

Democracy is undemocratic

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August 11, 2008

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One of the strangest arguments against anarchist ways of organising is that it is “undemocratic.” This argument is usually associated with Trotskyists. As it crops up with sadly regular frequency, it is worthwhile to discuss this accusation in detail.

Anarchists are for federations of self-managed groups. This means that the membership of such organisations decide policy directly at open meetings. Anyone delegated from that group to do specified tasks or to attend a federal meeting are given a strict and binding mandate. Failure to implement that agreed mandate means that the delegate is instantly replaced. In this way power remains in the hands of all and decisions flow from the bottom up. Anyone placed into a position of responsibility is held accountable to the membership and any attempt to usurp power from the grassroots is stopped.

Such forms of organisation do not spring from the brains of a few anarchists thinkers, independently of working class struggle. The idea of strict and accountable mandates can be found in the works of Bakunin and Proudhon after both became active in working class struggle. Proudhon raised the idea during the 1848 revolution, while Bakunin talked about it after becoming active in the struggles of the International Workers’ Association in Switzerland. So these ideas were developed within the class struggle itself, often spontaneously. For example, both the Paris Commune and Russian Soviets implemented such a system of imperative mandates.

Anarchists have long argued that we should organise in ways that prefigure the kind of society we want. We often call this “*building the new world in the shell of the old.*” Moreover, in anarchist theory, the class struggle is the link between capitalism and any future libertarian socialist society. We start to build the structures of the free society when we fight against capitalism. In support of our arguments we point to the unions, factory committees, workers’ councils, collectives, community assemblies and other popular organisations which have been created during numerous revolts and revolutions which have later become the structural basis for post-revolutionary working class management of society (before being undermined or destroyed by either the bourgeois or so-called workers’ states).

This means that the way we organise today is important to anarchists. We argue that only freedom can be the school for freedom. This means that we only become capable of managing society if we make our own decisions and directly manage our own struggles and organisations today. Which is why we stress the need to organise in an open, directly democratic fashion in our struggles against oppression and exploitation — self-management today is the foundation for the self-managed socialist society of tomorrow.

I

Others disagree. They say that anarchism (i.e. self-management) is “undemocratic.” They argue that while anarchist groups are, in theory, directly democratic, in practice a few leaders still call the shots without being accountable for it and without their input being a decision made by the whole group. It is still a leadership except it is not democratically decided and would be made up by who has the most time, charisma, experience etc. Because not all activists can attend all activist meetings, it is argued, and so a lot of decisions are made at meetings with low attendance’s.

A hierarchy exists, it is claimed, but is masked by fine-sounding rhetoric. In fact it is worse because there is no structure to change the leadership that exists under the surface. Would it

not, ask the critics, be far more democratic if some people were elected to regularly meet and do essential work and then hold these elected people accountable in general meeting that everyone can attend?

Anarchists are somewhat surprised by these arguments. If this proposed “democratic” solution sounds familiar, it is because it is. It is representative democracy, a basic principle of liberal bourgeois ideology. It seems strange to anarchists that self-proclaimed socialists should be seeking to reproduce one of the principles of capitalist politics into *anti*-capitalist movements.

Moreover, the influence of those who have the most time, charisma, experience, etc., will, at best, be the same as in a directly democratic group as it would be in a representative democratic group. Why does this render only the former “undemocratic”? And, in practice, this problem will be far worse in representative groups. This is because the aim of the group is to select a leader, not manage their own affairs. Therefore would-be leaders would be applying all their skills and ability to get elected, making use of their charisma, experience, resources and time to sway voters to give them power. The key difference is that the voters would not be in a position to question these “leaders” when the decisions were actually being made. They would simply be left with a *fait accompli*, being reduced to simply trying to find better leaders next time.

For all the worry about people’s input not being a decision made by the whole group, the proposed solution actually ensures that this is always the case. The role of the group is, after all, reduced to merely picking leaders who make decisions for them. In representative democracy any decision is *not* made by the whole group, but rather by a few leaders who may, or may not, have been elected by a majority. Look at the UK. Tony Blair was elected by a quarter of the population. Currently he is ignoring the clear wishes of the majority and planning to attack Iraq. Is that really more “democratic” than self-management? Rather than democracy, it sounds more like autocracy.

In response it will be argued that such a form of representative democracy is not desired. Instead, leaders will be held accountable more frequently to the group. But this “solution” raises more problems than it solves.

After all, how can the group hold these elected people accountable unless they meet to evaluate their leaders decisions? And if they meet to evaluate these decisions, then why are they unable to make those decisions themselves and mandate instantly recallable delegates to implement them? And why are people deemed incapable of directly making their own decisions also deemed capable of evaluating the decisions of their leaders and holding them “accountable”? Surely if they are able to evaluate the decisions made for them, they are capable of making them themselves? If they can pick their masters, then surely they are mature enough to do without them and govern themselves? If a group is capable of selecting a leader and evaluating their decisions then its members are capable of making those decisions themselves.

And why should we assume that everyone can actually attend any such “general meeting”? An infrequent “general meeting,” where all they do is to elect leaders, will make people apathetic rather than active. The example of the trade union movement, where members rarely turn up to meetings, seems appropriate here. Why assume new hierarchical organisations will not have the same problems as existing ones?

And, of course, between elections those who have the most time, charisma, experience, etc., of those elected will be applying them within the small minority of the group elected to any representative committee. Why is this not labelled “undemocratic”? If self-management is “undemocratic” when applied to the base of an organisation, why does it become “democratic” at the

top? There is no logical reason why it should and so the leadership faces the exact same problem. To overcome it in the leadership group there can be only one solution, namely to concentrate all power into the hands of one person. Why this should be considered as “far more democratic” than the mass participation of self-management is hard to say.

In summary, therefore, we can say that the self-proclaimed democrats are wrong. Rather than anarchism being undemocratic, it is democracy that is so. Their “far more democratic” organisation simply empowers a few leaders at the expense of the rest, whose job is simply to pick who will tell them what to do until the next election. At best, the arguments against direct democracy are applicable to representative democracy. At worse, there are far more applicable to a hierarchical system rather than a non-hierarchical one.

II

We should not forget that this is an old debate. During the American and French revolutions, for example, self-managed popular assemblies were created in many towns and cities. The wealthy were horrified by this participation of the many in the affairs of society. They consistently favoured representative democracy over direct democracy and delegates. They did so to reduce participation and ensure minority class rule. Today, in Argentina politicians are calling the popular assemblies “*undemocratic*.”

It seems strange to see self-proclaimed socialists advocating a structure explicitly designed to restrict mass working class participation in social decision making. Indeed, they are using the same rhetoric against it as bourgeois politicians. Is this a coincidence? Perhaps not, as the aim of Trotskyism is, after all, for the party to seize power on behalf of the masses. The idea that the working class could actually run society itself is dismissed. To quote Lenin:

“the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries ... the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts ... that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard ... for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.”

Trotsky held this Bolshevik truism (“*the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party,*” to quote the **Platform of the Opposition**) until his death. He repeatedly argued in favour of party dictatorship **over** the working class. “*The very same masses,*” he argued in 1939, “*are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves.*” Two years previously, he put it even more bluntly. The “*revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party*” was “*an objective necessity,*” he asserted. This “*dictatorship of a party*” was essential and “*we can not jump over this chapter*” of human history. He stressed that the “*revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution.*”

And yet they call anarchism “undemocratic” for advocating and implementing participatory decision making in the revolutionary struggle! These opinions, needless to say, have not stopped his followers claiming that Trotsky or his ideas were democratic.

If working class people are deemed incapable of running the future socialist society directly, then why expect Trotskyists to support self-management in the struggle today? Or, for that matter, within their own parties?

With regards to whether the referendum could be used as a means of setting policy within the party, Trotsky argued that it was “*not possible to answer this question except in the negative.*” He goes on to argue that “*whoever is in favour of a referendum must be in favour of imperative mandates,*” which meant “*that every local has the right to **compel** its representative ... to vote in a definite manner.*” This meant that a “*party decision is simply an arithmetical total of local decisions.*” While allowing the right for locals to vote on “*every question,*” he considered it right that the representatives could ignore that decision as they had “*the right to weigh all the arguments*” made at the party conference. The party members only had the right to “*subsequently deprive him of its political confidence*” while implementing the decisions they had no part in determining, either at conference or subsequently.

Compare this to Marx. He **praised** the Communards of 1871 for implementing the “*imperative mandate.*” Needless to say, Marx failed to note that Proudhon and Bakunin had advocated this measure years before it was applied in Paris. However, it seems strange that his modern followers pay lip service to that idea while, in practice, dismissing it as “undemocratic.”

Now, why would Trotskyists oppose a form of decision making praised by Marx? Could it be because they, just like the bourgeois politicians, are aware that it stops, to quote Engels, the “*transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society*”?

Why should self-proclaimed socialists be so against self-management that they would, in the face of all logic and evidence, call it “undemocratic” while, at the same time, subscribing to a organisation structure which places power into the hands of a few? The answer seems all too plain.

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Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

A defence of anarchist organisation (i.e., self-management) against Leninist claims that it is “undemocratic.” It shows that the logical position of this so-called critique is centralised rule by one person.

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