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Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism
Lucien Van der Walt and Michael Schmidt
AK Press (2009)

This is an excellent work. Wide ranging, both in terms of subjects covered and geography. The latter makes a welcome break from most accounts of anarchism which are sadly all-too Eurocentric. The former sees anarchist analysis expanded from the usual subjects of political authority and economic class into gender and imperialism (and national liberation struggles). It covers such perennial issues as anarchist organisation (including Platformism), the Spanish Revolution and a host of others.

Black Flame gets almost everything right. It concentrates on the mainstream of anarchism, class struggle anarchism (collectivist, communist and syndicalist anarchism, in other words). It is comprehensive, discussing all important issues, people and movements. The authors are right in showing the anarchist roots of syndicalism and exposing the Leninist myth that anarchism and syndicalism are fundamentally different. They debunk the notion that Sorel was the creator or main theoretician of syndicalism. They place

anarchism where it should be: as part of the wider socialist movement, its libertarian wing. It is right to say that anarchism is *"a product of the capitalist world and the working class it created"* (p. 96) and that thinkers and activists alike *"defined anarchism as an anticapitalist ideology and a form of socialism."* (p. 46) It does a great job in discussing the ins and outs of our movement and theory, using practice to illuminate our ideas.

I have two somewhat minor quibbles about it, which I hope that the comrades will take as positive feedback to an outstanding contribution to anarchist theory and history.

The first, minor, criticism is the claim that Daniel De Leon, Big Bill Haywood and James Connolly can be included in the broad anarchist tradition. They were Marxists! By no stretch of the imagination can they be considered anarchists. The reason why **Black Flame** has *"described De Leonism as a form of syndicalism"* is that *"syndicalism was a type of anarchism"* and *"self-identification as a Marxist or an anarchist is less important than the content of the ideas adopted, and the ideas of the IWW are certainly within the ambit of the broad anarchist tradition."* (p. 161)

But that is confusing a tactic with a theory. Syndicalism is an anarchist tactic, and like other tactics can be utilised by non-anarchists. Thus we can have Marxist as well as anarchist syndicalists (although the irony of Marxists subscribing to the ideas of Bakunin rather than Marx should be stressed). They themselves acknowledge this when arguing that the Italian syndicalists who later became fascists were not really syndicalists. But they were – they just happened to be Marxist syndicalists! However, they are right that the IWW should be considered as part of the wider anarchist tradition. Its revolutionary unionism is straight out of Bakunin, not Marx.

My major criticism is their relegation of Proudhon to being a forerunner of anarchism. It is strange to read that Proudhon was not an anarchist and that *"the anarchists took [from him] the notion of the self-management of the means of production, the*

idea of free federation, a hatred of capitalism and landlordism, and a deep distrust of the state"! (p. 84) So, except for anti-statism, anti-capitalism, anti-landlordism, federalism, communes, self-management, the vision of a revolution from below, the name "anarchist", what has Proudhon done for us?

Given his contributions to anarchism, which Bakunin and Kropotkin built upon, can we seriously suggest he was not an anarchist? Yes, he was not a revolutionary anarchist but not an anarchist at all?

When discussing Proudhon, **Black Flame** makes a rare error, stating that *"workers were not exploited in the market, as Proudhon believed, but at the workplace."* (p. 86) In fact, Proudhon saw wage-labour causing exploitation – hence his call for its abolition by workers associations. Yes, in the First International the *"mutualists supported small proprietors"* but unless you believe in forced collectivisation, we all do! Yes, it *"generalised acceptance of common ownership as a core demand of the popular classes"* (p. 84) but that position was shared by the mutualists within it who only rejected public ownership of **land**.

Black Flame also has an excellent discussion of the sadly too common "problem" of how to define anarchism, effectively refuting those who reduce anarchism to just "anti-statism." They rightly argue that anarchism is a form of socialism with its roots in working class protest. By basing itself on the actual development of anarchism as a theory, it rightly rejects the all too common history of anarchism framed by a list of grand-thinkers of anarchism, starting with Godwin and Stirner. This is flawed for the reasons the book outlines. Neither had an influence on how anarchism developed as a movement, being rediscovered in the 1890s and the links with anarchism recognised.

As such, **Black Flame** is right to not discuss Godwin, Stirner, Tolstoy and American individualist anarchism in detail. Yet it is wrong to exclude them from anarchism – they were anti-capitalist and anti-state – so while their influence was nowhere as impor-

tant as Proudhon, Bakunin or Kropotkin, it would fair to mention but not concentrate upon them. The mainstream is social anarchism and, in particular, revolutionary social anarchism and the book correctly reflects that.

It rightly rejects the "dictionary definition" of anarchism – as if a rich socio-economic theory and social movement can be summed up in such a way! As **Black Flame** stresses, anarchism needs to be defined in terms of its ideas and history, not by who calls themselves an "anarchist" or has been so-labelled. While being anti-state is necessary to be an anarchist it is not sufficient – as can be seen from the fact that anarchists themselves have never restricted their politics so.

Black Flame is a wonderful book which every anarchist will enjoy reading. It is well researched, well argued and should be read by every one interested in anarchism. Do yourself a favour and buy it now! You won't be disappointed. Roll on volume 2.