science” to justify a decision clearly driven by other factors.

The myth is that centralisation is more efficient. Yes, orders may be issued and people act but often belatedly, inefficiently, ineffectively and at great human and ecological cost. Now, the ruling elite cares little for that, but socialists cannot be so sanguine. Arbitrary decisions from above can undermine constructive work based on knowledge of local conditions as well

as hindering commencing local activities as people subject to hierarchy await orders from above.

That this is no exaggeration can be seen from the example of Bolshevik Russia, which Leninists to this day point to as proof of the need for centralisation. The reality was radically different. Emma Goldman recounted from experience in *My Disillusionment in Russia*:

“how paralysing was the effect of the bureaucratic red tape which delayed and often frustrated the most earnest and energetic efforts ... Materials were very scarce and it was most difficult to procure them owing to the unbelievably centralised Bolshevik methods. Thus to get a pound of nails one had to file applications in about ten or fifteen bureaus; to secure some bed linen or ordinary dishes one wasted days.”

Thus “the newly fledged officialdom was as hard to cope with as the old bureaucracy” while the “bureaucratic officials seemed to take particular delight in countermanding each other’s orders.” In short, “the terrorism practiced by the Bolsheviks against every revolutionary criticism ... the new Communist bureaucracy and inefficiency, and the hopelessness of the whole situation ... was a crushing indictment against the Bolsheviks, their theories and methods.” The economic crisis worsened and while Leninists today repeat the Bolshevik position of blaming this exclusively on the civil war, but the centralised, bureaucratic, top-down economic structure played a key role:

“In Kharkoff I saw the demonstration of the inefficiency of the centralised bureaucratic machine. In a large factory warehouse there lay huge stacks of agricultural machinery. Moscow had ordered them made “within two weeks, in pain of punishment for sabotage.” They were made, and six months already had passed without the ‘central authorities’ making any effort to distribute the