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August 18, 2008

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A review of a classic introduction to communist-anarchism by one of its leading militants.

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What is Anarchism? Alexander Berkman, AK Press

Alexander Berkman's "*What is Anarchism?*" is simply one of the best introductions to the ideas of what is often called class struggle anarchism (or communist anarchism, as it was called in 1927 when the book was originally written). Berkman had been an active anarchist militant in America for over 25 years and this book summarises the ideas and ideals which drove that activism.

Drawing upon his experiences in the labour and unemployed movements as well as his time in revolutionary Russia, Berkman's book is an excellent and very readable account of the basics of anarchism. Despite being nearly 80 years old, his work is remarkably undated. His account of the injustices of capitalism and the state are as applicable today as they were then. He discusses the roots of war, unemployment and injustice in the capitalist system and, more importantly, points to the means of ending them. Along the way, he refutes various false solutions. His chapter on socialism, for example, should be read by every radical who thinks electioneering is a good tactic. Similarly, his discussion of the Russian rev-

olution is an excellent summary of why it went wrong. And every worker should read his account of the failings of the trade unions. As a trade unionist I know his account of the sectionalism and bureaucratic nature of the trade unions is as relevant today as when it was written (as are his sensible and practical recommendations for the labour movement).

At the core of the book is a concise and well argued case for anarchism. He refutes many of the usual straw men arguments against our ideas (is anarchism violent? aren't anarchists against organisation? doesn't equality mean we become identical? and other such nonsense). He stresses that change can only come from below, from the class struggle. He reiterates the point that we, the working class, have the power to change society. He explains why revolution is necessary and what it could involve. He stresses that any revolution will be work of the oppressed, of the working class organised in their own class organisations. As he puts it, "the strength of the revolution" lies "in the support of the people" when "they feel that they themselves are making the revolution, that they have become masters of their lives, that they have gained freedom and are building up their welfare." From his experiences in Lenin's Russia, he adds "deprive the people of power by setting up some authority over them ... and you have dealt a fatal blow to the revolution. You will have robbed it of its main source of strength, the masses." Sadly, most revolutionaries in the UK have not learned that lesson and still subscribe to Leninism. Hopefully, some will read Berkman's book and learn the errors of their ways (or, at least, read his chapter on the "Defence of the Revolution" and stop asserting anarchists don't realise a revolution needs defending!).

His sketch of what a communist anarchist society would look like is brief, but convincing. A decentralised, free society where we work together as equals and share the riches of the world is an inspiring goal. While he does stress (like Kropotkin) that any revolution will face economic disruption (and, correctly, recommends decentralisation as a solution) his account of the immediate intro-

duction of libertarian communism seems somewhat unrealistic. No revolution, not even the Spanish with its decades of anarchist propaganda, saw the kind of revolution Berkman argues for. Obviously, as a goal to aim for he is correct but Berkman underestimates the problems a revolution throws into the path of achieving it. We should be aware that no revolution ever develops exactly as we would hope and we must, therefore, be prepared for this and not fall in dogmatism (and the resulting authoritarianism that would inevitably produce). However, compared to Marxism his account of a revolution and the problems it will face is extremely realistic as are, in the main, his suggestions.

Of course, the book shows its age. There is no discussion of ecology, for example. Similarly, there is no discussion of the causes of sexism, racism and homophobia and how to end them. Yet in spite of this, the book is as fresh and powerful as the day it was written. A true anarchist classic. For too long, Berkman's work has only been available in two volumes: "*ABC of Anarchism*" by Freedom Press and "*What is Communist Anarchism?*" by Phoenix Press. AK Press should be congratulated in reprinting Berkman's classic introduction to anarchism in its full glory.