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Letters to Socialist Resistance: Anarchism or Marxism?

Anarcho

December 11, 2010

Two letters to a Leninist newspaper, Socialist Resistance, refuting their claims about anarchism. It covers the usual Leninist distortions about anarchism. The second letter was turned into a pdf file (included) which was handed out at their subsequent meeting on anarchism. For more discussion of these issues, section H of **An Anarchist FAQ** is recommended.

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Letters to Socialist Resistance: Anarchism or Marxism?

December 11, 2010

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Dear *Socialist Resistance*

I read your article “*Marxism or Anarchism?*” (February 2004) with interest. I can only assume its author knows absolutely nothing about Anarchism.

The author asserts that we anarchists cannot “*answer one critical question,*” namely how to defend a revolution, against its “*many enemies, at home and abroad.*” Clearly he hasn’t read any anarchists. If he had he would know that we

have answered that question repeatedly. For example Bakunin argued the “*alliance of all labour associations*” would “*constitute the Commune*” with a “*Communal Council*” of delegates “*invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times.*” These communes had to organise “*to defend the revolution*” and would “*form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to federate with [other communes] for common defence*” and so “*organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction.*”

This also answers the assertion that anarchists do not see that “*the local institutions of democracy need to coordinate themselves at regional and national level.*” Like all anarchists, Bakunin is arguing for a federation of (to use the author’s words) “*workplaces and community councils.*” I should note that this was five decades before Lenin belatedly argued the same in 1917.

So if anarchists have been arguing since the 1860s for (to quote the article) “*workers taking power through their own organisations,*” then what are the real differences between Marxism and anarchism? In a nutshell, we mean it. Lenin was clear in 1917 that the Bolshevik party would seize power, not the masses. And to stay in power they undermined the workers organisation. For example, by the spring of 1918 (i.e. before the start of the civil war) they were gerrymandering soviets and disbanding any which were elected with non-Bolshevik majorities. Less than a year later they had raised this de facto party dictatorship into a key ideological principle. Anarchists were not surprised, as the state is not simply “*bodies of armed men*” but rather a top-down structure which concentrates power in the hands of a few. The Marxist definition of the state ignores the key question, “*who has power, the masses or a handful of leaders?*”

So, in reply to the question “*are you serious?*” I simply ask the same of you. If you were, you would not inflict such rub-

Finally, there is the question of “politics.” Anarchists do not ignore political issues (“*public affairs*”). Rather we argue that they be fought on our class terrain, by direct action and solidarity. We do reject electionism because it does not work. Hearse points to SSP doing a “*brilliant job*” in the Scottish Parliament. One hundred years ago the Marxist Social Democrats were doing a “*brilliant job*” in the German Parliament. Yet the Marxists soon became reformist, watering down their principles to get more votes. The means used became an end in itself. Come 1914, the chickens came home to roost and the “socialists” voted for war credits. As in so many things, Bakunin, not Marx, was proven correct.

Hearse wants us to forget all that. I’m not surprised. Marxists seem intent on repeating history, not making it. The Anarchist critique of Marxism has been confirmed repeatedly. So has our theory of revolution. Whether it is defending the revolution against White and Red dictatorship in the Ukraine, occupying the factories and fighting fascism in Italy, or the collectives and militias of the Spanish revolution, anarchism has done pretty good for a movement Hearse claims can “*never have any effect on anything important politically.*” But, then again, if that were true Hearse would not have written his essay to begin with.

If you are interested in anarchist ideas and want to see the references for the facts and quotes I present, please visit “**An Anarchist FAQ**” at www.anarchistfaq.org

yours,
Iain McKay

bish on your readers. To discover the real differences between anarchism and Marxism on such issues as the state, political organisation, parliamentarianism, the Russian and Spanish revolutions and the other subjects the article distorts, I would suggest visiting “*An Anarchist FAQ*” at www.anarchistfaq.org.

yours in disgust,
Iain McKay

Dear *Socialist Resistance*

Phil Hearse’s attempt to reply to anarchist criticism was wonderfully self-contradictory. He wants a government, dismissing direct democracy as impossible, yet also argues that this “*does not imply a delegation of overall social and political power by the working class*”! He maintains that “*majority rule is part of the central definition of workers democracy*” while also arguing that “*for us all democracy is representative.*” In other words, **minority** rule by the handful of leaders elected by the majority. Rather than the actual “*self-organised power of the workers*” we get a government only “*based*” on it.

Anarchists reject this sophistry. The key issue is, as I said, power. When I said the Bolsheviks aimed at party power, Hearse asserts that I am “*presumably referring to Lenin’s insentience that the Bolsheviks ... take the initiative for the insurrection of October 1917.*” No, I was referring to Lenin’s constant refrain that they “*can and must take state power into their own hands.*” Hearse claims that workers and community councils would rule, yet Lenin argued that “*it is impossible to refuse a purely Bolshevik government without treason to the slogan of the power of the Soviets, since a majority at the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets ... handed power over to this government.*” “**All power to party leadership via the soviets**” is a more accurate description of Leninist ideology.

But, Hearse asserts, “*revolutionary marxists see workers’ power being exercised through the self-rule of the workers ... not through dictatorship of a particular party.*” Does this mean that Lenin and Trotsky were not “*revolutionary marxists*”? According to Lenin, “*when we are reproached with having established a dictatorship of one party ... we say, ‘Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position ...’*” He, like Hearse, dismissed the idea that the whole working class could rule for “*in all capitalist countries ... the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation. It can be exercised only by a vanguard.*” Trotsky agreed, arguing (in 1936!) that the “*revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party*” was “*an objective necessity*” and that the “*revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution.*”

Perhaps Hearse will argue that this was due to the “*conditions of civil war.*” Yet he significantly ignores the fact that the Bolsheviks had been disbanding soviets and imposing one-man management before it started. They had also been repressing the left. He asserts that “*decisive action was taken against the anarchists*” after some bombed a Bolshevik meeting. That was in September 1919. A year and a half before, the Cheka had attacked the anarchists all across Russia — before the civil war started. Repression continued from then on. The bombing was in response to state repression, not its cause.

Ignoring the awkward fact that Bolshevik authoritarianism started before (and continued after) the civil war, Hearse argues that “*decline of soviet democracy*” was due to “*the decline and near-disappearance of the proletariat.*” Yet massive strike waves against the Bolsheviks were a common feature of Lenin’s Russia. A non-existent proletariat hardly needs martial law and lock-outs to tame it. The Bolsheviks suppressed the workers to remain in power. As Trotsky explained, the party was “*entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship*

temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy.”

Hearse asserts that “*there is nothing in the history of the Russian Revolution which constitutes proof that a revolutionary party disables revolution and workers power.*” He is wrong. Something does: the Makhnovist movement. Fighting the same civil war, the Bolsheviks were putting the “*dictatorship of the party*” at the core of their politics while the anarchists called democratic soviet congresses and protected freedom of speech and association. Hearse claims that Makhno “*was part*” of the “*counter-revolution.*” This is a lie. Makhno fought the Whites and the Bolsheviks for soviet democracy. Is soviet democracy “*counter-revolution*”? Significantly, the Bolsheviks worked with Makhno, betraying him once the Whites were defeated. The Makhnovists also refutes his assertion that we anarchists “*can’t*” defend a revolution.

Hearse wonders if there “*would have been a Russian revolution without the Bolshevik party?*” If the striking women in February 1917 had listened to the Bolsheviks, the answer would have been no! However, Hearse makes the common Leninist assumption that opposition to vanguardism means rejecting “*the need for the organisation and leadership role of the most consistent revolutionaries.*” Anarchists disagree and form anarchist groups to influence the class struggle. However, unlike Leninism, we do not see these groups as seizing power on behalf of the masses.

Equally, anarchists are well aware that an ideal socialist society will not be created immediately after a revolution. The task of working class organs (like federations of factory committees and neighbourhood assemblies) is to build it. However, all state institutions (like capitalist ones) do need to be destroyed. To keep them would be to retain inequality of power between a few leaders and the masses. As Lenin’s regime showed, these soon come into conflict — a conflict Leninism always resolves in favour of party power.