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# Marxism and “Anarchism”: A reply to the SWP

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December 11, 2010

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*'only from below' is an anarchist principle.*” For real “socialism from below” find out about anarchism.

With anarchism back in the news thanks to the student protests in 2010, we can expect the likes of the **Socialist Workers Party** to have patronising and inaccurate articles on “anarchism” in their publications. This is a reply to a previous article from 10 years ago but which repeats all the usual nonsense typically spouted by Leninists on “anarchism.” This article was serialised in **Freedom**.

For more discussion of the real differences between anarchism and Marxism/Leninism, see section H of **An Anarchist FAQ**.

## ***Part One***

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once wrote that *“to tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act.”* Sadly, when it comes to anarchism, Marxists rarely tell the truth. Instead, they usually produce a series of slanders and lies.

In issue no. 1714 of *Socialist Worker* (dated 16<sup>th</sup> September 2000) the British SWP decided to “expose” anarchism in an article entitled *“Marxism and Anarchism.”* However, their article is little more than a series of errors and distortions. We shall indicate how the SWP lies about anarchist ideas and discuss the **real** differences between anarchism and Marxism.

The inspiration for their diatribe is clear—they are worried about anarchist influence in the various anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation movements and demonstrations which are currently occurring across the world. As they put it:

*“The great revolt against capitalism in Seattle last year, and similar demonstrations since, have attracted diverse groups of protesters.”*

Yes, indeed, anarchists have been involved in these demonstrations from the start, unlike “vanguard” parties like the SWP who only became aware of the significance of these movements

once they exploded in the streets. That in itself should tell us something about the effectiveness of the Bolshevik inspired politics the SWP raise as an alternative to anarchism. Rather than being at the vanguard of these demonstrations and movements, parties like the SWP have been, post-Seattle, busy trying to catch up with them. Nor is this the only time this has happened.

In Russia, in February 1917, for example, the Bolshevik party **opposed** the actions that produced the revolution which overthrew the Tsar. After weeks of strikes with police attacks on factories, the most oppressed part of the working class, the women textile workers, took the initiative. Demands for bread and attacks on bakeries were superseded by a massive demonstration of women workers on International Women's Day. The women had ignored a local Bolshevik directive to wait until May Day! The early slogan of "Bread !" was quickly followed by "Down with the autocracy! Down with the war!" By February 24<sup>th</sup>, half of Petrograd was on strike. The workers did go to their factories, not to work, but to hold meetings, pass resolutions and then go out to demonstrate. The Vyborg committee of the Bolsheviks opposed the strikes. Luckily for the Russian workers, and unfortunately for the Tsar, the Bolsheviks were ignored.

Similarly, during the British Poll Tax rebellion of the late 1980s, the SWP dismissed the community based mass non-payment campaign. Instead they argued for workers to push their trade unions leadership to call strikes to overthrow the tax. Indeed, they even argued that there was a *"danger that community politics divert people from the means to won, from the need to mobilise working class activity on a collective basis"* by which they meant trade union basis. They argued that the state machine would *"wear down community resistance if it cannot tap the strength of the working class."* However, once non-payment began in earnest and showed hundreds of thousands involved and refusing to pay, overnight the SWP

Moreover, as argued above, centralisation is the key means by which minorities govern majorities. It is a tool used to impose minority rule and is not designed for other uses. But, then again, the SWP do aim for minority rule – the rule of the "revolutionary" party over the masses. As they argue:

*"The working class needs what anarchism rejects – a clear and determined revolutionary party which can lead the working class as a whole, and is not afraid to overthrow capitalism and set up a workers' state."*

Yes, indeed. The examples of the current anti-capitalist movement, the poll tax revolt and the 1917 February Russian revolution indicate well that a revolutionary party works. If such a party had led the working class in each of these events, they would not have occurred. The workers would have done nothing, as the Bolsheviks desired. People would have paid their poll tax waiting for the trade union bureaucrats to act. The anti-globalisation demonstrations would not have happened as the "vanguard" party did not recognise their importance.

Given that the Russian Revolution quickly resulted in the marginalisation of the workers' councils by the centralised, *"clear and determined"* Bolsheviks who turned them into rubber stamps of their government, it suggests that the politics of the SWP leave much to be desired. This, we suggest, provides the explanation of why they have spent so much time re-writing history to smear anarchism. Not being able to discuss our ideas honestly – for that would expose the authoritarian ideas of Bolshevism – the SWP invent a straw man they call anarchism and beat him to death. Unfortunately for them, anarchists are still around and can expose their lies for what they are.

One last point, the SWP claim they are for *"socialism from below."* Unfortunately for them, Lenin argued that *"the principle,*

via mutual credit and workers' co-operatives and rejected the idea of revolution (spontaneous or not). Anyone with even a limited knowledge of Proudhon's work would know this. In addition, Proudhon's last book (**The Political Capacity of the Working Classes**) was an attempt to influence the workers' movement towards his ideas of mutualism and federalism. Hardly to be expected from someone who "despised" humanity for not overthrowing capitalism. As examples go, the SWP is clearly clutching at straws.

The SWP then move onto an even greater factual error. They claim that the "*biggest anarchist groups today, the 'autonomists' in Europe, treat workers who have not fully broken with capitalist ideas as an enemy rather than a potential ally.*" Unfortunately for them, the "autonomists" are not generally anarchists. Rather they are non-Leninist Marxists whose ideas (and name) originally came from the Marxist left in Italy during the 1960s. It is also probable that the various European anarchist federations (such as the French and Italian) and anarcho-syndicalist unions are bigger than the autonomists. Moreover, without any examples of the groups meant it is hard to evaluate the accuracy of the SWP's claims. Suffice it to say, the leading theorists of "autonomism" such as Tony Negri and Harry Cleaver do not express the opinions the SWP claim "autonomists" have.

They admit that their analysis leaves much to be desired by mentioning that "*Many anarchists understand the way that capitalism works and organise to change the world.*" In other words, if an anarchist points out the flaws in their argument or a reader knows an anarchist who does not match the SWP's distorted picture, then the SWP can say that they are part of the "many." Extremely handy, if dishonest, comment to make.

The SWP continue by arguing that our "*rejection of centralisation means that at critical moments their intervention in the struggle is fatally flawed.*" This is ironic. Given that their example of the benefits of centralisation showed the flaws in that method of organising, their conclusion seems without basis.

became passionate believers in the collective class power of community based non-payment. They argued, in direct contradiction to their earlier analysis, that the state was "*shaken by the continuing huge scale of non-payment.*" (**Trotwatch, Carry on Recruiting**)

Therefore, the fact that the self-proclaimed "vanguard of the proletariat" is actually miles behind the struggle comes as no surprise. Nor are their slanders against those, like anarchists, who are at the front of the struggle unsurprising. They produced similar articles during the poll tax rebellion as well, to counter anarchist influence by smearing our ideas.

The SWP continue:

*"Anarchists, amongst others, have taken part in all of those protests. Anarchism is generally taken to mean a rejection of all authority."*

One question immediately arises. What do anarchists mean by the term "authority"? Without knowing that, it will be difficult to evaluate the SWP's arguments.

Kropotkin provides the answer. He argued that "*the origin of the anarchist inception of society ... [lies in] the criticism ... of the hierarchical organisations and the authoritarian conceptions of society; and ... the analysis of the tendencies that are seen in the progressive movements of mankind.*" He stresses that anarchism "*refuses all hierarchical organisation*"

Thus anarchism rejects authority in the sense, to use Malatesta's words, of "*the delegation of power, that is the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands a few.*" Once this is clearly understood, it will quickly be seen that the SWP create a straw man to defeat in argument.

The SWP correctly argue that we "*live in a world of bullying line managers, petty school rules, oppressive police, and governments that serve the rich and powerful.*" However, they trivialise anarchism (and the natural feelings that result from such

domination) by stating “Everyone who hates that has, at least at times, felt a streak of ‘anarchist’ revolt against authority.” Thus anarchism is presented as an emotional response rather than as valid, coherent intellectual opposition to hierarchical authority, an authority which serves its own interests as well as the rich and powerful. But, of course, anarchism is more than this, as the SWP acknowledge:

*“Anarchism, however, is more than a personal reaction against the tyrannies of capitalism. It is a set of political beliefs which have been held up as an alternative to the revolutionary socialist ideas of Karl Marx. Anarchist ideas have, on occasion, had a mass influence on movements against capitalism.”*

Given that the “revolutionary socialist ideas” of Marx have been proven wrong on numerous occasions while Bakunin’s predictions were proven right, anarchists humbly suggest that anarchism is a valid alternative to Marxism. For example, Bakunin correctly predicted that when “*the workers ... send common workers ... to Legislative Assemblies ... The worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois ... For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.*” The history of the Marxist Social Democratic Parties across the world proved him right. Similarly, Bakunin predicted that Marx’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” would become the “dictatorship over the proletariat.” The experience of the Russian Revolution proved him correct.

The SWP continue by arguing:

*“Socialists and anarchists share a hatred of capitalism. They have often fought alongside each other in major battles against the capitalist system. They*

*minority “should intervene. But, in every place and under all circumstances, ... [they] should freely participate in the common work, as true collaborators, not as dictators. It is necessary that they especially create an example, and employ themselves... without dominating, subjugating, or oppressing anyone... Accordingly to the libertarian thesis, it is the labouring masses themselves, who, by means of the various class organisations, factory committees, industrial and agricultural unions, co-operatives, et cetera, federated... should apply themselves everywhere, to solving the problems of waging the Revolution... As for the ‘elite’ [i.e. the politically aware], their role, according to the libertarians, is to **help** the masses, enlighten them, teach them, give them necessary advice, impel them to take initiative, provide them with an example, and support them in their action – **but not to direct them governmentally.**”*

Sadly, Leninists like the SWP confuse giving a lead with taking power themselves. They seek to take over positions of responsibility in a movement and turn them into positions of power which they can use to tell the others what to do. Instead of being the servants of the organisation, they become its masters. For this reason anarchist organisations try to influence movements from below, in the mass assemblies which make it up, rather than seek power.

After creating a straw man about anarchist theory, they draw some thoughts from it:

*“When struggles have not spontaneously broken capitalism, anarchists have tended to end up blaming workers for being insufficiently revolutionary. So 19<sup>th</sup> century French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon started off talking of his ‘love of the people’ but ended up saying he ‘despised’ humanity because they had not overthrown capitalism.”*

Strange that they picked Proudhon as he was not a revolutionary anarchist. Rather he favoured the reform of capitalism



*give labour unrest in all countries an **essentially economic** character, with the aim of reducing working hours and increasing salary, by means of the **association of the working masses** ... It will [also] propagandise its principles ...”*

Thus anarchists see the importance of workers’ organisation and struggle in the here and now. Anarchists are active in industrial disputes and (as the SWP note) the anti-globalisation movement and were heavily involved in the anti-poll-tax and anti-criminal justice act struggles, for example. The role of anarchists is not to wait for “upsurges” but rather to encourage them by spreading our ideas and encouraging workers to fight their bosses and the state. It is for this reason anarchists form groups and federations, to influence workers today rather than waiting for a “spontaneous uprising” to occur. Moreover, it is quite ironic that the SWP say that anarchists wait for upsurges before declaring themselves to the masses. After all, that is what the SWP do. They turn up at picket lines and try and sell their paper and party to the strikers. Obviously, if anarchist do this, it is bad, if the SWP do it, then it is “revolutionary.”

Therefore, rather than believing in or waiting for “spontaneous upsurges” anarchists, like the SWP, spread their message, try and convince people to become revolutionaries. That is why there are numerous anarchist federations across the world, involved in numerous struggles and working class organisations, with magazines, papers and leaflets being produced and distributed. Anarchists stress the importance of winning people over to anarchist ideas and of giving a “lead” in struggle rather than as a “leadership” (which implies a hierarchical relationship between the mass of people and a group of leaders). To state otherwise, to argue we wait for spontaneous uprisings, is simply a lie.

Anarchist organisations see themselves in the role of aiders, **not** leaders. As Voline argued, the politically aware

*struggled together in the Europe-wide mass strikes at the end of the First World War and the inspiring Spanish Revolution in 1936, as well as in countless smaller battles today.”*

Which is true. They also fail to mention that the mass-strikes at the end of the First World War were defeated by the actions of the Social-Democratic Parties and trade unions. These parties were self-proclaimed revolutionary Marxist organisations, utilising (as Marx had argued) the ballot box and centralised organisations. Unsurprisingly, given the tactics and structure, reformism and bureaucracy had developed within them. When workers took strike action, even occupying their factories in Italy, the bureaucracy of the Social Democratic Parties and trade unions acted to undermine the struggle, isolating workers and supporting capitalism. The Marxist movement had degenerated into bourgeois parties, as Bakunin predicted.

It is also strange that the SWP mention that “*inspiring Spanish Revolution in 1936*” as this revolution was mainly anarchist in its “*inspiring*” features. Workers took over workplaces and the land, organising them under workers’ self-management. Direct democracy was practised by hundreds of thousands of workers in line with the organisational structures of the anarchist union the CNT. In contrast, the Russian Revolution saw power become centralised into the hands of the Bolshevik party leadership and workers’ self-management of production was eliminated in favour of one-man management imposed from above (see M. Brinton’s *The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control* for details).

The SWP continue by arguing that “*there are differences between revolutionary socialism and anarchism. Both understand the need for organisation but disagree over what form that organisation takes.*” This is a vast step forward in the usual Marxist slander that anarchists reject the need for organisation and so

should be welcomed. Unfortunately the rest of the discussion on this issue falls back into the usual swamp of slander.

They argue that *“Every struggle, from a local campaign against housing privatisation to a mass strike of millions of workers, raises the need for organisation. People come together and need mechanisms for deciding what to do and how to do it.”* They continue by arguing that *“Anarchism says that organisation has nothing to do with centralisation. For anarchism, any form of centralisation is a type of authority, which is oppressive.”* This is true, anarchists do argue that centralisation places power at the centre, so disempowering the people at the base of an organisation. In order to co-ordinate activity anarchists propose **federal** structures, made up of mandated delegates from autonomous assemblies. In this way, co-ordination is achieved while ensuring that power remains at the bottom of the organisation, in the hands of those actually fighting or doing the work. Federalism does not deny the need to make agreements and to co-ordinate decisions. Far from it — it was put forward by anarchists precisely to ensure co-ordination of joint activity and to make agreements in such a way as to involve those subject to those decisions in the process of making them. In other words, it is the means to combine participation and co-ordination and to create an organisation run from the bottom up rather than the top-down. As can be seen, anarchists do not oppose co-ordination and co-operation, making agreements and implementing them together.

After mentioning centralisation, the SWP make a massive jump of logic and assert:

*“But arguing with someone to join a struggle, and trying to put forward tactics and ideas that can take it forward are attempts to lead.*

*“It is no good people coming together in a struggle, discussing what to do and then doing just what they feel like as if no discussion had taken place. We al-*

The anarchist revolution would be organised in an identical fashion, and, in Bakunin’s words, *“must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegations ... [who] will set out to administer public services, not to rule over peoples.”*

After lying about the FAI, they move on to lying about anarchist theory:

*“Anarchists instead look to spontaneous upsurges by workers. In the struggle anarchists will declare themselves and urge the workers on. They hope this will lead to the toppling of capitalism. History is full of mass struggles which have been able to win significant gains, but which have not had a clear leadership that can carry the struggle over to victory against capitalism.”*

Nothing could be further from the truth. Their own article exposes their lies. They mention the CNT, which was organised in an anarchist way and in which anarchists were heavily involved. Anarchists from Bakunin onward have all argued in favour of organising as anarchists as well as organising workers and fighting for reforms in the here and now. For Bakunin, *“the natural organisation of the masses ... is organisation based on the various ways that their various types of work define their day-to-day life; it is organisation by trade association.”* He stressed the importance of anarchists being involved in unions as well as union struggle for reforms by direct action:

*“What policy should the International [Workers’ Association] follow during th[e] somewhat extended time period that separates us from this terrible social revolution ... the International will*

given the periods of repression suffered by the CNT and FAI during the Republic, being an illegal organisation made perfect sense (again, the SWP ignore historical context and so mislead the reader).

Did the FAI ignore *“open debate and common struggle.”* No, of course not. The members of the FAI were also members of the CNT. The CNT was based around mass assemblies in which all members could speak. It was here that members of the FAI took part in forming CNT policy along with other CNT members. Anarchists in the CNT who were not members of the FAI indicate this. Jose Borrás Casacarosa note that *“One has to recognise that the F.A.I. did not intervene in the C.N.T. from above or in an authoritarian manner as did other political parties in the unions. It did so from the base through militants ... the decisions which determined the course taken by the C.N.T. were taken under constant pressure from these militants.”* Jose Campos notes that F.A.I. militants *“tended to reject control of confederal committees and only accepted them on specific occasions ... if someone proposed a motion in assembly, the other F.A.I. members would support it, usually successfully. It was the individual standing of the **faista** in open assembly.”* [quoted by Stuart Christie, Op. Cit., p. 58]

As can be seen, open debate with their fellow workers in the union assemblies. In this they followed Bakunin’s arguments that anarchist organisation *“rules out any idea of dictatorship and custodial control”* and it *“will promote the Revolution only through **the natural but never official influence** of all members of the Alliance.”* This influence would be exerted in the union assemblies, as the union members *“could only defend their rights and their autonomy in only one way: the workers called general membership meetings. Nothing arouses the antipathy of the committees more than these popular assemblies... In these great meetings of the sections, the items on the agenda was amply discussed and the most progressive opinion prevailed...”*

*ways need to take the best ideas and act on them in a united way.”*

Placing ideas before a group of people is a “lead” but it is not centralisation. Moreover, anarchists are **not against making agreements!** Far from it. The aim of federal organisation is to make agreements, to co-ordinate struggles and activities. This does not mean ignoring agreements. As Kropotkin argued, the commune *“cannot any longer acknowledge any superior: that, above it, there cannot be anything, save the interests of the Federation, freely embraced by itself in concert with other Communes.”* This vision was stressed in the CNT’s resolution on Libertarian Communism made in May, 1936, which stated that *“the foundation of this administration will be the Commune. These Communes are to be autonomous and will be federated at regional and national levels for the purpose of achieving goals of a general nature. The right of autonomy is not to preclude the duty of implementation of agreements regarding collective benefits.”* Hence anarchists do not see making collective decisions and working in a federation as an abandonment of autonomy or a violation of anarchist theory.

They continue by arguing:

*“Not all authority is bad. A picket line is ‘authoritarian.’ It tries to impose the will of the striking workers on the boss, the police and on any workers who may be conned into scabbing on the strike.”*

What should strike the reader about this “example” is its total lack of class analysis. In this the SWP follow Engels. In his essay **On Authority**, Engels argues that a *“revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon-authoritarian means, if such there be at all; and if the victorious party does not want to*

*have fought in vain, it must maintain this rule by means of the terror its arms inspire in the reactionaries.”*

However, such an analysis is without a class basis and so will, by necessity, mislead the writer and the reader. Engels argues that revolution is the imposition by “*one part of the population*” on another. Very true – but Engels fails to indicate the nature of class society and, therefore, of a social revolution. In a class society “*one part of the population*” constantly “*imposes its will upon the other part*” all the time. In other words, the ruling class imposes its will on the working class everyday in work by the hierarchical structure of the workplace and in society by the state. By discussing the “population” as if it was not divided by classes, and so subject to specific forms of authoritarian social relationships, is liberal nonsense. Once we recognise that the “population” in question is divided into classes we can easily see the fallacy of Engels argument. In a social revolution, the act of revolution is the overthrow of the power and authority of an oppressing and exploiting class by those subject to that oppression and exploitation. In other words, it is an act of liberation in which the hierarchical power of the few over the many is eliminated and replaced by the freedom of the many to control their own lives. It is hardly authoritarian to destroy authority! Thus a social revolution is, fundamentally, an act of liberation for the oppressed who act in their own interests to end the system in which “one part of population imposes its will upon the other” everyday.

This applies equally to the SWP’s example of a picket line. Is a picket line **really** authoritarian because it tries to impose its will on the boss, police or scabs? Rather, is it not defending the workers’ freedom against the authoritarian power of the boss and their lackeys (the police and scabs)? Is it “authoritarian” to resist authority and create a structure – a strike assembly and picket line – which allows the formally subordinated workers to manage their own affairs directly and without bosses? Is it “authoritarian” to combat the authority of the boss, to proclaim

*“Each FAI group thought and acted as it deemed fit, without bothering about what the others might be thinking or deciding ... they had no ... opportunity or jurisdiction ... to foist a party line upon the grass-roots.”* [Francisco Carrasquer, quoted by Stuart Christie, **We, the Anarchists!**, p. 29]

Murray Bookchin paints a similar picture:

*“The FAI ... was more loosely jointed as an organisation than many of its admirers and critics seem to recognise. It has no bureaucratic apparatus, no membership cards or dues, and no headquarters with paid officials, secretaries, and clerks... They jealously guarded the autonomy of their affinity groups from the authority of higher organisational bodies-a state of mind hardly conducive to the development of a tightly knit, vanguard organisation.*

*“The FAI, moreover, was not a politically homogeneous organisation which followed a fixed ‘line’ like the Communists and many Socialists. It had no official program by which all **faistas** could mechanically guide their actions.”* [**The Spanish Anarchists**, p. 224]

Was the FAI a “secret” organisation? When it was founded in 1927, Spain was under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera and so it was illegal and so secret by necessity. With the foundation of the Republic in 1931, the FAI refused to register as an organisation as required by Republican Law. Thus it was illegal rather than secret. As one anarchist militant asked, “*If it was secret, how come I was able to attend FAI meetings without ever having joined or paid dues to the ‘specific’ organisation?*” [Francisco Carrasquer, quoted by Christie, Op. Cit., p. 26] Moreover,

extremely slow, such an organisation would have spent most of its time waiting for instructions from above. Why would anyone want to join such a group? Simple logic undermines the SWP's argument.

The reality of Bakunin's organisation is slightly different. The association's "*single will*," Bakunin wrote, would be determined by "*laws*" that every member "*helped to create*," or at a minimum "*equally approved*" by "*mutual agreement*." This "*definite set of rules*" was to be "*frequently renewed*" in plenary sessions wherein each member had the "*duty to try and make his view prevail*," but then he must accept fully the decision of the majority. Thus the revolutionary association's "*rigorously conceived and prescribed plan*," implemented under the "*strictest discipline*," was in reality to be "*nothing more or less than the expression and direct outcome of the reciprocal commitment contracted by each of the members towards the others*." [quoted by Richard B. Saltman, **The Social and Political Thought of Michael Bakunin**, p. 115]

We should also point out that the Bolshevik party itself was a secret organisation for most of its life in Tsarist Russia. Bakunin, an exile from Tsarist Russia, would have been aware, like the Bolsheviks, of the necessity of secret organising. Given that the countries in which anarchists were operating were not democracies, in the main, a secret organisation would have been considered essential. The SWP ignore the historical context.

They move onto Spanish Anarchism:

*"The anarchist organisation inside the Spanish CNT, the FAI, was centralised and secret. A revolutionary party thrives on open debate and common struggle with wider groups of workers."*

The FAI, regardless of Marxist myths, was not centralised. It was a federation of affinity groups. As one member put it:

your freedom and exercise it? Of course not. The SWP are playing with words.

Needless to say, it is a large jump from the "authority" of a strikers' assembly to that of a highly centralised "workers' state" but that, of course, is what the SWP wish the reader to do. Comparing a strikers' assembly and picket line – which is a form of self-managed association – with a state cannot be done. It fails to recognise the fundamental difference. In the strikers' assembly and picket line the strikers themselves decide policy and do not delegate power away. In a state, power **is** delegated into the hands of a few who then use that power as they see fit. This by necessity disempowers those at the base, who are turned into mere electors and order takers. Such a situation can only spell death of a social revolution, which requires the active participation of all if it is to succeed. It also exposes the central fallacy of Marxism, namely that it claims to desire a society based on the participation of everyone yet favours a form of organisation – centralisation – that precludes that participation.

## **Part Two**

The SWP continue their diatribe against anarchism ("*Marxism and Anarchism*", **Socialist Worker**, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2000):

*"Big workers' struggles throw up an alternative form of authority to the capitalist state. Militant mass strikes throw up workers' councils. These are democratic bodies, like strike committees. But they take on organising 'state functions'-transport, food distribution, defence of picket lines and workers' areas from the police and army, and so on."*

To state the obvious, transportation and food distribution are not "state functions." They are economic functions. Simi-

larly, defence is not a “state function” as such – after all, individuals can and do defend themselves against aggression. Defence can be organised in a libertarian fashion, based on self-managed workers’ militias and federations of free communes. It need not be a hierarchical system like the Bolshevik Red Army where the election of officers, soldiers’ councils and self-governing assemblies were abolished by Trotsky in favour of officers appointed from above. What is a “state function” is imposing the will of a minority – the government, the boss, the bureaucrat – onto the population via professional bodies such as the police and military. This is what the Bolshevik state did, with workers’ councils turned into state bodies executing the decrees of the government and using a specialised and hierarchical army and police force to do so. The difference is important. Luigi Fabbri sums up it well:

*“The mistake of authoritarian communists in this connection is the belief that fighting and organising are impossible without submission to a government; and thus they regard anarchists ... as the foes of all organisation and all co-ordinated struggle. We, on the other hand, maintain that not only are revolutionary struggle and revolutionary organisation possible outside and in spite of government interference but that, indeed, that is the only effective way to struggle and organise, for it has the active participation of all members of the collective unit, instead of their passively entrusting themselves to the authority of the supreme leaders.*

*“Any governing body is an impediment to the real organisation of the broad masses, the majority. Where a government exists, then the only really organised people are the minority who make up the government; and ... if the masses do organise, they do so against it, outside it, or at the very least, indepen-*

*bureaucracy, centralisation and the state. It fosters the bureaucracy, centralisation and the state. It fosters the very social conditions which justify this kind of society. Hence, instead of ‘withering away,’ the state controlled by the ‘glorious party’ preserves the very conditions which ‘necessitate’ the existence of a state-and a party to ‘guard’ it.”*

But, then again, the SWP know that anarchists do not reject the need for anarchists to organise as anarchists to influence the class struggle. As they argue, “Anarchism’s attempts to deal with them have been far less effective and less democratic.”

They continue:

*“All the major anarchist organisations in history have been centralised but have operated in secret. The 19<sup>th</sup> century theorist of anarchism Mikhail Bakunin’s organisation had a hierarchy of committees, with half a dozen people at the top, which were not under the democratic control of its members.”*

It is just as well they say “all the major anarchist organisations,” it allows them to ignore counter-examples. We can point to hundreds of anarchist organisations that are/were not secret. For example, the Italian Anarchist Union was a non-secret organisation. Given that the IAU had around 20 000 members in 1920, we wonder by what criteria the SWP excludes it from being a “major anarchist organisation”? The French Anarchist Federation which organises today has a weekly paper and groups all across France and Belgium. That is not secret and is a major anarchist organisation. We wonder why the SWP excludes it? Simply because they know their generalisation is false?

As for Bakunin’s organisation, we wonder why anyone would have wanted to join it if they had no say in the organisation. Also, given that communication in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was

Such an organisation can never create a socialist society. In contrast, anarchists argue that socialist organisations should reflect as much as possible the future society we are aiming to create. To build organisations which are statist/capitalistic in structure cannot do other than reproduce the very problems of capitalism/statism into them and so undermine their liberatory potential. As Murray Bookchin puts it:

*“The ‘glorious party,’ when there is one, almost invariably lags behind the events ... In the beginning ... it tends to have an inhibitory function, not a ‘vanguard’ role. Where it exercises influence, it tends to slow down the flow of events, not ‘co-ordinate’ the revolutionary forced. This is not accidental. The party is structured along hierarchical lines **that reflect the very society it professes to oppose** ... Its membership is schooled in obedience ... The party’s leadership, in turn, is schooled in habits born of command, authority, manipulation ... Its leaders ... lose contact with the living situation below. The local groups, which know their own immediate situation better than any remote leaders, are obliged to subordinate their insights to directives from above. The leadership, lacking any direct knowledge of local problems, responds sluggishly and prudently...*

*“The party becomes less efficient from a revolutionary point of view the more it seeks efficiency by means of hierarchy, cadres and centralisation. Although everyone marches in step, the orders are usually wrong, especially when events begin to move rapidly and take unexpected turns—as they do in all revolutions. The party is efficient in only one respect—in moulding society in its own hierarchical imagine if the revolution is successful. It recreates*

*dently of it. In ossifying into a government, the revolution as such would fall apart, on account of its awarding that government the monopoly of organisation and of the means of struggle.”*

Thus the difference between anarchists and Leninists is not whether the organisations workers’ create in struggle will be the framework of a free society (or the basis of the Commune). Indeed, anarchists have been arguing this for longer than Marxists have. The difference is whether these organisations remain self-managed or whether they become part of a centralised state. In the words of Camillo Berneri:

*“The Marxists ... foresee the natural disappearance of the State as a consequence of the destruction of classes by the means of ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat,’ that is to say State Socialism, whereas the Anarchists desire the destruction of the classes by means of a social revolution which eliminates, with the classes, the State. The Marxists, moreover, do not propose the armed conquest of the Commune by the whole proletariat, but the propose the conquest of the State by the party which imagines that it represents the proletariat. The Anarchists allow the use of direct power by the proletariat, but they understand by the organ of this power to be formed by the entire corpus of systems of communist administration-corporate organisations [i.e. industrial unions], communal institutions, both regional and national—freely constituted outside and in opposition to all political monopoly by parties and endeavouring to a minimum administrative centralisation.”*

So, anarchists agree, in “big workers’ struggles” organisation is essential and can form an alternative to the capitalist

state. However, such a framework only becomes an “authority” when power is transferred from the base into the hands of an executive committee at the top. Strike and community assemblies, by being organs of self-management, are not an “authority” in the same sense that the state is or the boss is. Rather, they are the means by which people can manage their own affairs directly, to govern themselves and so do without the need for hierarchical authority. The SWP, in other words, confuse two very different things.

After misunderstanding basic concepts, the SWP treat us to a history lesson:

*“Such councils were a feature of the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the German Revolution after the First World War, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, and many other great struggles. Socialists argue that these democratic workers’ organisations need to take power from the capitalists and break up their state.”*

Anarchists agree. Indeed, they argued that workers’ organisations should “break up” and replace the state long before Lenin discovered this in 1917. For example, Bakunin argued in the 1860s as follows:

*“the federative alliance of all working men’s associations ... constitute the Commune ... all provinces, communes and associations ... by first **reorganising** on revolutionary lines ... [will] constitute the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... [and] organise a revolutionary force capable defeating reaction ... [and for] self-defence ... [The] revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from*

*“In the struggle he cannot act like a soldier under orders but like a man who is conscious of what he is doing. I know it is not easy to get such a result, but what one cannot get by reason, one can never get through force. If our revolutionary army must be maintained through fear, we will have changed nothing but the colour of fear. It is only by freeing itself from fear that a free society can be built.”*

Durruti’s words effectively refute the SWP’s flawed argument. We need to organise, co-ordinate, co-operate our activities but we cannot do so in bourgeois ways. We need to discover new ways, based on libertarian ideas and not capitalist ones like centralisation.

They continue by arguing that “Anarchists say a revolutionary party is at best unnecessary and at worst another form of authoritarianism. But they cannot avoid the problems that a revolutionary party addresses.” In reality, while anarchists reject the “revolutionary” party, they do not reject the need for an anarchist federation to spread anarchist ideas, convince others of our ideas and to give a lead during struggles. We reject the Bolshevik style “revolutionary party” simply because it is organised in a centralised, bourgeois, fashion and so produces all the problems of capitalist society within so-called revolutionary organisations. As the anarchists of **Trotwatch** explain, such a party leaves much to be desired:

*“In reality, a Leninist Party simply reproduces and institutionalises existing capitalist power relations inside a supposedly ‘revolutionary’ organisation: between leaders and led; order givers and order takers; between specialists and the acquiescent and largely powerless party workers. And that elitist power relation is extended to include the relationship between the party and class.”*



goals we are aiming for. During the Spanish Revolution anarchists organised militias to fight the fascists. One was led by anarchist militant Durruti. His military adviser, Pérez Farras, a professional soldier, was concerned about the application of libertarian principles to military organisation. Durruti replied:

*“I have already said and I repeat; during all my life, I have acted as an anarchist. The fact of having been given political responsibility for a human collective cannot change my convictions. It is under these conditions that I agreed to play the role given to me by the Central Committee of the Militias.*

*“I thought – and what has happened confirms my belief – that a workingmen’s militia cannot be led according to the same rules as an army. I think that discipline, co-ordination and the fulfilment of a plan are indispensable. But this idea can no longer be understood in the terms of the world we have just destroyed. We have new ideas. We think that solidarity among men must awaken personal responsibility, which knows how to accept discipline as an autonomous act.*

*“Necessity imposes a war on us, a struggle that differs from many of those that we have carried on before. But the goal of our struggle is always the triumph of the revolution. This means not only victory over the enemy, but also a radical change in man. For this change to occur, man must learn to live in freedom and develop in himself his potentialities as a responsible individual. The worker in the factory, using his tools and directing production, is bringing about a change in himself. The fighter, like the worker, uses his gun as a tool and his acts must lead to the same goals as those of the worker.*

*the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation...”*

And:

*“The future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.”*

Thus it is somewhat ironic to have Leninists present basic anarchist ideas as if **they** had thought of them first!

Their history lesson continues:

*“This happened in Russia in October 1917 in a revolution led by the Bolshevik Party.”*

In reality, this did not happen. In October 1917, the Bolshevik Party took power in the name of the workers’ councils, the councils themselves did not take power. This is confirmed by Trotsky, who notes that the Bolshevik Party conference of April 1917 “was devoted to the following fundamental question: Are we heading toward the conquest of power in the name of the socialist revolution or are we helping (anybody and everybody) to complete the democratic revolution? ... Lenin’s position was this: ... the capture of the soviet majority; the overthrow of the Provisional Government; the seizure of power through the soviets.” Note, **through** the soviets not **by** the soviets thus indicating the fact the Party would hold the real power, not the soviets of workers’ delegates. Moreover, he states that “to prepare the insurrection and to carry it out under cover of preparing for the Second Soviet Congress and under the slogan of defending it, was of inestimable advantage to us.” He continued by noting that it was “one thing to prepare an armed insurrection under the

*naked slogan of the seizure of power by the party, and quite another thing to prepare and then carry out an insurrection under the slogan of defending the rights of the Congress of Soviets.”* The Soviet Congress just provided “*the legal cover*” for the Bolshevik plans rather than a desire to see the Soviets actually start managing society. [**The Lessons of October**]

In 1920, he argued that “*[w]e have more than once been accused of having substituted for the dictatorships of the Soviets the dictatorship of the party. Yet it can be said with complete justice that the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party. It is thanks to the ... party ... [that] the Soviets ... [became] transformed from shapeless parliaments of labour into the apparatus of the supremacy of labour. In this ‘substitution’ of the power of the party for the power of the working class there is nothing accidental, and in reality there is no substitution at all. The Communists express the fundamental interests of the working class.*” [**Terrorism and Communism**]

In 1937 he continued this theme by arguing that “*the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard.*” Thus, rather than the working class as a whole “seizing power”, it is the “vanguard” which takes power – “*a revolutionary party, even after seizing power ... is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.*” He mocked the anarchist idea that a socialist revolution should be based on the self-management of workers within their own autonomous class organisations:

*“Those who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party dictatorship were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat.”*

[**Stalinism and Bolshevism**]

As can be seen, over a 17 year period Trotsky argued that it was the party which ruled, not the councils. The workers’

out waiting for instructions from the centre, as well as communicate what has happening to other roadblocks and come to common agreements on what action to take. The Washington demonstration showed the effectiveness of anarchist principles, of decentralisation and federalism from the bottom up.

So the SWP’s analysis of the Washington demonstration is faulty on two levels. Firstly, their account is not accurate. The demonstration was organised in a decentralised manner and worked extremely well. Secondly, even if their account was not fiction, it proves the failure of centralisation, not federalism.

They draw a lesson from their fictional account:

*“The police, needless to say, did not ‘decentralise’ their decision making. They co-ordinated across the city to break the protests.”*

Such an analogy indicates the bourgeois and authoritarian nature of the SWP’s politics. They do not understand that the capitalist state and workplace is centralised for a reason. It is to concentrate power into the hands of a few, with the many reduced to mere order takers. It is the means by which bourgeois rule is enforced

Moreover, they seem to be arguing that if we followed the example of the bourgeois state, of the organisational structure of the police or the army, then we would be as “effective” as they are. They are, in effect, arguing that the anti-capitalist movement should reproduce the regulated docility of the police force into its ranks, reproduce the domination of a few bosses at the top over a mass of unquestioning automations at the bottom. As Murray Bookchin argued, the Leninist “*has always had a grudging admiration and respect for that most inhuman of all hierarchical institutions, the military.*” The SWP prove him right.

Yes, there is a need for co-ordination and joint activity, but that must be created from below, in new ways that reflect the

ing process and an agreement reached between all involved. Centralisation was not required, no centre imposed the decision. Rather than weaken the protests, decentralisation strengthened it by involving all in the decision making process. Little wonder the SWP re-wrote history.

However, let us assume that the SWP's fiction was, in fact, true. What does it actually mean? We must point out its interesting logic. They argue that the protests had a "key organiser" which means they were centralised. They argue that the protestors looked to that person for direction. Unfortunately that person could not come to a "clear decision" and instead handed back decision making to each roadblock. In other words, centralisation failed, not federalism. Moreover, the state would have had a simple means to destroy the demonstration — arrest the "key organiser." In a centralised system, without a centre, the whole structure collapses — without someone giving orders, nothing is done.

In a federal structure each roadblock would have sent a delegate to a council to co-ordinate struggle (which, we stress, was what actually did happen). To quote Bakunin, "*there will be a federation of the standing barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council will operate on the basis of one or two delegates from each barricade ... these deputies being invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times.*" In the SWP's version of history, the blockades did not do this and so, unsurprisingly, without organisation, there was confusion. As an argument against anarchism it is useless. So the SWP's fictional example is an argument against centralisation — of placing decision-making power at the centre. In their story, faced with the task of co-ordinating actions which they had no knowledge of, the "key organiser" could not act and by not having a federal structure, the roadblocks were weakened due to lack of co-ordination. In reality, a federal structure existed within the demonstration, each roadblock and affinity group could take effective action instantly to counter the police, with-

councils became little more than rubber-stamps for the Bolshevik government (and not even that, as the central government only submitted a fraction of its decrees to the Central Executive of the national soviet, and that soviet was not even in permanent session). As Russian Anarchist Voline made clear "*for, the anarchists declared, if 'power' really should belong to the soviets, it could not belong to the Bolshevik Party, and if it should belong to that Party, as the Bolsheviks envisaged, it could not belong to the soviets.*"

In other words, the workers' councils took power in name only. Real power rested with the central government and the workers' councils become little more than a means to elect the government. Rather than manage society directly, the soviets simply became a transmission belt for the decrees and orders of the Bolshevik party. Hardly a system to inspire anyone.

The SWP, after re-writing Russian history, move onto Spanish history:

*"It did not happen in Spain in 1936. The CNT, a trade union heavily influenced by anarchist ideas, led a workers' uprising in the city of Barcelona that year. Workers' councils effectively ran the city.*

*"But the capitalist state machine did not simply disappear. The government and its army, which was fighting against Franco's fascist forces, remained, although it had no authority in Barcelona.*

*"The government even offered to hand power over to the leaders of the CNT. But the CNT believed that any form of state was wrong. It turned down the possibility of forming a workers' state, which could have broken the fascists' coup and the capitalist state.*

*"Worse, it accepted positions in a government that was dominated by pro-capitalist forces.*

*“That government crushed workers’ power in Barcelona, and in doing so fatally undermined the fight against fascism.”*

It is hard to know where to start in this distortion of history.

Firstly, we have to point out that the CNT did lead a workers’ uprising in 1936 but it was in response to a military coup and occurred all across Spain. The army was **not** “fighting against Franco’s fascist forces” but rather had been the means by which Franco had tried to impose his version of fascism. The government did nothing, even refusing to distribute arms to the workers. Thus the CNT faced the might of the Spanish army rising in a fascist coup. That, as we shall see influenced its decisions. By distorting the context of the events of 1936, the SWP distorts the readers understanding of what happened.

Secondly, anarchism does not think that the “capitalist state machine” will “simply disappear.” Rather, anarchists think that (to quote Kropotkin) the revolution “*must smash the State and replace it with the Federation [of workers’ associations and communes] and it will act accordingly.*” In other words, the state does not disappear, it is destroyed and replaced with a new, libertarian, form of social structure. Thus the SWP misrepresents anarchist theory.

Thirdly, yes, the Catalan government did offer to stand aside for the CNT and the CNT rejected the offer. Why? The SWP claim that “*the CNT believed that any form of state was wrong*” and that is why it did not take power. That is true, but what the SWP fail to mention is more important. The CNT refused to implement libertarian communism after the defeat of the army uprising in 1936 simply because it did not want to be isolated nor have to fight the republican government as well as the fascists. It did not take power nor did it destroy the state, as anarchists argue. Rather it ignored the state and this was its undoing. Thus the SWP attacks anarchism for anarchists failing to act in an anarchist manner!

ans (such as council communists and autonomists). The RACB officially maintained its autonomy within the demonstration and worked with others when and where it could. The affinity groups of the RACB would come to quick decisions on what to do. Often, they would quickly respond to the situation; usually their appearance was enough for the cops to fall back after a few tense moments.

The RACB was divided between two choices — either join with the rally or march on the Bank. There was a lot of negotiation back and forth. A compromise was reached. The RACB would move to each blockade in order and provide cover for those locked down to unlock and safely merge with the grown march so that attempts could be made the next day do blockade. The march continued to swell as it made its way along the route, eventually merging with the crowd at the permitted demonstration.

A decision was made. Perhaps it wasn’t the most militant. Perhaps it did not foresee that the next day would lack the numbers to even attempt a successful blockade. But arrests on the demonstration were kept to a minimum, a large show of strength was put on and strong feelings of solidarity and camaraderie grew. The cops could only control a few square blocks, the rest of the city was ours. And it was a decision that everyone had a part in making, and one that everyone could live with. It’s called self-management, perhaps it isn’t always the most efficient method of making decisions, but it is the best one if you desire freedom.

Of course, the last thing the SWP would want to admit is that anarchists led the victory march around Washington D.C. without a permit, without marshals, without many arrests and a minimal amount of violence! Of all the recent demonstrations in the U.S. the black bloc was the largest and most well received at Washington. Moreover, that demonstration showed that decentralised, federal organisation worked in practice. Each affinity group participated in the decision mak-

Unfortunately for the SWP, they have the facts all wrong. The World Bank/IMF complex in Washington DC was extremely difficult to blockade. The police blocked over 50 blocks on the day of the demonstration to travel. DC has very wide streets. Many World Bank and IMF Delegates spent the night in those buildings, or came in early in the morning long before sunrise. This calls into question whether a blockade was the best strategy considering the logistic details involved (the Blockade strategy was abandoned for the Republican and Democratic Party Conference demonstrations). In addition to the blockades, there was an officially permitted rally blocks away from the action.

By early afternoon, the various affinity groups manning the blockades were informed that the blockades had failed, and enough delegates had made it inside that the meeting was continuing inside with only a short delay. So the question came of what to do next? There were varying opinions. Some affinity groups favoured maintaining their blockades symbolically as an act of defiance and hoping to slow the dispersion of World Bank/IMF representatives as they left the meeting. Others wished to have a victory march around the area. Others wanted to join the rally. Some wanted to march on the World Bank and try for an occupation. There was no consensus. After much discussion between the affinity groups, a decision was reached.

The tactical process worked in practice like this. While there was an original plan agreed to by consensus at the beginning of the blockades by all affinity groups, with groups picking which intersection to occupy and which tactics to use, there was a great deal of flexibility as well. There were several flying columns that moved from intersection to intersection reinforcing barricades and increasing numbers where it looked like police might charge. The largest of these was the Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Bloc (“the Black Bloc”) made up mostly of class-struggle anarchists but included a number of other left libertari-

Obviously it is impossible to discuss the question of the CNT during the Spanish Revolution in depth here. Interested readers can visit this web page for a fuller discussion: [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)

The SWP try and generalise from these experiences:

*“In different ways, the lessons of Russia and Spain are the same. The organisational questions thrown up in particular struggles are critical when it comes to the working class challenging capitalism.*

*“Workers face conflicting pressures. On the one hand, they are forced to compete in the labour market. They feel powerless, as an individual, against the boss.*

*“That is why workers can accept the bosses’ view of the world. At the same time constant attacks on workers’ conditions create a need for workers to unite and fight back together.*

*“These two pressures mean workers’ ideas are uneven. Some see through the bosses’ lies. Others can be largely taken in. Most part accept and part reject capitalist ideas. The overall consciousness of the working class is always shifting. People become involved in struggles which lead them to break with pro-capitalist ideas.”*

That is very true and anarchists are well aware of it. That is why anarchists organise groups, produce propaganda, argue their ideas with others and encourage direct action and solidarity. We do so because we are aware that the ideas within society are mixed and that struggle leads people to break with pro-capitalist ideas. To quote Bakunin:

*“the germs of [socialist thought] ... [are to] be found in the instinct of every earnest worker. The goal ... is*

*to make the worker fully aware of what he wants, to unjam within him a stream of thought corresponding to his instinct ... What impedes the swifter development of this salutary though among the working masses? Their ignorance to be sure, that is, for the most part the political and religious prejudices with which self-interested classes still try to obscure their conscious and their natural instinct. How can we dispel this ignorance and destroy these harmful prejudices? By education and propaganda? ... they are insufficient ... [and] who will conduct this propaganda? ... [The] workers' world ... is left with but a single path, that of **emancipation through practical action** ... It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means **trade-unions, organisation** ... To deliver [the worker] from that ignorance [of reactionary ideas], the International relies on collective experience he gains in its bosom, especially on the progress of the collective struggle of the workers against the bosses ... As soon as he begins to take an active part in this wholly material struggle, ... Socialism replaces religion in his mind... through practice and collective experience ... the progressive and development of the economic struggle will bring him more and more to recognise his true enemies ... The workers thus enlisted in the struggle will necessarily ... recognise himself to be a revolutionary socialist, and he will act as one."*

Therefore anarchists are well aware of the importance of struggle and propaganda in winning people to anarchist ideas. No anarchist has ever argued otherwise.

decentralised social organisation. Such decentralisation is required to include the bulk of the population in the revolutionary struggle and does not imply isolation. A decentralised movement does not preclude co-ordination or co-operation but that co-ordination must come from below, based on federal structures, and not imposed from above.

Therefore, if we want a revolution which is more than just a change in who the boss is, we must create new forms of organisation and struggle which do not reproduce the traits of the world we are fighting. To put out the fire of class society, we need the water of a classless society and so we should organise in a libertarian way, building the new world in the shell of the old.

### **Part four**

The SWP in an article entitled "*Marxism and Anarchism*", **Socialist Worker**, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2000) attacked anarchist ideas. In the process of this they discussed the benefits of centralisation. As an example of why Marxism is better than anarchism they give an example:

*"Protesters put up several roadblocks during the major anti-capitalist demonstration in Washington in April of this year. The police tried to clear them. The question arose of what the protesters should do.*

*"Some wanted to try to maintain the roadblocks. Others thought the best tactic was to reorganise the protests into one demonstration. Instead of coming to a clear decision and acting on it, the key organiser of the whole event told people at each roadblock to do what they thought was right.*

*"The resulting confusion weakened all the protests."*

*“Centralism is needed above all because the capitalist state is centralised. The police, media moguls, employers, the state bureaucracy and governments act in a concerted way to protect the system.”*

Very true. However, the SWP fail to analyse **why** the state is centralised. Simply put, the state is centralised to exclude the mass of people from taking part in the decision making processes within society. This is to be expected as social structures do not evolve by chance – rather they develop to meet specific needs and requirements. The specific need of the ruling class is to rule and that means marginalising the bulk of the population. Its requirement is for minority power and this is transformed into the structure of the state and capitalist company. The SWP assume that centralisation is simply a tool without content. Rather, it is a tool that has been fashioned to do a specific job, namely to exclude the bulk of the population from the decision making process. It is designed that way and can have no other result. For that reason anarchists reject centralisation. As the justly famous Sonvillier Circular argued: *“How could one expect an egalitarian society to emerge out of an authoritarian organisation? It is impossible.”*

Just as the capitalist state cannot be utilised by the working class for its own ends, capitalist/statist organisational principles such as appointment, autocratic management, centralisation and delegation of power and so on cannot be utilised for social liberation. They are not designed to be used for that purpose (and, indeed, they were developed in the first place to stop it and enforce minority rule!).

In addition, we must point out the central fallacy of the SWP’s argument. Essentially they are arguing you need to fight fire with fire. They capitalist class is centralised, so must we be in order to defeat them. Unfortunately for the SWP, you do not put a fire out with fire, you put fire out with water. Therefore, to defeat centralised system you need

## **Part Three**

The SWP in their article *“Marxism and Anarchism”* (**Socialist Worker**, 16<sup>th</sup> September 2000) argue that:

*“So there is always a battle of ideas within the working class. That is why political organisation is crucial. Socialists seek to build a revolutionary party not only to try to spread the lessons from one struggle to another.*

*“They also want to organise those people who most clearly reject capitalism into a force that can fight for their ideas inside the working class as a whole. Such a party is democratic because its members constantly debate what is happening in today’s struggles and the lessons that can be applied from past ones.”*

That, in itself, is something most anarchists would agree with. That is why they build specific anarchist organisations which discuss and debate politics, current struggles, past struggles and revolutions and so on. In Britain there are three national anarchist federations (the **Anarchist Federation**, the **Solidarity Federation** and the **Class War Federation**) as well as numerous local groups and regional federations.

However, an organisation is not democratic because it debates. It is democratic only if the membership actually decides the policy of the organisation. That the SWP fail to mention this is significant and places doubt on whether their organisation is democratic in fact. The reason why democracy in the SWP may not be all that it should be can be found in their comment that: *“It is also centralised, as it arrives at decisions which everyone acts on.”*

However, this is not centralisation. Centralisation is when the centre decides everything and the membership follow

those orders. That the membership may be in a position to elect those at the centre does not change the fact that the membership is simply expected to follow orders. It is the organisational principle of the army or police, not of a free society. That this is the principle of Leninism can be seen from Trotsky's comment that the "*statues [of the party] should express the leadership's organised distrust of the members, a distrust manifesting itself in vigilant control from above over the Party.*" [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. xi] Thus the centre controls the membership, not vice versa.

In **What is to be Done?** Lenin discussed "*the confusion of ideas concerning the meaning of democracy.*" He dismisses the idea of self-management as "*Primitive Democracy.*" He uses the example of the early British unions, where workers "*thought that it was an indispensable sign of democracy for all the members to do all the work of managing the unions; not only were all questions decided by the vote of all the members, but all the official duties were fulfilled by all the members in turn.*" He considered "*such a conception of democracy*" as "*absurd*" and saw it as historical necessity that it was replaced by "*representative institutions*" and "*full-time officials*". In other words, the Leninist tradition rejects self-management in favour of hierarchical structures in which power is centralised in the hands of "*full-time officials*" and "*representative institutions.*" In contrast, Bakunin argued that trade unions which ended "*primitive democracy*" and replaced it with representative institutions became bureaucratic and "*simply left all decision-making to their committees ... In this manner power gravitated to the committees, and by a species of fiction characteristic of all governments the committees substituted their own will and their own ideas for that of the membership.*" Who was right can quickly be seen from radical and pro-active nature of the British TUC leadership. Ironically, the SWP always bemoan trade union bureaucracies betraying workers in struggle yet promote an

and so on, socialists and anarchists, etc.). Given a hierarchical system, Lenin's comment is simply a justification for state repression of its enemies (including elements within, or even the whole of, the working class).

It could be argued, however, that workers could use the soviets to recall the government. However, this fails for two reasons.

Firstly, the Leninist state will be highly centralised, with power flowing from the top-down. This means that in order to revoke the government, all the soviets in all parts of the country must, at the same time, recall their delegates and organise a national congress of soviets (which, we note, is not in permanent session). The local soviets are bound to carry out the commands of the central government (to quote the Soviet constitution of 1918 — they are to "*carry out all orders of the respective higher organs of the soviet power*"). Any independence on their part would be considered "*wavering*" or an expression of "*unstable*" natures and so subject to "*revolutionary coercion*". In a highly centralised system, the means of accountability is reduced to the usual bourgeois level — vote in the general election every few years (which, in any case, can be annulled by the government if it dislikes the "*passing moods*" expressed by them).

Secondly, "*revolutionary coercion*" against "*wavering*" elements does not happen in isolation. It will encourage critical workers to keep quiet in case they, too, are deemed "*unstable*" and become subject to "*revolutionary*" coercion. As a government policy it can have no other effect than deterring democracy.

Thus Trotskyist politics provides the rationale for eliminating even the limited role of soviets for electing the government they hold in that ideology.

The SWP continue:



their own efforts. Leninism contains within itself the justification for eliminating democracy within the revolution. In other words, the SWP's "*Battle of Ideas*" becomes, once the vanguard is in power, just a battle:

*"Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves."* [Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 24, p. 170]

Significantly, of the 17 000 camp detainees on whom statistical information was available on 1 November 1920, peasants and workers constituted the largest groups, at 39% and 34% respectively. Similarly, of the 40 913 prisoners held in December 1921 (of whom 44% had been committed by the Cheka) nearly 84% were illiterate or minimally educated, clearly, therefore, either peasants or workers. [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, p. 178] Needless to say, Lenin failed to mention this aspect of his system in **The State and Revolution**.

It is hard to combine these facts and the SWP's comments with the claim that the "workers' state" is an instrument of class rule — after all, Lenin is acknowledging that coercion will be exercised against members of the working class as well. The question of course arises — who decides what a "*wavering*" or "*unstable*" element is? Given their comments on the role of the party and the need for the party to assume power, it will mean in practice whoever rejects the government's decisions (for example, strikers, local soviets who reject central decrees and instructions, workers who vote for anarchists or parties other than the Bolshevik party in elections to soviets, unions

organisational structure that ensures that power flows to the centre and into the hands of bureaucrats.

At best, Leninism reduces "democracy" to mean that the majority designates its rulers, copied from the model of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. In practice it is drained of any real meaning and quickly becomes a veil thrown over the unlimited power of the rulers. The base does not run the organisation just because once a year it elects delegates who designate the central committee, no more than the people are sovereign in a parliamentary-type republic because they periodically elect deputies who designate the government. That the central committee is designated by a "democratically elected" congress makes no difference once it is elected, it is de facto and de jure the absolute ruler of the organisation. It has complete (statutory) control over the body of the Party (and can dissolve the base organisations, kick out militants, etc.).

Therefore it is ironic that the SWP promote themselves as supporters of democracy as it is **anarchists** who support the "primitive democracy" (self-management) contemptuously dismissed by Lenin. With their calls for centralisation, it is clear that SWP still follow Lenin, wishing to place decision-making at the centre of the organisation, in the hands of leaders, in the same way the police, army and bureaucratic trade unions do. Anarchists reject this vision as non-socialist and instead argue for the fullest participation in decision making by those subject to those decisions. Only in this way can government — inequality in power — be eliminated from society.

Just to stress the point, anarchists are not opposed to people making decisions and everyone who took part in making the decision acting on them. Such a system is not "centralised," however, when the decisions flow from the bottom-up and are made by mandated delegates, accountable to the people who mandated them. It is centralised when it is decided upon by the leadership and imposed upon the membership. Thus the

issue is not whether we organise or not organise, nor whether we co-ordinate joint activity or not, it is a question of how we organise and co-ordinate — from the bottom up or from the top down.

The SWP argue that “unity” is essential:

*“Without unity around decisions there would be no democracy – minorities would simply ignore majority decisions.”*

Anarchists are in favour of free agreement and so argue that minorities should, in general, go along with the majority decisions of the groups and federations they are members of. That is, after all, the point behind federalism — to co-ordinate activity. Minorities can, after all, leave an association. However, we do not make a fetish of this, recognising that, in certain circumstances, the minority must and should ignore majority decisions. For example, if the majority of an organisation decide on a policy which the minority thinks is disastrous then why should they follow the majority? In 1914, the representatives of the German Social Democratic Party voted for war credits. The anti-war minority of that group went along with the majority in the name of “democracy.” Would the SWP argue that they were right to do so? Similarly, if a majority of a community decided, say, that homosexuals were to be arrested, would the SWP argue that minorities must not ignore that decision? We hope not.

In practice, of course, the SWP know that the majority of an organisation cannot be consulted on every issue and so what they actually mean is that the decisions of the central committee (or government) should be followed at all times. In other words, the decisions of a minority (the leaders) should be obeyed by the majority. Very “democratic.”

Moreover, those, like the SWP, who are part of the Bolshevik tradition have no problem with minorities ignoring majority

decisions — as long as the minority in question is the leadership of the vanguard party. For example, the Bolsheviks usually overthrew the results of provincial soviet elections that went against them (Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, pp 22–4). They abolished by decree soldiers’ councils and the election of officers in the Red Army. They replaced self-managed factory committees with appointed, autocratic managers (M Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers Control**). All this before the start of the Russian Civil War. Similarly, Lenin and Trotsky happily replaced the democratically elected leaders of trade unions with their followers when it suited them.

As Trotsky argued, you cannot place *“the workers’ right to elect representatives above the party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!”* He continued by stating the *“Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship ... regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class ... The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.”*

Of course, such a position follows naturally from Lenin’s theory from **What is to be Done?** that *“the working class, exclusively by their own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness ... The theory of socialism [i.e. Marxism], however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals ... the theoretical doctrine of Social-Democracy arose quite independently of the spontaneous growth of the labour movement; it arose as a natural and inevitable outcome of ideas among the revolutionary socialist intelligentsia.”* This meant that *“Social Democratic [i.e. socialist] consciousness ... could only be brought to them from without.”*

For Leninists, if the workers’ act in ways opposed to by the party, then the party has the right to repress the workers — they simply do not (indeed, cannot) understand what is required of them. They cannot reach *“socialist consciousness”* by