

The AWL Versus Anarchism (part 2)

Anarcho

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Last year, I participated in a debate with a Leninist sect, the AWL. I produced a leaflet for the debate, placed a written-up version of my talk notes on line and blogged about it (Leninists are strange). Somewhat later, I was informed by the AWL that they were putting my leaflet in a pamphlet. Only now have I actually bothered to read it (I was a bit busy with union work). Suffice to say, I'm not impressed. It is the same mishmash of inaccurate assertion, invention and what seems wilful ignorance of the reality of Bolshevik power.

Little did I know that Martin Thomas had written a "response" to my leaflet entitled *Six points in reply to Iain McKay* (submitted on Christmas Day, 2011). Here I respond to the response.

Suffice to say, Thomas' comments express what can be termed (to use the words John Kenneth Galbraith popularised) "conventional wisdom" – in this case, of Leninists about anarchism. So Thomas is simply expressing what he thinks anarchism is – sadly, no amount of evidence seems to have an impact as I will show. This is to be expected, for it is very difficult for Leninists to make an objective criticism of Anarchism. It exposes how ignorant they are of anarchism as well as the authoritarian nature of their ideology.

Yes, I will be repeating many of the same points I made in my talk to the AWL as well as in *An Anarchist FAQ* and in numerous other replies to Marxists (usually the SWP, but not always). So please accept my apologies if you have read these facts and arguments before. I present this reply to help breakdown the "conventional wisdom" of Leninists in the hope that we can actually get a serious debate over the issues that matter started. Sadly, I doubt Leninists stop repeating nonsense about anarchism anytime soon – if they did then they would need to seriously look at their own tradition and its (negative) impact on socialism.

This response will, by necessity, be longer (much longer) than Thomas' response. The reason is simple – Thomas makes so many inaccurate and unsupported assertions about anarchism (and Marxism!) that I need to provide substantial evidence to refute them. It takes little space to assert, for example, that Proudhon did not think industrial capital was exploitative but it takes substantially more to discuss his theory of collective force, why this lead him to oppose wage-labour and support co-operatives in order to end the exploitation ("theft") inherit in selling your labour to a boss. Similarly with claims on Bakunin's syndicalism, Bolshevik ideology and what actually happened during the Russian Revolution.

Suffice to say, this covers much of what is discussed in section H of *An Anarchist FAQ*. If Leninists bothered to acquaint themselves and engage with anarchist theory and history, they would not produce so many howlers and so we anarchists would spend less time, energy and space stating the obvious.

In my initial leaflet I asked this question: "Is it not time for Marxists to stop producing straw-man arguments against anarchism?" The answer to this question will become sadly all too obvious as you read Thomas' response...

1: "Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta were not so naive as to believe that anarchism could be established overnight..."

Thomas' first point is based on a quote from Murray Bookchin: "**Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Malatesta were not so naive as to believe that anarchism could be established overnight...**" He comments:

“Certainly sometimes they wrote that the road to an anarchist society would be long. But always, as far I know, they insisted that anarchists should dispute, resist, and disrupt moves by workers to create a strong, centralised, democratic authority of their own – a workers’ state or semi-state – during or after the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist class.”

Now, this is a strange thing to say. It is completely without context and without any attempt to explain why anarchists are against the so-called “workers’ state.” If Thomas bothered to explain the anarchist position then his readers would have discovered that we oppose the “strong, centralised” state (i.e., the authority of a few party leaders in practice) because we do not think it would remain democratic.

To quote Bakunin, anarchists do not we do “not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.” Rather, 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 the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.” (*Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, p. 237, p. 172)

History has shown who was right – the Bolsheviks created such a “strong, centralised” authority and it quickly usurped power from the workers’ councils. On the first issue, do not take my word for it. Let me quote Trotsky (and as a Trotskyist I’m sure that Thomas will consider this appropriate evidence). This is from 1939 and so reflects the lessons learned by the Bolshevik Revolution (and, presumably, any lessons he learned from its descent into Stalinism):

“The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves ... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.” (“The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism”, pp. 53–66, *Their Morals and Ours*, p. 59)

So Trotsky is clear – Thomas’s “strong, centralised” authority is the party (“the vanguard of the proletariat”) and is “armed” to defeat itself again “dangers” including those from “the proletariat itself.” In this he was repeating Lenin’s conclusions from in 1921 that “the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts ... that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard ... Such is the basic mechanism of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the essentials of transition from capitalism to communism ... for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 32, p. 21)

This hardly suggests a “democratic” state as Thomas claims, quite the reverse! Ah, it will be objected, Trotsky talks of the “backward layers” and that is true. Yet the problem is obvious – by definition, *everyone* is “backward” compared to the vanguard. Thus Trotsky’s arguments suggest a deeply undemocratic regime in which the party gives itself the right, nay the duty, to destroy working class democracy to remain in power. In this he was repeating Lenin: “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.” (*Op. Cit.*, vol. 42, p. 170) The same can be said of Lenin’s position – who defines who is a “wavering and unstable” element? The Party leadership of course... the undemocratic nature of this situation is clear.

And need I remind Thomas that the Bolsheviks were meant to support election and recall (something anarchists have supported since at least 1848). This is so that the masses remain in control of the revolution, so that the institutions of socialism reflect the wishes of the working class.

So did the Bolsheviks act along these lines? Sadly, yes. As discussed in section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*, they disbanded soviets which elected non-Bolshevik majorities, gerrymandered soviets at all levels (including the 5th All-Russian Congress, so denying the Left-SRs their rightful majority) and crushed strikes. In 1921, at the height of his power and influence, Trotsky explained the situation well:

“The Workers’ Opposition has come out with dangerous slogans, making a fetish of democratic principles! They 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 temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy. It is necessary to create amongst us the awareness of the revolutionary birthright of the party, which is obliged to maintain its dictatorship, regardless of temporary wavering even in the working classes. This awareness is for us the indispensable element. The dictatorship does not base itself at every given moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.” (quoted by Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p. 209)

And before anyone states that the Workers’ Opposition were a faction of the Bolshevik party so proving that it is not inherently undemocratic, I must stress that it did *not* question the party’s monopoly of power: “Kollontai and her supporters had no wish to disturb the communist party’s monopoly of political power” (Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy*, p. 294). It simply wanted more workplace democracy (within the limits allowed by the party, of course) for economic decision making.

This “revolutionary” authority undermining working class self-management began from the start. The first act of the Bolsheviks was to create an executive body, the Council of People’s Commissars (or Sovnarkon), over and above the soviets. This was in direct contradiction to Lenin’s *The State and Revolution*, where he had used the example of the Paris Commune to argue for the merging of executive and legislative powers. Then, a mere four days after this seizure of power by the Bolsheviks, the Sovnarkom unilaterally took for itself legislative power simply by issuing a decree to this effect:

“This was, effectively, a Bolshevik coup d’état that made clear the government’s (and party’s) pre-eminence over the soviets and their executive organ. Increasingly, the Bolsheviks relied upon the appointment from above of commissars with plenipotentiary powers, and they split up and reconstituted fractious Soviets and intimidated political opponents.” (Neil Harding, *Leninism*, p. 253)

Within six months, this “workers’ state” was a de facto party dictatorship and within a year the Bolsheviks’ were openly advocating party dictatorship as a necessity of any revolution. Needless to say, this “strong, centralised” authority was not shy in breaking strikes (see section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ*).

By 1920 Lenin was arguing that “the Communists’ correct understanding of his tasks” lies in “correctly gauging the conditions and the moment when the vanguard of the proletariat can successfully assume power, when it will be able – during and after the seizure of power – to win adequate support from sufficiently broad strata of the working class and of the non-proletarian working masses, and when it is able thereafter to maintain, consolidate, and extend its rule by educating, training and attracting ever broader masses of the working people.” Note: the vanguard (the party) seizes power, *not* the masses. Indeed, he stressed that the “mere presentation of the question – ‘dictatorship of the party *or* dictatorship of the class: dictatorship (party) of the leaders *or* dictatorship (party) of the masses?’ – testifies to most incredible and hopelessly muddled thinking” and “[t]o go so far ... as to contrast, *in general*, the dictatorship of the masses with a dictatorship of the leaders is ridiculously absurd, and stupid.” (*The Lenin Anthology*, p. 575, p. 567, p. 568) In reality, of course, there is a clear and obvious difference between dictatorship by the masses and by a few leaders.

Thomas ignores all this and postulates something which has never existed – “*a strong, centralised, democratic authority*.” Still, why bother with such trivialities as the reality of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky?

I should stress here that this opposition to the so-called “workers’ state” does not mean we deny the need for areas in revolt to co-ordinate joint activity, including (but not limited to!) defend of the revolution. That is why we urge the creation of strong self-managed assemblies in our workplaces and communities and their federation into workers’ councils (see sections H.2.1 and J.7.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*). So Thomas is presenting a false dichotomy – coordination by a centralised “authority” or localised, uncoordinated activity. Anarchists reject both for good reasons, reasons Thomas seems completely unaware of (as I now show). Thomas continues:

“In practice, during revolutions, anarchists have often supported some revolutionary power (the Paris Commune, if you count the left-Proudhonists like Varlin as anarchists; the Council of People’s Commissars in November 1917).”

It is interesting that Thomas mentions the Council of People’s Commissars, given that it usurped the power of the workers’ councils (and that anarchists opposed its existence). As for the Paris Commune, a key aspect of the anarchist critique of it was precisely that the communal council was simply not up to the task of organising a revolution (see my article *The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism* for details). According to one Leninist, the council was “overwhelmed” by suggestions from other bodies, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties” and it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices.” (Donny Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune: A Revolutionary Democracy*, pp. 47–8).

Needless to say, our Leninist makes this comment in passing and makes no attempts to draw any conclusions from it. Unlike the anarchists, who stressed the need for federalism to overcome these problems. Problem which Thomas is blissfully unaware of (he clearly did not listen to my speech!).

I should also note that the “strong, centralised” Bolshevik regime had the same problems which affected the Paris Commune but on a larger scale. This was very centralised and very inefficient:

“it seems apparent that many workers themselves ... had now come to believe ... that confusion and anarchy [sic!] *at the top* were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic ... Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to

factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council... issu[ed] dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs.” (William G. Rosenberg, *Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power*, p. 116)

The centralised Bolshevik economic system quickly demonstrated how to *really* mismanage an economy. The Bolshevik onslaught against workers’ control in favour of a centralised, top-down economic regime ensured that the economy was handicapped by an unresponsive system which wasted the local knowledge in the grassroots in favour of orders from above which were issued in ignorance of local conditions. Thus the *glavki* “did not know the true number of enterprises in their branch” of industry. To ensure centralism, customers had to go via a central orders committee, which would then pass the details to the appropriate *glavki* and, unsurprisingly, it was “unable to cope with these enormous tasks”. As a result, workplaces often “endeavoured to find less bureaucratic channels” to get resources and, in fact, the “comparative efficiency of factories remaining outside the *glavki* sphere increased.” In summary, the “shortcomings of the central administrations and *glavki* increased together with the number of enterprises under their control”. (Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organisation of War Communism, 1918–1921*, p. 232, p. 233 and p. 250) In summary:

“The most evident shortcoming ... was that it did not ensure central allocation of resources and central distribution of output, in accordance with any priority ranking ... materials were provided to factories in arbitrary proportions: in some places they accumulated, whereas in others there was a shortage. Moreover, the length of the procedure needed to release the products increased scarcity at given moments, since products remained stored until the centre issued a purchase order on behalf of a centrally defined customer. Unused stock coexisted with acute scarcity. The centre was unable to determine the correct proportions among necessary materials and eventually to enforce implementation of the orders for their total quantity. The gap between theory and practice was significant.” (*Op. Cit.*, p. 233)

Thus there was a clear “gulf between the abstraction of the principles on centralisation and its reality.” (*Op. Cit.*, p.269) Worse, the “semi-state” also spawned a bureaucracy which “grew by leaps and bounds. Control over the new bureaucracy constantly diminished, partly because no genuine opposition existed. The alienation between ‘people’ and ‘officials,’ which the soviet system was supposed to remove, was back again. Beginning in 1918, complaints about ‘bureaucratic excesses,’ lack of contact with voters, and new proletarian bureaucrats grew louder and louder.” [Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets*, p. 242] Thus “red tape and vast administrative offices typified Soviet reality” as the Bolsheviks “rapidly created their own [state] apparatus to wage the political and economic offensive against the bourgeoisie and capitalism. As the functions of the state expanded, so did the bureaucracy” and so “following the revolution the process of institutional proliferation reached unprecedented heights ... a mass of economic organisations [were] created or expanded.” (Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power*, p. 190 and p. 191)

This was a striking confirmation of the anarchist analysis which argued that a new bureaucratic class develops around any centralised body. This body would soon become riddled with personal influences and favours, so ensuring that members could be sheltered from popular control while, at the same time, exploiting its power to feather their own nest. Over time, this permanent collection of bodies would become the real power in the state, with the party members nominally in charge really under the control of the unelected and uncontrolled officialdom.

All of which shows why anarchists stress the need for federalist organisations rather centralised ones. Still, why bother to try and learn lessons from past revolutions?

Needless to say, Thomas mentions Spain:

“In the Spanish revolution of 1936–7, the strongest anarchist-led movement ever to exist, the CNT/FAI, responded to the need for coordination against the counter-revolution (the fascists) by entering the bourgeois governments of Catalonia and the Spanish Republic.”

That this is a superficial account of the Spanish revolution should go without saying. The CNT-FAI had long argued for the need for federated defence committees (following Bakunin). The question is, of course, why did the CNT-FAI did not implement this vision of workers’ councils? Simply put, fear of isolation and of having to fight both the fascists and the republic made many anarchists put aside their ideas (see, for example, section I.8.10 of *An Anarchist FAQ*).

Thomas continues:

“In revolutionary times, anarchists must abandon their anti-government dogma, or else box themselves into inadvertently helping counter-revolution by their efforts to disrupt the creation of a revolutionary power. The trouble is that then they have no criteria as to ‘how much’ to abandon it. If all government is bad, but you are forced by the needs of struggle against counter-revolution to recognise some government as a necessary evil, then a workers’ government appears no less evil than a bourgeois-republican one, and a bourgeois-republican government no less necessary than a workers’ one.”

Wonderful logic, premised on a confusion of the state with social organisation. As noted above, Anarchists have long argued the need to federate to defend a revolution. For example, Bakunin argued:

“Immediately after established governments have been overthrown, communes will have to reorganise themselves along revolutionary lines ... In order to defend the revolution, their volunteers will at the same time form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighbouring communes in revolt ... and to federate with them for common defence.” (*No Gods, No Masters*, vol. 1, p. 142)

The question is how to organise a successful revolution without giving power to a few leaders. For Leninists, this is unproblematic – indeed, their ideology is based on the party taking power. However, in reality this produces a new class system (as the Bolshevik regime shows). For anarchists, federations of workers’ councils (with no execute of party leaders above them) is the means. Hence the need to smash the state and ensure no new one replaces it. Instead the federation of workers’ organisations is the social structure of the future. To quote Luigi Fabbri:

“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, independently 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.” (“Anarchy and ‘Scientific’ Communism”, pp. 13–49, *The Poverty of Statism*, Albert Meltzer (ed.), p. 27)

So the question Thomas should be asking is *why* the Spanish anarchists rejected the anarchist position in favour of collaboration with the bourgeois state (something they aimed to destroy). Why did they not form the same kind of Defence Council in Catalonia as they did in Aragon? It cannot be the ideas in their head, given that it was the same organisation (indeed, some of the same people) who made both decisions.

Perhaps it was a concern not to have to fight on multiple fronts? This is how the CNT explained its decision, with anarchist historian Jose Peirats noting that “the CNT was in absolute control of Catalonia in July 19, 1936, but its strength was less in Levante and still less in central Spain where the central government and the traditional parties were dominant. In the north of Spain the situation was confused. The CNT could have mounted an insurrection on its own ‘with probable success’ but such a take-over would have led to a struggle on three fronts: against the fascists, the government and foreign capitalism. In view of the difficulty of such an undertaking, collaboration with other antifascist groups was the only alternative.” (*Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 179)

Of course, this was a mistake – and a substantial section of the libertarian movement pointed this out at the time. To ignore these objective circumstances as Thomas does suggests a poverty of analysis which is incredulous.

Thomas then writes:

“How does anarchist writers’ ‘theoretical’ line of insisting on the immediate abolition of all government in a revolution square with their admission that anarchism cannot be established overnight?”

Need I really have to point out that by saying anarchism cannot be established overnight, anarchists are saying that any anarchist revolution would need to do things which an anarchist society would not need to do – such as defending itself against counter-revolution, dealing with the economic disruption associated with the upheaval, rationing goods, reorganising production to meet human needs rather than profit for the few, and generally dealing with the legacy of class society.

So anarchists are well aware that “class difference do not vanish at the stroke of a pen whether that pen belongs to the theoreticians or to the pen-pushers who set out laws or decrees. Only action, that is to say direct action (not through government) expropriation by the proletarians, directed against the privileged class, can wipe out class difference.” (Luigi Fabbri, *Op. Cit.* p. 30)

So arguing that anarchism cannot be created overnight is unproblematic.

“For many anarchists, and probably most anarchists today, it is not a problem. They regard anarchism as a distant ideal. Action is not gauged so as quickly to realise the ideal, but to bring it closer by pushing bit-by-bit in an anti-government direction.”

Ah, the joys of assertion – “many” and “most” anarchists? Really? And assuming this assertion is correct, which it is not, the actions of “most” anarchists in fighting for reforms does not contradict the longer term aim for social revolution.

*“There were periods, though, when Bakunin and Kropotkin were confident about early prospects of revolution. Then, they wrote of the abolition of government as something which could be achieved immediately, in the coming revolution, and which **must** be achieved, or else the revolution would be fruitless. They did claim that the abolition of government could be achieved ‘overnight’, or after a brief but fruitful period of chaos.”*

Ah, now we have the confusion of “abolition of government” with anarchism.

Anarchism, just to stress the obvious, is not simply the abolition of government. It aims at the expropriation of capital, the transformation of social relationships, the creation of new forms of social and economic organisation and so on. Anarchists argue that such a transformation is only possible by destroying the bourgeois state and if all are involved in its creation. This means that no “workers’ state” (as it, like all states, concentrates power into a few hands and rules from the top-down) can achieve this task.

So the anarchist position is quite clear – while anarchism (a free and classless society) cannot be created overnight we can create the necessary conditions to ensure it. This involves smashing the bourgeois state and the creation of federations of workers’ councils as well as starting the expropriation of capital and reorganising the economy.

“Anarchists’ ideas about revolution are less problematic when revolution is distant both in reality and, even more so, in the minds of the anarchists. They are harmful and disruptive when revolution is close. [See also McKay’s sections on “Anarchism and defence of the revolution”, and “Anarchism and revolution”].”

Now it gets strange. Thomas references two sections of my reply with the comments that anarchist ideas are “harmful and disruptive when revolution is close.” Let me provide one of the quotes I gave:

“Paris will naturally make haste to organise itself as best it can, in revolutionary style, after the workers have joined into associations and made a clean sweep of all the instruments of labour, every kind of capital and building; armed and organised by streets and *quartiers*, they will form the revolutionary federation of all the *quartiers*, the federative commune... All the French and foreign revolutionary communes will then send representatives to organise the necessary common services... and to organise common defence against the enemies of the Revolution, together with propaganda, the weapon of revolution, and practical revolutionary solidarity with friends in all countries against enemies in all countries” (Bakunin)

So it is “harmful and disruptive” for workers to expropriate workplaces, form revolutionary communes, arm themselves and organise a common defence of the revolution? Really? What should they do? Leave capital alone? Refuse to form new social organisations? Refuse to arm? Refuse to federate for common defence?

Which shows the poverty of Thomas’ claims.

This raises a serious question. Anarchists argue that a revolution should be defended by means of federated self-managed workers’ militias. If this is “harmful and disruptive” then so is what Lenin advocated in *State and Revolution*. Perhaps that this vision was quickly abolished in favour of the Red Army (which appointed officers) and a secret police (the Cheka) gives some indication of what Thomas means? If he is saying that the AWL opposes democratic working class militias in favour of an army organised in the traditional manner and a political police force then he should clearly state this.

2. Anarchists and working-class struggle

The next section is “**Anarchists and working-class struggle**” and now it gets interesting. Thomas states:

*“I wrote [in] (**Solidarity** 3/195): ‘Some anarchists — primarily the anarcho-syndicalists, who on this issue have the same idea as Marxists do — identify with the working class as the force to defeat*

the capitalist state and create a new society; but most do not'. For the purpose of 'refuting' this statement, Iain McKay first converts it into something significantly different.

"His version of what I wrote is: 'Some anarchists do [support class struggle]. Those are the anarcho-syndicalists, who on this issue have the same idea as Marxists do... but most schools of anarchism do not'.

"I wrote 'primarily' (i.e. not only) the anarcho-syndicalists. McKay has me saying that it is only the anarcho-syndicalists. I wrote that the anarcho-syndicalists and some other anarchists 'identify with the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state and create a new society', while yet other anarchists do not. McKay has me saying something different: that anarchists other than anarcho-syndicalists do not even 'support class struggle'."

How could I get this so wrong? How could I attribute to Thomas ideas he claims he did not write? Well, I didn't. I quoted Thomas quite accurately. Here is the appropriate quote from the AWL webpage:

"Anarchism opposes the capitalist state. But by no means all anarchists identify with the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state and create a new society.

"Some anarchists do. Those are the anarcho-syndicalists, who on this issue have the same idea as Marxists do, and whose ideas this article will come back to later.

"But most schools of anarchism do not." (Martin Thomas, Working-class struggle and anarchism)

Strangely, Thomas seems to have forgotten he had written those words. Perhaps the confusion arises because this version of his article was posted on 1 March, 2011 while the one in *Solidarity* was a "revised and abridged version" published two days later on the AWL webpage. I used the text Thomas had published on-line as the basis of my response, the first one was the one I had read and critiqued. Thomas, surely, is well aware of this? This can be seen from the fact he responded to the comments I made there.

To be fair, my leaflet did state "his account of anarchism published in *Solidarity* disproves it. This is easy to show, we need only compare his comments about anarchism to what anarchists like Michael Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman and a host of others argued." However, the point remains, Thomas did make that assertion and rather than say he later corrected this position to a slightly less wrong one he suggests I twist his words.

So we have a case of intellectual dishonesty. If he were to be honest, Thomas would have acknowledged I quoted him accurately but stated he corrected this statement in the revised version of his article. He would also have indicated why he went from a completely false assertion about anarchism to a misleading assertion in the space of two days. We can only wonder if he finally got round to reading some Bakunin or Kropotkin...

What of his revised version? That he "wrote 'primarily' (i.e. not only) the anarcho-syndicalists. McKay has me saying that it is only the anarcho-syndicalists. I wrote that the anarcho-syndicalists and some other anarchists 'identify with the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state and create a new society', while yet other anarchists do not." Some other anarchists? The whole of the revolutionary anarchist tradition is hardly "some other anarchists"!

I quoted Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta, Berkman and Goldman on the necessity of working class struggle and organisation, a representative cross section of the great revolutionary anarchist thinkers and activists by any measure. That should show that the mainstream of anarchism holds the positions which Thomas assigns "primarily" to anarcho-syndicalism. As Kropotkin summarised in his article on anarchism for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*:

“They [the anarchists] do not seek to constitute, and invite the workers not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly, since the foundation of the International Working Men’s Association in 1864–1866, they have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation...Within these federations [of the First International] developed now what may be described as *modern anarchism*. ...The great bulk of the anarchist workers prefer the anarchist-communist ideas which have gradually evolved out of the anarchist collectivism of the International Working Men’s Association.”

So revolutionary anarchism has always seen “*the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state and create a new society*.” So to state that “some” anarchists other than anarcho-syndicalists support the class struggle is incredulous. The majority of the anarchist movement cannot be labelled as “some”!

“As Yves Coleman writes in a sympathetic account of ‘today’s young anarchists’ (*Solidarity* 224): ‘The most ‘physical’... anarchists want to confront physically the cops, to throw Molotov cocktails... etc. The more ‘peaceful’ ones... want to build new human relationships here and now... organising squats or communes [etc.]’

“Pretty much all of them welcome unrest, strife, rebellion, strikes. No question about that. They support class struggle in that sense. But their focus is not on class struggle.”

Ah, right, so we have a “sympathetic account” in place of a serious analysis of anarchism as a revolutionary socialist tradition and movement. Yet Thomas mentions Bakunin in his article, wrongly asserting “Bakunin did not see the working class as the central agent of revolution.” The simple fact is that revolutionary anarchism, starting with Bakunin, has its focus on class struggle (see sections H.2.2 and H.2.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ* for evidence).

It seems that Thomas is being incredulous. Revolutionary anarchists are held responsible for everyone who calls themselves an anarchist (regardless of how well they know the politics and history of the tradition) while Thomas is, of course, only responsible for members of his own sect. Which is handy, of course.

This applies to his sects ideological forefathers, with any inconvenient self-proclaimed Marxists (like Stalin) excluded from the “real” Marxist tradition. This is not applied to anarchism, of course, and so we get Proudhon’s anti-strike position mentioned prominently when no *revolutionary* anarchist holds it – it would be like an anarchist article on Marxism starting with the ideas of the revisionist Bernstein! Still, it sets the tone – regardless of Proudhon’s contribution to anarchism, his position on this was unique and so irrelevant to a discussion of revolutionary (mainstream) anarchism.

Thomas acknowledges that most anarchists are class struggle based:

“Even some anarchists who (like the Anarchist Federation) describe themselves as ‘class-struggle anarchists’, to distinguish themselves from other anarchists, do not quite share the same view as anarcho-syndicalists or Marxists.

The AF’s strategy is based on two great values: ‘direct action’ and ‘self-organisation’, also summed up as ‘a culture of resistance’. The AF sympathises with the working class and favours biff and strife. But if you unpick its arguments, you see that biff is valued primarily as ‘direct’, ‘self-organised’, and ‘local’, rather than primarily as working-class.”

I guess that “unpick” absolves Thomas of actually providing any evidence for his assertions. Anyone familiar with the Anarchist Federation will know that this summation is pure fantasy. But let us “unpick” Thomas’s comments.

How does “local” mean ignoring the working class? Working class people live and work in specific areas, localities if you like. As a union rep, I know the importance of organising on a “local” (i.e., workplace or branch) level. As someone who was heavily involved in the struggle against the poll-tax, I know the importance of organising in my community (my local area). Without work at the local (lowest) level any organisation would be a hollow-shell – as would any wider (national or international) campaign.

That seems so blindingly obvious that I fail to understand what Thomas is getting at. Is he suggesting revolutionaries ignore “local” issues and organising? That we reject forming community and workplace groups? I doubt it, so I think his point is just an incoherent insult without any meaning. Perhaps he means anarchists ignore wider issues, campaigns and organising? If so, he clearly is talking nonsense.

What of “self-organised”? How does that mean ignoring the working class? Is Thomas suggesting that working class people cannot organise themselves? I know Lenin argued that socialist ideas came from the enlightened bourgeoisie and had to be injected into the working class by the party, but most Leninists try to distance themselves from this perspective (at least they pay lip-service to denying this elitist nonsense). So favouring self-organisation does not preclude the working class.

And, finally, what of “direct”? But that he is referring to direct action. What is direct action? To quote Rudolf Rocker, it is “every method of immediate warfare by the workers against their economic and political oppressors. Among these the outstanding are: the strike, in all its gradations from the simple wage struggle to the general strike; the boycott; sabotage in all its countless forms; anti-militarist propaganda, and in particularly critical cases ... armed resistance of the people for the protection of life and liberty.” (*Anarcho-Syndicalism*, p. 78) As Kropotkin put it in his classic *Modern Science and Anarchism*:

“since the times of the International Working Men’s Association, the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers’ organisations which carry on the *direct* struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector, – the State.

“Such a struggle, they say, better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil that is done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.”

Strikes are a classic form of direct action, so how is that ignoring the working class? Clearly Thomas is talking nonsense. And what are these “indirect” methods Kropotkin talks of? Well, voting for politicians to act for you. Now, if any form of activity means ignoring the working class it is that – it is premised on asking working class people to vote once every few years and then let the politicians get on with it. Kropotkin summarised the anarchist perspective well in 1907:

“Workmen’s organisations are the real force capable of accomplishing the social revolution – after the awakening of the proletariat has been accomplished, first by individual action, then by collective action, by strikes and revolts extending more and more; and where workmen’s organisations have not allowed themselves to be dominated by the gentlemen who advocate ‘the conquest of political power’, but have continued to walk hand in hand with anarchists – as they have done in Spain – they have obtained, on the one hand, immediate results (an eight-hour day in certain trades in Catalonia), and on the other have made good propaganda for the social

revolution – the one to come, not from the efforts of those highly-placed gentlemen, but from below, from workmen’s organisations.” (quoted by Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince*, pp. 294–5)

In short, Thomas’s position is so bizarre that it is fantasy. And talking of fantasy, Thomas goes on to state:

“Most anarchists criticise Marxists for differentiating between the wage-working class and, on the other hand, the peasantry and the lumpenproletariat. They are sympathetic to the wage-working class, but regard the peasantry and lumpenproletariat as equally, or sometimes more, the forces for revolution.”

This is strange. How many peasants are there in the UK today? As for the “lumpenproletariat”, that is a very flexible category and as I prove in section H.2.7 of *An Anarchist FAQ*, Marxist claims of anarchists and the “lumpenproletariat” are based on selective quoting of Bakunin. Looking at the modern movement, suffice to say, if you read the Anarchist Federation’s *Organise!, Black Flag* or *Freedom* you will soon see the stupidity of this claim.

Historically, this is also the case. Indeed, the historical illiteracy at work here is staggering – in countries with a large peasantry “most” anarchists in those countries have argued that the proletariat must seek to get the support of the peasantry in order to ensure a successful revolution. When Bakunin was alive, only in Britain was the proletariat the majority of the working class. In continental Europe, as Marx admitted, the peasantry was in the majority (overwhelmingly so in many countries). Getting the support of the majority of a country makes sense for any revolutionary (see the Bolsheviks alienation of the peasantry if in doubt!). However, Bakunin (like other anarchists) stressed the importance of the proletariat – to again quote my leaflet:

“in order that the peasants rise up, it is absolutely necessary that the initiative in this revolutionary movement be taken up by the city workers... who combine in themselves the instincts, ideas, and conscious will of the Social Revolution”

Ignoring such awkward facts, Thomas continues:

“Today in Britain, anarchism broadly defined probably has more energetic young people than the aggregate of all the would-be Trotskyist activist groups. Yet visibly the impact of anarchists in working-class struggles is less than the impact (for good, or sometimes for worse) of even one of the main would-be Trotskyist groups. That is partly because of many anarchists’ distaste for systematic long-term organising beyond small ‘affinity groups’, but partly also because of priorities.”

Again, more assertion. As suggested above, we revolutionary anarchists are apparently responsible for everyone who calls themselves an anarchist. Why is “anarchism broadly defined” compared to Trotskyist parties? Should we not compare “anarchism broadly defined” to “socialism broadly defined”? Or should we not compare Trotskyist groups to their equivalent, namely Anarchist Federations?

Could the organised revolutionary anarchist groups be more effective? Of course. I’m sure Thomas would say the same of the AWL. Suffice to say, most working class people do not know much about Trotskyists sects (and those who do are usually, and rightly, alienated by them). Thomas is right in a sense – all revolutionaries have their work cut out for them. Sadly, the main contribution of the Trotskyist grouplets is to put people off socialism.

Still, rest assured all the time anarchists spend refuting inaccurate attacks on anarchism by Leninists does eat into the time we could spend in other activities...

3. Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism

Thomas then gets into difficulties when discussing “**Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism.**” He states I claim, “*or seems to claim, that almost all anarchism, at least after Bakunin, is anarcho-syndicalism anyway.*” In a sense, yes, as revolutionary anarchists like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Malatesta and Goldman all advocated active participation in the labour movement, stressing the importance of unions and strikes.

This should be uncontroversial, given the wealth of quotes I provided in my leaflet – all of which Thomas ignored. Instead, he decides to concentrate on “*a highly compressed version of a passage from Marx*” I give “*in which Marx seems to attribute anarcho-syndicalism to Bakunin.*” This is what he gives:

“McKay’s version: ‘Bakunin’s programme [is that] the working class must not occupy itself with politics. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions [and] by means of the International, they will supplant the place of all existing states.’”

For some reason Thomas removes the ellipses from my quote: “Bakunin’s programme... [is that] the working class must not occupy itself with politics. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions... [and] by means of the International, they will supplant the place of all existing states.” Ignoring this, the question arises why did I provide a summary? I boiled down the quote to its key point simply because of space. This becomes clear when Thomas provides the full-quote:

“Marx’s original: ‘Bakunin’s programme [held that] the working class must not occupy itself with politics. They must only organise themselves by trades-unions. One fine day, by means of the International, they will supplant the place of all existing states. You see what a caricature he [Bakunin] has made of my doctrines!

‘As the transformation of the existing States into Associations is our last end, we must allow the governments, those great Trade-Unions of the ruling classes, to do as they like, because to occupy ourselves with them is to acknowledge them. Why! In the same way the old socialists said: You must not occupy yourselves with the wages question, because you want to abolish wages labour, and to struggle with the capitalist about the rate of wages is to acknowledge the wages system!

‘The ass has not even seen that every class movement, as a class movement, is necessarily and was always a political movement’”

The key point is that Marx points out something Thomas denied, namely that Bakunin’s ideas were directed to the working class and argued that not only should they organise themselves in unions but this international union organisation will replace the bourgeois state. Given that Thomas suggests that is purely an anarcho-syndicalist position, it is important to stress that Bakunin held it – as summarised by Marx. Ignoring the key point, Thomas continues:

“In the disputes in the First International around 1870, Bakunin’s faction, the anarchists-to-be, made opposition to political and electoral activity by the working class their point of honour. Arguing as they were from within the First International, their opposition to political activity more or less automatically defined economic and trade-union activity for them as the only road to liberation.”

In reality, of course, Bakunin gave good reasons to reject electoral activity. I quote it in my leaflet: “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 subsequent development of social democracy confirmed Bakunin, not Marx, so showing the

validity of being (to quote Thomas) “*opposed workers organising into a workers’ political party.*” Another awkward fact Thomas prefers to ignore.

Now, if Thomas is aware that Bakunin’s position “*defined economic and trade-union activity...as the only road to liberation*” then why did he feel the need to lecture anarchists on the benefits of trade unions in his article? As I showed in my leaflet, Bakunin was well aware of the benefits and necessity for union organisation and struggle. So why did he proclaim “[u]nlike other variants of anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism focuses on the wage-working class. It has a coherent idea of what to do in un-revolutionary times: build up the unions which will later be the instruments of revolution”? Now Thomas backtracks on this and states that Bakunin was in favour of building unions! Opps.

Given the wealth of evidence supporting the links between Bakunin and anarcho-syndicalism (both direct quotes from Bakunin and extensive academic research), Thomas decides to go for assertion:

“*Some of what they wrote reads with hindsight like an early statement of the later anarcho-syndicalist idea. I think the apparent identity is an anachronistic illusion. Around 1870 trade unions everywhere were weak. Where they were strongest, in Britain, they tended more to Liberalism than to anarchism or Marxism. No-one really could or did have a short-term practical project of expanding and improving them so that they could quickly become strong enough to hollow out and throw off the capitalist state and the employing class.*”

Note it well: “I think.” That is it.

I could quote extensively from Bakunin and other anarchists as well as numerous academics to show the overwhelming evidence against Thomas, but that would be tedious. For those interested see my articles *Syndicalism*, *Marxism and Anarchism* and *Syndicalism: Marxist Myth and Anarchist Reality* as well as section H.2.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ* in which I quote extensively from Bakunin, subsequent anarchists like Kropotkin, Goldman, Malatesta and Rocker as well as many academics. Still, what matter evidence when you can proclaim “I think”!

In short, this position is hardly “an anachronistic illusion” – if it were, then Marx was suffering from it when he summarised Bakunin’s position on trade unionism! And, if in doubt, here is Bakunin arguing precisely what Thomas proclaims no-one could advocate.

In order for the worker to “become strong” he “must unite” with other workers in “the union of all local and national workers’ associations into a world-wide association, *the great International Working-Men’s Association.*” There was “but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*” which “has only one meaning. It means workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds.*” Then, “when the revolution – brought about by the force of circumstances – breaks out, the International will be a real force and know what it has to do”, namely to “take the revolution into its own hands” and become “an earnest international organisation of workers’ associations from all countries” which will be “capable of replacing this departing political world of States and bourgeoisie.” (*The Basic Bakunin*, pp. 97–8, p. 103, p. 110)

For Bakunin strikes train workers for social revolution as they “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.” (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, pp. 384–5) As “strikes spread from one place to another, they come close to turning into a general strike. And with the ideas of emancipation that now hold sway over the proletariat, a general strike can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin.” The “necessities of the struggle impel

the workers to support one another” and the “more active the struggle becomes ... the stronger and more extensive this federation of proletarians must become.” Thus strikes “indicate a certain collective strength already” and “each strike becomes the point of departure for the formation of new groups.” (*The Basic Bakunin*, pp. 149–50)

Thus “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” and once “every occupation ... is represented within the International, its organisation, the organisation of the masses of the people will be complete.” (*The Basic Bakunin*, 139) Moreover, the “organisation of the trade sections and their representation by the Chambers of Labour ... bear in themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old world. They are creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself.” (*Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 255)

But, rest assured, these words only appear like “an early statement of the later anarcho-syndicalist idea” because of “hindsight” – as expressed by Marx at the time!

Thomas continues:

“Equally, it is anachronistic to read references by Bakunin and Kropotkin to ‘workers’ associations’ and so on as descriptions-in-advance of the workers’ councils (soviets) which first emerged in Russia in 1905 [cf: McKay’s section, “Anarchism and Workers’ Councils”]. Proudhon, whom both Bakunin and Kropotkin frequently acknowledged as their teacher, had limned a future society composed of local economic cooperatives interacting through trade (on equal terms) rather than with coordination by a wider-than-local workers’ authority. ‘Workers’ associations’ was a description of the basic economic and social units of the new society.”

I should note that Kropotkin is quoted discussing how “workers’ organisations” must “take the place of existing capitalist exploitation and the state...it is the duty and the task of the workers’ organisations to work out the new form of society.” No mention of associations there. As for Bakunin, I quoted him as follows:

“Toilers count no longer on anyone but yourselves. Do not demoralise and paralyse your growing strength by being duped into alliances with bourgeois Radicalism... organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organisation are already completely given: they are the workshops and the federation of workshops... instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international.”

That sounds remarkably like workers’ councils. Thus we find Bakunin arguing that workers would expropriate their workplaces and federate them:

“the revolution must set out from the first to radically and totally destroy the State ... [as well as the] confiscation of all productive capital and means of production on behalf of workers’ associations, who are to put them to use ... the federative Alliance of all working men’s associations ... [will] constitute the Commune ... [the] Communal Council [will be] composed of ... delegates ... vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates... 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 the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.” (*Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, pp. 170–2)

Again the similarities with workers' councils are clear. The evidence seems pretty conclusive – Bakunin argued that federations of recallable delegates from workplaces would be the framework of a socialist society. Is that not a system of workers' councils?

Yes, Bakunin was developing Proudhon's ideas on workers' associations – by placing them in a revolutionary and trade union context (and I must stress that most anarchists have long rejected Proudhon's market socialism as Thomas is not going to mention that). However, I must note that Proudhon also argued for co-ordination by (to use his term) “an agricultural-industrial federation.” Strange that Thomas did not mention this – he is probably unaware of it (I cover it in my introduction to *Property is Theft!*). Still, he *knows* that anarchists favour “local” associations and so he has no need for anything as trivial as evidence...

Thomas then shows his ignorance of anarchism:

“After 1872 the anarchists-to-be separated from the Marxists and, bit by bit, from the non-anarchist allies they'd had in their factional battle in the First International.”

This is a bizarre comment as it implies that the anarchists in the First International were not anarchists. Given that he discusses (i.e., misrepresents) Bakunin's ideas it is clear that he considers *him* to be an actual anarchist rather than an “anarchist-to-be.” What of Malatesta who joined the anarchist movement under Bakunin's influence and remained a leading militant and thinker until his death in 1932. When did he stop being an “anarchist-to-be” and become an anarchist?

Thomas then shows his ignorance of anarchism:

“Over the 1870s anarchism emerged as a distinct current in political activity (albeit one which protested that its political activity avoided politics). Nothing like anarcho-syndicalism emerged at first. For two decades, until the mid 1890s, its dominant concern was not building workers' unions, but ‘propaganda by the deed.’”

Well, only if you ignore all those pesky pro-union comments by Bakunin! Or the Jura Federation. Or the union organising by the Spanish anarchists. Or the pro-union comments by Kropotkin. Or the Chicago anarchists. Or the Mexican anarchists. Or the anarchists in Cuba. All of which took place before 1890.

Which is precisely what Thomas does do – he is well aware that anarchists did all this, he would have read it in *Black Flame!*

Not that Thomas is unique in this. It is quite common in Leninist circles. Ralph Darlington makes the same suggestion, that syndicalism does not really have anarchist roots. Unlike Thomas, Darlington does provide some evidence but sadly it destroys his claim that syndicalism developed in the 1890s. Thus we find Darlington proclaim that “anarchists increasingly began to look to trade unions as a potential base for support” in the 1890s and then destroy his own assertion by listing anarchist unionism *before* that date: in “Italy anarcho-syndicalism became a potent force after the Russian anarchist Bakunin had arrived in the country in the late 1860s”; the Spanish anarchists in the 1870s “organised mainly in working men's associations” and “recommended their supporters to join trade unions and take a forceful role in their activities and direction”; the Chicago anarchists in the 1880s “contributed to the building of a Central Labour Union which won the support of most of organised labour in the city.” (*Syndicalism and the Transition to Communism*, 70–3)

So Darlington *himself* shows how *revolutionary* anarchists had raised “principles of revolutionary unionism” decades before the term syndicalism was coined. Thomas, of course, eschews evidence and so avoids Darlington's fate by keeping safely to assertion.

Let me concentrate on one of these many movements, the American one. I assume that Thomas would have heard of May Day and its roots in the Haymarket events. Let me quote Lucy Parsons: "Our comrades were not murdered by the state because they had any connection with the bomb-throwing, but because they had been active in organising the wage-slaves of America." (Lucy Parsons, *Liberty, Equality & Solidarity*, p. 142) As one historian notes, the "proceedings of the I.W.W.'s inaugural convention indicate that the participants were not only aware of the 'Chicago Idea' but were conscious of a continuity between their efforts and the struggles of the Chicago anarchists to initiate industrial unionism." The Chicago idea represented "the earliest American expression of syndicalism." (Salvatore Salerno, *Red November, Black November*, p. 71)

Thus we find Lucy Parsons' arguing that "we hold that the granges, trade-unions, Knights of Labour assemblies, etc., are the embryonic groups of the ideal anarchistic society" (contained in Albert R. Parsons, *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis*, p. 110) Compare these words with Bakunin: "the organisation of the trade sections and their representation in the Chambers of Labour ... bear in themselves the living seeds of the new society which is to replace the old one. They are creating not only the ideas, but also the facts of the future itself." (*Bakunin on Anarchism*, p. 255)

This perspective is reflected in those close to Bakunin. To quote the anarchists active in the IWMA who gathered at Saint-Imier, "the proletarians of every land should establish solidarity of revolutionary action outside of all bourgeois politicking." Instead they advocated the "Organisation of Labour Resistance" as it created "a community of interests, trains [the proletariat] in collective living and prepares it for the supreme struggle." The strike was regarded "as a precious weapon in the struggle" and "a product of the antagonism between labour and capital." These "ordinary economic struggles" prepare "the proletariat for the great and final revolutionary conquest" which will destroy "all class difference." The future socialist society would be created by the "proletariat itself, its trades bodies and the autonomous communes." (Robert Graham (Ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas* Vol. 1, pp. 99–100)

Yes, clearly "[n]othing like anarcho-syndicalism emerged at first"!

I should also note that Malatesta attended the Saint-Imier conference and so it is useful to compare this resolution to the one he submitted 35 years later in Amsterdam: "the Syndicates [are] organisations fighting in the class war for amelioration of the conditions of labour, and as unions of productive workers which can help in the transformation of capitalist society into Anarchist Communist society... it [is] the duty of Anarchists to constitute the revolutionary element in those organisations... the Syndicalist movement [is] a powerful means of revolution, but not... a substitute for revolution... [that is] armed insurrection and expropriation by force." (*International Anarchist Conference*, pp. 132–2) The similarities are clear.

As for "propaganda by deed", well, that was popular in some circles for a while but anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin were stressing the importance of workers' organisation and struggle from the 1870s onwards. For example, in 1881 he was arguing that the French libertarians follow the example of their Spanish comrades who had remained faithful to "the Anarchist traditions of the International" and "bring this energy to workers' organisations." His "advice to the French workers" was "to take up again ... the tradition of the International" (quoted by Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, p. 31).

Kropotkin returned to this time and time again, writing later in the 1880s that "to make the revolution, the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this." It was "a question of organising societies

of resistance for all trades in each town, of creating resistance funds against the exploiters, of giving more solidarity to the workers' organisations of each town and of putting them in contact with those of other towns, of federating them ... Workers' solidarity must no longer be an empty word but practised each day between all trades and all nations." A "decisive blow will have to be administered to private property: from the beginning, the workers will have to proceed to take over all social wealth so as to put it into common ownership. This revolution can only be carried out by the workers themselves." In order to do this, the masses have to build their own organisation as the "great mass of workers will not only have to constitute itself outside the bourgeoisie ... it will have to take action of its own during the period which will precede the revolution ... and this sort of action can only be carried out when a strong *workers' organisation* exists." This meant, of course, it was "the mass of workers we have to seek to organise. We ... have to submerge ourselves in the organisation of the people ... When the mass of workers is organised and we are with it to strengthen its revolutionary idea, to make the spirit of revolt against capital germinate there ... then it will be the social revolution." (quoted by Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886*, pp. 255-6, pp. 153-4)

I would recommend Cahm's book for those seeking the facts about the development of revolutionary anarchism from the 1870s onwards.

Ignoring the wealth of information available, Thomas states:

"In 1895, Fernand Pelloutier wrote an article, 'Anarchism and the Workers' Union', urging anarchists to plunge into the unions. His article shows a writer aware that he is arguing for a change of direction, not someone just reminding anarchists of old common-stock ideas."

And so Thomas ignores the extensive work by the likes of Kropotkin to urge French anarchists to get involved with the unions – like the Spanish anarchists had and as anarchists had done in the 1860s and 1870s! And that is the point, Pelloutier was writing for a French audience and, equally important, following in the footsteps of previous revolutionary anarchists. As Kropotkin put it:

"Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or 'Bakuninist' section of the International Working Men's Association. In Spain and in Italy it had been especially successful. Now it was resorted to, with evident success, in France and *Freedom* eagerly advocated this sort of propaganda." (*Act For Yourselves*, pp. 119-20)

Then there is Malatesta, a veteran of the First International, speaking in 1907, when he noted that he had "never ceased to urge the comrades into that direction which the syndicalists, forgetting the past, call *new*, even though it was already glimpsed and followed, in the International, by the first of the anarchists." (*The Anarchist Reader*, p. 221) Rudolf Rocker and Emma Goldman made the same point.

But then if Thomas had more than a passing acquaintance with anarchism then he would know that. He continues:

"The French CGT did not emerge in full form until 1902, and the Spanish CNT until 1910. With them, anarcho-syndicalism became for a while the most vigorous, though still not the only, strand of anarchism."

Let me quote one expert on Spanish anarchism, who notes that the Spanish section of the IWMA "was from the beginning based upon unions" and organised "by local councils in each town, and national unions for each branch of production." One leading Spanish anarchist noted

in 1910 that only the term “syndicalism” was new. (Temma Kaplan, *Anarchists of Andalusia: 1868–1903*, p. 82)

Historian J. Romero Maura summarised, in the 1870s the “anarchist doctrine” was “anarcho-collectivism: Bakunin’s own doctrine. The general principles are well known... anarchists believed that the only way of turning society into a just society was to overturn it... Revolution was a matter of superior firing power and it was up to the workers to organise to that effect. The anarchist revolution, when it came, would be essentially brought about by the working class. Revolutionaries needed to gather great strength and must beware of underestimating the strength of reaction... the Bakuninists logically decided that revolutionaries had better organise along the lines of labour organisations.” (“The Spanish case,” pp. 60–83, *Anarchism Today*, D. Apter and J. Joll (eds.), p. 66)

Another historian notes how syndicalism “had deep roots in the Spanish libertarian tradition. It can be traced to Bakunin’s revolutionary collectivism.” The Bakuninists “endorsed the concept of class struggle” and “Bakunin himself viewed individual strikes as the building blocks of what he called the general or insurrectionary strike.” (*Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain, 1868–1898*, p. 209, p. 55)

Clearly Thomas is unaware that the Spanish anarchists had organised revolutionary unions since the 1870s. Or that the Chicago anarchists were doing so in the 1880s. Or that Kropotkin followed Bakunin’s ideas on unions and advocated publicly advocated them. As Bertrand Russell summarised: “Hardly any of these ideas [associated with syndicalism] are new: almost all are derived from the Bakunist [sic!] section of the old International.” Moreover, this was “often recognised by Syndicalists themselves.” (*Roads to Freedom*, p. 52)

Then, to cap it all, Thomas states:

“Since the decay of the French CGT into reformist syndicalism, in the years up to 1914, and the political collapse of the CNT with the entry of the Spanish anarchists into bourgeois governments in 1936, anarcho-syndicalism has been a subordinate strand among many in anarchism.”

Yet anarchists have not stopped following Bakunin and Kropotkin and their stress on the importance of working class economic struggle and organisation. In terms of trying to build revolutionary unions, anarchists tend not to do this in the UK – we are well aware our numbers preclude that for the time being (in Europe there are various syndicalist unions but best not mention those!). Moreover, most anarchists recognise the need to organise anarchist federations as well and so reject pure anarcho-syndicalism. Still, why let an accurate account of anarchist positions creep in?

4. Anarchism and the medieval commune

Now we get to a very funny issue, Thomas’ continued attempts to like “**Anarchism and the medieval commune.**” For some reason, Thomas thinks that when Marx mentioned in passing that some people viewed the Paris Commune as a return to the medieval commune, he was “[e]xplaining how his view differed from the anarchists”! He does not let the awkward fact that he is alone in this stop him asserting it.

And assert it he did. Medieval Communes, he stated, were “idealised by Bakunin, and, later, even more so by Kropotkin.” That is it. No attempt to prove it. So I provided some quotes which showed this was not the case, to which Thomas states:

“McKay quotes a couple of sentences from Bakunin, and one from Kropotkin, indicating awareness of differences between medieval communes and the Paris Commune. Those should be read together with the much greater number of sentences in which they emphasised what the commune of the future would have in common with the medieval commune of the past, both of them representing the supposed trend of human nature when freed from the unnatural constraint of an organised state machine.”

Apparently they are so many sentences that it is impossible to quote even one!

Now I’ve read a lot of Bakunin and I’m not aware that Bakunin mentioned the medieval commune more than once, never mind emphasis what the future commune would “have in common with the medieval commune of the past.” Unsurprisingly, when asked on-line, Thomas could not provide a single sentence of the “greater number of sentences” he claims exist.

However, as I said, he *did* mention it once. Did he idealise it? Nope, quite the reverse as these are some of “couple of sentences” Thomas mentions:

“Mazzini, in his hatred of the Paris Commune, has gone to the extreme of sheer foolishness. He maintains that the... revolution in Paris would lead us back to the medieval ages... He does not understand, poor fellow, that between the commune of the Middle Ages and the modern commune there is the vast difference which the history of the last five centuries wrought”

So much for Bakunin having “idealised” the Medieval Commune!

What of Kropotkin? Ignoring the awkward fact that Marx was hardly discussing Kropotkin in 1871, it is fair to say that he did write about the medieval commune in various historical accounts (for example, *Mutual Aid*). However, those are, by definition, looking backwards, not forwards. When pressed for a reference Thomas pointed the 1913 preface to *The Conquest of Bread* but reading that quickly showed he was either does not have basic reading comprehension skills or was being incredulous.

In that preface Kropotkin was refuting claims that because the ideas of socialism were “so old” and have never been realised it showed “some fundamental error” in the anarchist “understanding of human nature and its needs.” Not so, he replied, and pointed to various examples of socialistic institutions. One of these were “the medieval cities” which “succeeded in maintaining in their midst for several centuries in succession a certain socialised organisation of production and trade.” He noted that “these centuries were periods of a rapid intellectual, industrial, and artistic progress” but were finally destroyed by “the growth of the military states.” Thus, he suggested, the “history of mankind... does not offer, then, an argument against Communism” rather, it is “a succession of endeavours to realise some sort of communist organisation, endeavours which were crowned with a partial success of a certain duration.” He concluded that “mankind has not yet found the proper form for combining, on communistic principles, agriculture with a suddenly developed industry and a rapidly growing international trade.” Thus “modern Communism had to take them into account.” (*The Conquest of Bread*, pp. 17–8)

So Kropotkin noting that the Medieval Commune had “some sort of communist organisation” which had “partial success” but which had “not yet found the proper form” of communism and, moreover, its modern form had to “take into account” modern industry becomes, to Thomas, idealising it! Which, needless to say, matches with the sentence I quoted in my leaflet:

“Between the Commune of the middle ages and that... established today... there will be plenty of essential differences: a veritable abyss opened up by six or seven centuries of human development... all the great cities will unfurl the same flag “

Clearly, Kropotkin did not idealise the medieval commune nor suggest the future commune would have much in common with it. Rather, Kropotkin used it as an example of communistic tendencies *in the past*, a form which was inadequate and did not reflect the needs of today.

As such, it is ironic to read Thomas urge us to “*read together with the much greater number of sentences*” as he fails to provide any means for us to do so. So months later, Thomas still cannot provide a single reference in support of his assertion. Strange that.

5. Anarchism and capitalism

Now we move onto “**Anarchism and capitalism,**” which Thomas begins with:

“Iain McKay has written a lot against pro-capitalist individualists in the USA who claim to be anarchists. I’d happily second his wish to disqualify those right-wingers who attempt to steal a self-description used by pro-working-class, socialistic activists. I ask only that he would recognise that the ‘Marxists’ running Stalinist states had and have even less right to steal the descriptions ‘communist’, ‘Marxist’, or ‘revolutionary socialist’. (But he doesn’t recognise that: see below, ‘equating Trotskyism with Stalinism’).”

This would, of course, be much easier if Thomas did not make exceptions for the party-dictatorship state-capitalist regime of Lenin and Trotsky, but I will return to this. Thomas then states:

“McKay seems to want to claim that I equate his anarchism with those pro-capitalist individualists. I don’t.”

Now were do I do that? Unsurprisingly enough, I don’t even mention the proprietarians in my leaflet – why should I? They are irrelevant in the UK and just as I don’t discuss the peasantry as a revolutionary force in today’s Britain, I don’t waste space in a leaflet on the AWL and anarchism mentioning the proprietarians.

After this irrelevance, Thomas states:

“I wrote that in Bakunin’s activity in the League for Peace and Freedom, in 1867–8 – probably his largest-scale activity, and the only one for which he wrote a more or less comprehensive manifesto – he ‘made no demand for the expropriation of capitalist property or the collective ownership of the means of production’ and remonstrated that ‘the majority of decent, industrious bourgeois’ could quite well support his programme.”

Now, I cannot help thinking that most people knowledgeable about the subject would say that it was Bakunin’s activity in the First International which was by far his largest-scale activity, for which he wrote his mature anarchist works for (including his only book, *Statism and Anarchy*). But never mind such trivial facts, what of this claim? Well, I actually quoted from that manifesto:

“organise society in such a manner that every individual ... should find... equal means for the development of his or her diverse faculties and their utilisation in his or her work... rendering impossible the exploitation of anyone’s labour... enable every individual to enjoy the social wealth... only in so far as he contributes directly toward the creation of that wealth... the serious realisation of liberty, justice, and peace will be impossible so long as the majority of the population... is condemned to... producing all the wealth... and receiving in return only such a small part thereof ... [Hence] the necessity of a radical social and economic reconstruction, having for its aim the emancipation of people’s labour from the yoke of capital and property owners”

Now, yes, Bakunin did not call for expropriation in that manifesto but this extract shows that Thomas has distorted its message somewhat. I doubt many of the bourgeoisie would support this analysis and aim – and, unsurprisingly, the League rejected Bakunin’s ideas.

Thomas continues:

“McKay quotes a snippet as if I were denying that Bakunin subsequently moved to the left. I do not deny that. I wrote that Bakunin’s ‘writings of [his first months in the First International, 1868–9] suggest that he was genuinely won over by Marx’s ideas as transmitted through the International. They read as paraphrases – with a particular bias and twist, but paraphrases – of the general ideas of the International.”

It should be needless to say that this vision can be found in Proudhon – as with so many things, Marx need not be invoked. And talking of Proudhon:

“I quoted Proudhon from ‘The Philosophy of Poverty’: ‘The net product belongs to [the man of enterprise] by the most sacred title recognised among men – labour and intelligence. It is useless to recall the fact that the net product is often exaggerated, either by fraudulently secured reductions of wages or in some other way. These are abuses... which remain outside the domain of the theory’.”

This shows that Thomas is reading Proudhon not to engage with his arguments or understand his ideas but simply to cherry-pick apparently damning quotes. This becomes obvious when you read those sections of that work which discuss exploitation and how Proudhon thinks it happens under capitalism – as I will shortly show). He continues:

“McKay disputes my summary comment that ‘Proudhon did not even see industrial capital as exploitative’ by offering another quote from Proudhon talking about revenue being ‘confiscated by the entrepreneur’.

“McKay’s quote also comes from ‘The Philosophy of Poverty’. It comes between a passage in which Proudhon complains about lending at interest as apparently the prime form of exploitation, and a passage where he repeats his key idea that trade should by its essence be between equal values but due to some perversion is not: ‘commerce, the exchange of essentially equal values, is only the art of buying for three francs what is worth six, and selling for six francs what is worth three’.”

Needless to say, Thomas does not bother to reference or link to the appropriate work in his article, meaning that his readers need to take his word over what Proudhon was arguing. However, this chapter is available on-line and if you decide to read the passage in question you will see that, yes, Proudhon was discussing interest before the quoted passage because he was discussing all forms of exploitation. He discusses interest, then moves onto rent and then to profit. Each discussion is prefaced with an appropriate introduction and the part on profit which I quote begins:

“There is theft, in commerce and industry, every time the entrepreneur holds back from the worker some part of his wages, or receives a bonus in addition to what he is due.”

Thomas has read this part of *System of Economic Contradictions* (to use its proper title) and knows I have, which makes me wonder why he thought he would get away with such a distortion of Proudhon’s ideas – I guess he assumes that his members will not bother to read Proudhon nor any reply (and since he did not inform me of this reply, that seemed a safe bet!).

In short, Thomas is being wilfully misleading as Proudhon is clearly discussing industrial capital in the passage I quoted. That Thomas has no real understanding of Proudhon’s ideas on this matter can be seen from his failure to mention his analysis of bother the “collective force.” This is unsurprising because if he did, he would have to acknowledge that he was wrong in his assertions on Proudhon. Here is Proudhon’s 1851 summary of this idea:

“It is an economic power of which I was, I believe, the first to accentuate the importance, in my first memoir upon *Property* [in 1840]. A hundred men, uniting or combining their forces, produce, in certain cases, not a hundred times, but two hundred, three hundred, a thousand times as much. This is what I have called *collective force*. I even drew from this an argument... that it is not sufficient to pay merely the wages of a given number of workmen, in order to acquire their product legitimately; that they must be paid twice, thrice or ten times their wages, or an equivalent service rendered to each one of them.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 554)

This, needless to say, shows that Proudhon was aware that exploitation happens in production – the boss appropriated the collective force of his employees. He re-iterated this in *System of Economic Contradictions* and in *What is Property?* he states:

“Whoever labours becomes a proprietor – this is an inevitable deduction from the acknowledged principles of political economy and jurisprudence. And when I say proprietor, I do not mean simply (as do our hypocritical economists) proprietor of his allowance, his salary, his wages, – I mean proprietor of the value which he creates, and by which the master alone profits.” (*Property is Theft!*, p 114)

In short: “The free worker produces ten; for me, thinks the proprietor, he will produce twelve.” As he put it in 1850, “a worker, without property, without capital, without work, is hired by A, who gives him employment and takes his product... In a Mutualist Society, on the contrary, the worker, exchanging without reserve product for product and value for value, paying only a trifling discount which is amply recompensed by the surplus which his labour leaves him at the end of the year, alone profits by his products.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 124, pp. 534–5)

I could go on, but what would the point be? After all, if Proudhon did not think wage-labour lead to exploitation then why did he argue that “it is necessary to form an ASSOCIATION among the workers... because without that, they would remain related as subordinates and superiors, and there would ensue two industrial castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society.” (*Property is Theft!*, pp. 583)

Now this relates directly to the “*exchange of essentially equal values*” issue. The first question to ask is what is being exchanged here? Is it products? No, Proudhon is discussing the exchange of labour for wages. As he memorably put it after raising the issue of *collective force* in *System of Economic Contradictions*, workers “have sold their arms and parted with their liberty.” As workers do not get paid for the collective force they produce, then product produced is not equivalent to “the amount of individual wages paid by the entrepreneur” and so the axiom “*Every product is worth what it costs*” is “violated.” (*Property is Theft!*, pp. 212) He made a similar point in 1840:

“If the worker receives for his labour an average of three francs per day, his employer... must sell the day’s labour of his employee, in the form of merchandise, for more than three francs. The worker[s]... cannot repurchase their products; since, producing for a master who in one form or another makes a profit, they are obliged to pay more for their own labour than they get for it.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 125)

In terms of the collective force, is “the exchange an equitable one? Once more, no; when you have paid all the individual forces, the collective force still remains to be paid.... and which you [the boss] enjoy unjustly.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 117)

So, just to stress the matter, Proudhon raised collective force in 1840 and repeatedly used as a base to argue for the end of wage-labour by means of workers’ associations (co-operatives). As he put it in 1846, the workplace must be democratic for “[b]y virtue of the principle of collective force, labourers are the equals and associates of their leaders” and “all labour must leave a sur-

plus, all wages [must] be equal to product.” He returns to this in 1851, arguing that “due to the immorality, tyranny and theft suffered” by wage-workers, co-operatives were necessary and so “the collective force, which is a product of the community, ceases to be a source of profit to a small number of managers and speculators: It becomes the property of all the workers.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 77, pp. 584, p. 586).

Proudhon, to conclude, was well aware wage-workers experienced “immorality, tyranny and theft,” that property was theft and that the “exploitation of man by man... is theft.” His aim was: “Capitalist and landlord exploitation stopped everywhere, wage-labour abolished.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 400, p. 596) To claim that he “*did not even see industrial capital as exploitative*” just shows such a staggering level of ignorance that it is shocking that someone would want to expose it to the general public. But he did and, to make it worse, refused to acknowledge his mistake when he had the chance.

Still, I guess Thomas’ quick glance through *System of Economic Contradictions* must give him a better insight into Proudhon’s ideas than my years of work getting the first major anthology of Proudhon’s works published (*Property is Theft!*). I will say this: Proudhon wrote more than just one book...

Thomas continues:

“Proudhon, as Marx commented, fancied himself as a dialectician. Not only did his views change a lot over his life; even in a single book, as here in ‘The Philosophy of Poverty’, he often contradicted himself and took pride in doing so.”

So it is not Thomas’s fault he misrepresented Proudhon’s ideas by cherry-picking a quote from one book, rather it is the Frenchman’s for being so damn contradictory! Except, of course, it is a Marxist myth that Proudhon’s ideas were contradictory. When you read Proudhon you soon discover that his ideas are not contradictory and, indeed, remarkably consistent across his works.

Moreover, Thomas does not understand Proudhon’s aim in writing *System of Economic Contradictions*. He was exploring the contradictions within capitalism, presenting the positive and negative aspects of various aspects of that system. He did not contradict himself, rather he explored aspects of capitalism. For example, he argued, like Marx, that (for example) machines “promised us an increase of wealth; they have kept their word, but at the same time endowing us with an increase of poverty. They promised us liberty; I am going to prove that they have brought us slavery.” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 190) If this appears contradictory it is because capitalism is contradictory – and because the reader has either not understood or bothered to understand Proudhon’s work (or has picked up their ideas about Proudhon second-hand via Marx).

Thomas extends his ignorance of Proudhon’s ideas into that of his followers:

“The broad drift of Proudhon’s thought can however be assessed from the facts that ‘free credit’ became the hobby-horse of the Proudhonists, and that the Proudhonists formed the unsuccessful opposition in the First International to collective ownership of the means of production.”

It is a myth that Proudhon opposed collective ownership of the means of production. In fact, he repeatedly argued the opposite: “All human labour being the result of collective force, all property becomes, by the same reason, collective and undivided.” Or as he put in it a public manifesto in 1848:

“under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership... We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers’ associations... We want these associations to be models for agriculture, industry and trade,

the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.” (*Property is Theft!*, pp. 377–8)

He angrily rejected the notion he was against collective ownership in 1849, arguing that “it does not follow at all... that I want to see individual ownership and non-organisation of the instruments of labour endure for all eternity. I have never penned nor uttered any such thing: and have argued the opposite a hundred times over... I deny all kinds of proprietary domain. I deny it, precisely because I believe in an order wherein the instruments of labour will cease to be appropriated and instead become shared.”

The same goes for his followers in the First International. As one expert puts it, the “endorsement of collectivism by the International at the Basel Congress might appear to be a rejection of the French position on co-operatives. Actually, it was not, for collectivism as it was defined by its proponents meant simply the end of private ownership of agricultural land. Lumped together with this was usually the demand for common ownership of mines and railways.” (Julian P. W. Archer *The First International in France, 1864–1872: Its Origins, Theories, and Impact* p. xxi) As I discuss this in the introduction to *Property is Theft!*, I’ll leave it there.

He ends this section with a strange comment:

“Finally, McKay quotes anarchists saying that the state protects capital as refuting my comment that the ‘fathers’ of anarchism held that ‘human nature favours liberty and solidarity, the state is an artificial imposition, and capitalism is the product of the state’. There is no refutation here. Bakunin and Kropotkin could quite consistently hold that the artificial imposition of the state had led to the rise of capital, and also that the state then protected capital.”

Actually, I was refuting “the [Anarchist] assertion that... capitalism is the product of the state.” I made no comment on human nature nor how the state developed. Rather, I was addressing the issue that anarchists argue that the state and capitalism is interwoven and we oppose both.

In terms of “human nature” that is a big subject but suffice to say few anarchist subscribe to the pre-Darwinian Marxist notion that our natures are not the product evolution but rather blank slates. If Thomas wishes to deny that we are products of millions of years of co-operative primates and have an evolved sense of fairness and justice as a result, then he is free to ignore the well-documented findings of scientific research and invoke Marx’s sentence from *The Poverty of Philosophy*. As Kropotkin argued in *Mutual Aid*, co-operation as well as competition are part of our heritage as social animals and which factor predominates at specific times varies (I refute the many myths about Kropotkin’s ideas in my *Mutual Aid: An Introduction and Evaluation*).

If Thomas wants to deny this then he is welcome to, but it simply shows that it is not just anarchist theory he is ignorant of...

What of the “*artificial imposition of the state*”? I’m not sure where he gets that from (as usual, it is an assertion). Bakunin was a materialist and so recognised that the state was not somehow independent of the underlying economy. For Kropotkin, “[e]very economic phase has a political phase corresponding to it, and it would be impossible to touch private property unless a new mode of political life be found at the same time.” “A society founded on serfdom,” Kropotkin explained, “is in keeping with absolute monarchy; a society based on the wage system, and the exploitation of the masses by the capitalists finds its political expression in parliamentarianism.” Which means that “a free society regaining possession of the common inheritance must seek, in free groups and free federations of groups, a new organisation, in harmony with the new economic phase of history.” (*The Conquest of Bread*, p. 54)

And, finally, what of capitalism being “*the product of the state*”? Is he denying that the ruling class uses the state to extend its influences? To enclose what used to be commons? To grant itself class monopolies? Has Thomas not read Marx’s account of Primitive Accumulation in volume 1 of *Capital*? Suffice to say, anarchists recognise that the state and capitalism “developed side by side, mutually supporting and re-enforcing each other.” (*Anarchism*, p. 181)

6. Equating Trotskyism with Stalinism (and with social democracy?)

It is far to say that nothing annoys a Leninist than pointing out the similarities between Trotskyism and Stalinism – it is a bit like saying that the Republicans and Democrats are two wings of the same Business Party to a committed Democrat in America. Sure, they will point out a whole series of minor differences that show, at best, that the Democrats are nicer (and saner) than the Republicans but in terms of the fundamental issues of making American capitalism the best possible, there is substantial agreement. Sure, the attacks between them may get heated and it may be the case that a Democratic America would be better than a Republican one, but they exist to defend the same socio-economic system and class structure.

And this is the point anarchists stress with regards Leninism and Stalinism – when you look at the socio-economic system Trotsky aimed for, it is not all that different from Stalin’s regime. Needless to say, Leninist’s don’t like you mentioning this and they generate a lot of noise to hide this awkward fact. Thus we find Thomas writing:

“Much debate here started with me citing a string of words which the anarchist writers Schmidt and van der Walt “quote” as Trotsky’s own description of a socialist future. I responded:

“The footnotes show that the words put in quote marks by Schmidt and van der Walt, as if they come from Trotsky, are culled not from Trotsky himself but from ‘pages 128, 132’ of a book by one Wayne Thorpe.

“Some of the words may have been taken by Thorpe from one of the polemics in which, in late 1920 – between the Bolsheviks’ voting-down of Trotsky’s first proposal in February 1920 of what would become the more liberal ‘New Economic Policy’ and the adoption of the NEP itself, on Lenin’s initiative, in early 1921 – Trotsky sought expedients to get the economy of revolutionary Russia into working order in the midst of civil war”.

“I challenged anarchists to provide evidence that the supposed ‘quote’ was a valid summary of Trotsky’s thought. “None of the words was ever written by Trotsky as a statement of his vision of socialism. The quoted string of words was never written as a whole connected passage by Trotsky anywhere’.

“In the section of his sheet headed “The AWL versus Marxism”, Iain McKay quotes my challenge, and fails to answer it.”

Now that is deeply worrying as Thomas seems keen to deny that Trotsky did advocate the measures *Black Flame* summarised. After all, I quote Trotsky’s infamous *Terrorism and Communism* extensively to show precisely that. Indeed, by any objective measure I prove beyond doubt that this was “a valid statement of his vision of socialism.” Here is my quote from Thomas:

“Schmidt and van der Walt claim [Trotsky] ‘envisaged socialism as ‘authoritarian leadership... centralised distribution of the labour force... the workers’ state... entitled to send any worker wherever

his labour may be needed', with dissenters sent to labour camps if necessary'... None of the words was ever written by Trotsky as a statement of his vision of socialism."

Let me go through it claim by claim, presenting the quotes I gave from *Terrorism and Communism*.

"authoritarian leadership..."

"We have... been accused of having substituted for the dictatorship of the Soviets the dictatorship of our party. Yet... the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the party.... 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."

Unless Thomas is suggesting that "the dictatorship of the party" is not authoritarian, I think we can conclude that I have successfully proven the claim made.

"centralised distribution of the labour force..."

"the only solution to economic difficulties from the point of view of both principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power... and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation and utilisation."

That sounds like a centralised distribution of the labour force, so we can conclude that I have successfully proven the claim made. And note: "of both principle and of practice."

"the workers' state... entitled to send any worker wherever his labour may be needed"

"we can have no way to Socialism except by the authoritative regulation of the economic forces and resources of the country, and the centralised distribution of labour-power in harmony with the general State plan."

And:

"the road to Socialism lies through a period of the highest possible intensification of the principle of the State... Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction... No organisation except the army has ever controlled man with such severe compulsion as does the State organisation of the working class in the most difficult period of transition. It is just for this reason that we speak of the militarisation of labour."

And:

"The working class cannot be left wandering all over Russia. They must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers." (quoted by Brinton, *For Workers' Power*, p. 356)

That sounds like the state being able to send workers wherever as required, so we can conclude that I have successfully proven the claim made.

"with dissenters sent to labour camps if necessary"

Well, I did not provide a quote for this one simply because it was obviously implied by the others and workers and peasants *were* imprisoned under the Bolsheviks (indeed, most of the prisoners were workers or peasants). However, I think it wise to mention that Trotsky did publicly advocate this:

"Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps." (quoted by Brinton, *For Workers' Power*, p. 356)

So there are two issues here which Thomas is wilfully conflating. The first is "[n]one of the words was ever written by Trotsky as a statement of his vision of socialism." The second is "[t]he quoted string of words was never written as a whole connected passage by Trotsky anywhere." As

far as the second goes, that may well be true but as a summary of the realities of the Bolshevik regime goes it is sadly all too accurate. Which was the point *Black Flame* was making. And this relates to the first issue, for Trotsky *did* proclaim these ideas in his account of socialism. Sure, he expressed the notion that (eventually) these measures required for socialism would wither away and communism would arrive, but in terms of “*his vision of socialism*” Trotsky was very, very clear.

That Thomas disputes this and muddies the water over the fundamental issue here is deeply significant. He seems unwilling to admit that the Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky advocated and implemented the militarisation of labour.

So let me compare the summary from *Black Flame* and Trotsky’s words from English language sources:

“authoritarian leadership... centralised distribution of the labour force... the workers’ state... entitled to send any worker wherever his labour may be needed, with dissenters sent to labour camps if necessary”

This becomes:

“the dictatorship of the party” with “the centralised distribution of labour-power in harmony with the general State plan” as the workers’ state must “treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power” with the workers “thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers” and “[d]eserters from labour...put into concentration camps.”

Yes, completely different! If anything, ironically, the words *Black Flame* use are less, not more, damning.

So, given this, I can see why Thomas seeks to distract the rank-and-file of the AWL with the issue of precise quotes – that means he can avoid the awkward fact that *Black Flame* was fundamentally *right*. It gave a fair account of the Bolshevik regime *and* Trotsky’s actual positions defending that authoritarian regime as socialistic.

I should also mention that the “[*m*]uch debate” on-line involved Thomas proclaiming that Trotsky had never said those words, then back-tracking to saying that he *had* said it but the Party had not approved it, to admitting the party *had* approved it but never implemented it to, finally, arguing that it *had* been implemented but not on a wider-scale! This sorry back-peddling was provoked by quoting the relevant parts of Maurice Brinton’s (essential) *The Bolsheviks’ and Workers’ Control* (December 1919 to December 1920 and can be found in *For Workers’ Power* pages 353 to 364).

Thomas, after ignoring the real issue, goes on:

“He does, however, try to dispute the idea that ‘Trotsky fought Stalinism to the death’, after first suggesting that Marx and Engels favoured a parliamentary road to socialism, using the old bourgeois state machine and only adapting it a little.”

Clearly Thomas did not understand the point being made – Trotsky *did* fight Stalinism, but in terms of the reasons why socialists oppose Stalinism there was not much difference between the two. What marks out Stalinism as not being socialist? I think most people would argue that because it was a dictatorship and workers’ were wage-slaves to the state that it was not socialism. This seems to be the AWL’s position:

“It was a system of extreme exploitation of the workers and peasants, run by a backward bureaucratic ruling class with a monopoly of political and social power... their state should nationalise and control everything... the Stalinist systems were characterised above all by a savage repression of the working class, and relentless persecution of working class dissidents, especially workers who tried to organise independent trade unions.”

Of course they are keen to absolve Marx and Lenin from this, yet it was the former who stressed state ownership in the *Communist Manifesto* and it was the latter who implemented it and imposed one-man management when in power. Lenin, of course, was at the helm when the party dictatorship was created and proclaimed: “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 ...’” (*Collected Works*, vol. 29, p. 535) Needless to say, the Bolshevik regime under Lenin used the Cheka to break strikes and destroyed independent unions.

What was Trotsky’s position on these? Was he against dictatorship? Nope. Did he advocate workers’ self-management of production? No.

Let me quote from the platform of the Opposition published in 1927. In it Trotsky is quite clear: “This growing replacement of the party by its own apparatus is promoted by a ‘theory’ of Stalin’s which denies the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party.” (*The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926–7)*, p. 395) Ten years later he made the same point:

“The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities – the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history... The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution ... Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.” (*Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936–37*, pp. 513–4)

Even in the prison camps in the late 1920s and early 1930s, “almost all the Trotskyists continued to consider that ‘freedom of party’ would be ‘the end of the revolution.’ ‘Freedom to choose one’s party – that is Menshevism,’ was the Trotskyists’ final verdict.” (Ante Ciliga, *The Russian Enigma*, p. 280)

So, in terms of dictatorship both Trotsky and Stalin concurred – both advocated and practised party dictatorship. The difference seems to be that Trotsky was under the belief that the privileged minority would not abuse its position.

What of the exploitation of the workers by the state bureaucracy? Again, Trotsky did not advocate workers’ self-management of production – quite the reverse, as he openly advocated one-man management during and after the Civil War. For Trotsky, it was “necessary for each state-owned factory, with its technical director and with its commercial director, to be subjected not only to control from the top – by the state organs – but also from below, by the market which will remain the regulator of the state economy for a long time to come” (I should note

here that Trotsky's admission on the role of "the market" puts Thomas' sneering comments on Proudhon's desire for each exchange into context). In spite of the obvious fact that the workers did not control their labour or its product within a party dictatorship, Trotsky asserted that "[n]o class exploitation exists here, and consequently neither does capitalism exist." Moreover, "socialist industry ... utilises methods of development which were invented by capitalist economy." The "growth of Soviet state industry [which] signifies the growth of socialism itself, a direct strengthening of the power of the proletariat" (*The First 5 Years of the Communist International*, vol. 2, p. 237 and p. 245) The reality of this economic regime was described in 1923 by one anarchist:

"The nationalisation of industry, removing the workers from the hands of individual capitalists, delivered them to the yet more rapacious hands of a single, ever-present capitalist boss, the State. The relations between the workers and this new boss are the same as earlier relations between labour and capital, with the sole difference that the Communist boss, the State, not only exploits the workers, but also punishes them himself ... Wage labour has remained what it was before, except that it has taken on the character of an obligation to the State ... It is clear that in all this we are dealing with a simple substitution of State capitalism for private capitalism." (Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, p. 71)

In 1927 when he was protesting the excessive privileges of the bureaucracy he was *still* arguing that the "appropriation of surplus value by a workers' state is not, of course, exploitation" and that "nationalisation of the means of production was a decisive step towards the socialist reorganisation of the entire social system based on the exploitation of some by others." (*The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926-27)*, p. 348, p. 347) In this he followed Lenin who, as Ante Ciliga put it, "had handed it over entirely into the hands of the bureaucracy," and so the workers "became once more the wage-earning manpower in other people's factories. Of socialism there remained in Russia no more than the word." (*The Russian Enigma*, p. 280, p. 286)

So, in terms of exploitation of the workers by the state bureaucracy both Trotsky and Stalin concurred – both advocated and practised the (dictatorial) state appropriating surplus-value from the workers. That is why some termed the Trotskyites the bureaucracy in exile. The difference seems to be that Trotsky was under the belief that the privileged minority should not abuse its position, that its exploitation would not be too great. As Maurice Brinton concluded:

"there is a clear-cut and incontrovertible link between what happened under Lenin and Trotsky and the later practices of Stalinism ... The more one unearths about this period the more difficult it becomes to define – or even to see – the 'gulf' allegedly separating what happened in Lenin's time from what happened later. Real knowledge of the facts also makes it impossible to accept ... that the whole course of events was 'historically inevitable' and 'objectively determined'. Bolshevik ideology and practice were themselves important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every critical stage of this critical period." (*The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*, p. 84)

In short: "only the ignorant or those willing to be deceived can still kid themselves into believing that proletarian power *at the point of production* was ever a fundamental tenet or objective of Bolshevism." (Brinton, *Op. Cit.*, p. 14)

So, yes, Trotsky did (literally) fight "*Stalinism to the death*" but he did not fight it to create democratic (never mind libertarian!) socialism. He fought it to recreate the conditions that produced it in the first place – conditions that he and Lenin were instrumental in creating in the first place and did not in any way conflict with the principles of socialism.

Anarchists look at the socio-economic relationships within a society rather than who is in charge and their good intentions. Once you do that, it becomes clear that in terms of class

structure Leninism and Stalinism were the same – a state capitalist economy with a hierarchical and bureaucratic state presided over by a party dictatorship. Changing the people at the top may make some difference but it does not change the fundamental nature of the system – just as the AWL about the difference between the Democrats and Republicans in America.

And what of the Marx and Engels favouring a parliamentary road to socialism? Well, it is important to remember that Thomas claimed that the Paris Commune “*had shown that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes’.* *The working class must create a new form of state, a semi-state as Lenin would call it.*” This meant that Bakunin’s “*split against a ‘Marxism’ defined principally by ‘The Civil War in France’ was assuredly not a split against a socialism of manipulating the existing state machine.*” In reality, this was decidedly *not* the case – as I showed by my quotes.

Thomas ignores the awkward fact that in post-Commune Marx proclaimed that workers’ could use introduce socialism by “*of manipulating the existing state machine.*” Indeed, he said so with regards to Britain and America just a few months after the Commune had been destroyed, repeating this claim the following year. Instead Thomas (like Lenin) tries to argue this away:

“*At a time when the bourgeois state machine (standing army, bureaucracy, police) in England was very flimsy compared to what it had become by the end of the 19th century, and very flimsy compared to the state machines in some other countries in Europe, Marx thought that the ballot-box might let the working class win political supremacy.*”

Yet Thomas had proclaimed that Marx had concluded that the “*working class must create a new form of state*” and was “*against a socialism of manipulating the existing state machine.*” Now, apparently, that is no longer the case. Apparently Marx did think that the existing state could be seized by the ballot-box and modified after all! And, indeed, this was Engels position when asked to explain what Marx had meant by his words in *The Civil War in France*:

“It is simply a question of showing that the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its own purposes: whereas all bourgeois republicans since 1848 inveighed against this machinery so long as they were in the opposition, but once they were in the government they took it over without altering it and used it partly against the reaction but still more against the proletariat.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 47, p. 74)

Unsurprising, then, we discover Engels stating: “With respect to the proletariat the republic differs from the monarchy only in that it is the *ready-for-use* form for the future rule of the proletariat.” He went on to state that the French socialists “are at an advantage compared to us in already having it” and warned against “baseless” illusions such as seeking to “entrust socialist tasks to it while it is dominated by the bourgeoisie.” (Marx and Engels, *The Socialist Revolution*, p. 296) This was, significantly, simply repeating Engels 1891 argument from his critique of the draft of the Erfurt program of the German Social Democrats: “If one thing is certain it is that our Party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 27, p. 227)

So in terms of equating Marxism with social democracy then it appears Marx and Engels did that damage themselves. After all, until 1917 all Marxists were Social Democrats and argued for workers to organise to use the ballot-box as the means of introducing socialism. Sure, the captured state would require significant modification (as had happened during the Commune when the municipal council had been captured) but that did not stop the means used. As Karl Kautsky

noted, the democratic republic “was the particular form of government in which alone socialism can be realised.” He added, after the Russian Revolution, that “not a single Marxist revolutionary repudiated me, neither Rosa Luxemburg nor Klara Zetkin, neither Lenin nor Trotsky.” (*The Road to Power*, p. 34 and p. xlviii)

Needless to say, Leninists are keen to downplay the Marxist credentials of Social Democracy, preferring to concentrate on what it became (reformist) rather than what it started as (revolutionary Marxist). After all, had not Engels proclaimed in 1891:

“And, best of all, the anarchists have been shown the door, just as they were at the Hague Congress. The new, incomparably larger and avowedly Marxist International is beginning again at the precise spot where its predecessor left off.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 49, p 238)

This unwillingness to study the past is understandable – for if they dwelt too long on how the revisionists simply asked the party to bring its rhetoric into line with its practice they may conclude that Bakunin, not Marx, had been vindicated!

And, of course, it is not a case of Britain (or America) having a “*very flimsy*” state machine (neither had) but rather it was a case of them having universal (or near) universal suffrage (at least for men). Thomas addresses this:

“The bourgeoisie thought that too, which is why it resisted the working-class campaign for voting rights, and made concessions only in small doses and in proportion as it had consolidated a state machine and secured some political hegemony over the working class. Engels later commented that Marx had thought that ‘England [was] the only country where the inevitable social revolution might be effected entirely by peaceful and legal means. He certainly never forgot to add that he hardly expected the English ruling classes to submit, without a ‘pro-slavery rebellion’, to this peaceful and legal revolution’”

No one is disputing that the use of elections would not require defence against attempts to nullify the results nor changes in the state machine. As Engels put it, “the only organisation the victorious working class finds *ready-made* for use, is that of the State. It may require adaptation to the new functions. But to destroy that at such a moment, would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the working class can exert its newly conquered power.” (my emphasis, *Op. Cit.*, vol. 47, p. 10) To state the obvious, the state cannot both be smashed (as Thomas suggests) *and* be “ready-made” and in need of “adaptation”! And Engels was clear that he thought that voting gave workers political power:

“In every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say its safe majority in the Legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power, in order to become enabled to change existing laws in conformity with their own interests and requirements. Thus the working class of Great Britain for years fought ardently and even violently for the People’s Charter [which demanded universal suffrage and yearly general elections], which was to give it that political power.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 24, p. 386)

This was about Britain in 1881, “where the industrial and agricultural working class forms the immense majority of the people, democracy means the dominion of the working class, neither more nor less. Let, then, that working class prepare itself for the task in store for it – the ruling of this great Empire ... And the best way to do this is to use the power already in their hands, the actual majority they possess ... to send to Parliament men of their own order.” In case this was not clear enough, he lamented that “[e]verywhere the labourer struggles for political power, for

direct representation of his class in the legislature – everywhere but in Great Britain.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 24, p. 405)

So in terms of equating Social Democracy with Marxism, I would suggest Marx and Engels played their role and my contribution is simply to remind modern Marxists of this! Thomas continues on this theme:

“Maybe Marx was wrong on that. It is a reasonable subject for debate. It has nothing to do with the alleged idea of taking over the existing bureaucratic state machine and using it, only slightly modified, to bring socialism.”

I should note that Thomas now adds the qualifier “slightly modified” to his account of Marx’s ideas. Remember that initially he argued about “a socialism of manipulating the existing state machine.” Yet this was precisely the argument of Marx and Engels, namely that the workers could use elections to conquer “political power” and use the state to introduce socialism. They were both clear on this and that this captured state would need to be transformed.

Ignoring this awkward fact, Thomas states:

“Marx’s argument, right or wrong, was not about the suitability of the bureaucratic bourgeois state machine as an instrument for socialism, but about its flimsy and lightweight character in England in a certain period, and therefore the possible greater ease of replacing it by a radically different mode of government.”

And so Thomas seems to have forgotten (again!) his own words. He stated that post-Commune Marx and Engels thought the state had to be smashed. Faced with extensive evidence that this was not the case, well, he changes the subject. He does try and address one quote I provided:

“McKay quotes a sentence where he has Engels saying that in Holland “only a few changes [would] have to be made to establish that free self-government by the working class”. I can’t trace the quote and its context (McKay gives no source), and so can give no comment.”

Clearly comrade Thomas has never heard of Google for, if he had, he could have entered that quote into it and discovered that I quote it in section H.3.10 of *An Anarchist FAQ*. In Holland, Engels wrote, because of “a residue of local and provincial self-government” and “an absence of any real bureaucracy” in the French or Prussian sense “only a few changes will have to be made to establish that free self-government by the working [people] which will necessarily be our best tool in the organisation of the mode of production.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 47, pp. 397–8)

This was from 1886, with Engels confirming Marx’s speculation as regards Holland being suitable for a peaceful revolution by voting. Few would argue that smashing the state and its replacement with a new workers’ one would really constitute a “few changes”! In short, Thomas does seem to be as ignorant of (certain aspects of) his own political tradition as he is of anarchism.

He now turns to Russia:

“As for Trotsky and the other Bolsheviks, there is no question about it that they organised a harsh military regime during the Civil War after the Russian Revolution, 1917–22. They did it to defend the revolution.”

And they destroyed the revolution in the process, something that Thomas does not wish to admit nor was it something Trotsky ever did acknowledge. Worse, it fails to recognise that authoritarian political and economic policies were being implemented by the Bolsheviks *before* the start of the Civil War at the end of May 1918. As indicated in section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*, the Bolsheviks were had created an executive above the soviets, gerrymandered and disbanded soviets, eliminated military democracy, imposed one-man management in workplaces, repressed the opposition and broke strikes before the civil war started.

Perhaps Thomas would respond that the civil war started in 1917, as soon as the Bolsheviks seized power. Ignoring the awkward fact that if he does then he is admitting that for Leninists social revolution cannot remain democratic, the awkward fact is that Lenin argued that the period between October 1918 and March, 1918 saw “victory” achieved with “extraordinary ease... The Russian revolution was a continuous triumphal march in the first months.” (*Collected Works*, vol. 27, pp. 88–9) If Thomas thinks this period necessitates a “harsh military regime” then we can only fear for the worse if the AWL ever gets into power.

Moreover Lenin did not think these measures were the product of grim necessity. Looking back at this time from April 1920, Lenin reiterated his position (“Dictatorial powers and one-man management are not contradictory to socialist democracy.”) while also stressing that this was not forced upon the Bolsheviks by civil war. Discussing how, again, the civil war was ended and it was time to build socialism he argued that the “whole attention of the Communist Party and the Soviet government is centred on peaceful economic development, on problems of the dictatorship and of one-man management ... When we tackled them for the first time in 1918, there was no civil war and no experience to speak of.” So it was “not only experience” of civil war, argued Lenin “but something more profound ... that has induced us now, as it did two years ago, to concentrate all our attention on labour discipline.” (*Op. Cit.*, vol. 30, p. 503 and p. 504)

Trotsky also argued that Bolshevik policy was not conditioned by the civil war and as one historian summarises “the Communist Party took victory as a sign of the correctness of its ideological approach and set about the task of economic construction on the basis of an intensification of War Communism policies.” (Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin*, p. 37)

Yet this is strange admission, as Thomas was keen to defend Trotsky by asserting that anarchist reporting of this “*harsh military regime*” was baseless. So we have went (yet again!) from denying the realities of the Bolshevik regime to admission.

As for these measures being necessary “to defend the revolution,” well Emma Goldman believed that initially when she arrived in Bolshevik Russia. She soon, however, came to conclude that “what [the Bolsheviks] called ‘defence of the Revolution’ was really only the defence of [their] party in power.” (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, p. 57) The key problem with Leninism is that it confuses party power within working class power and so will, when required, destroy the latter to secure the former – while, at the same time, proclaiming it is acting to “defend” the revolution.

As Goldman stressed, the Bolshevik’s activities were counter-productive for “the Communists are a political party firmly adhering to the idea of a centralised State, and that as such they were bound to misdirect the course of the Revolution ... [Their policies] have paralysed the energies of the masses and have terrorised the people. Yet without the direct participation of the masses in the reconstruction of the country, nothing essential could be accomplished ... They created a bureaucracy and officialdom ... [which were] parasites on the social body ... It was not the fault of any particular individual: rather it was the State they had created, which discredits every revolutionary ideal, stifles all initiative, and sets a premium on incompetence and waste ... Intervention and blockade were bleeding Russia to death, and were preventing the people from understanding the real nature of the Bolshevik regime.” (*Op. Cit.*, p. 99)

After completely failing to recognise the counter-productive reality of the Bolshevik attempts to “defend” their power (which they equated with the revolution), he raises the possibility that mistakes were made:

“That they made mistakes in the maelstrom is a reasonable claim. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote: ‘a model and faultless proletarian revolution in an isolated land, exhausted by world war, strangled by imperialism, betrayed by the international proletariat, would be a miracle’”

Well, if we are quoting dead revolutionaries let me counter with Emma Goldman who argued that she had not come to Russia “expecting to find Anarchism realised” nor did she “expect Anarchism to follow in the immediate footsteps of centuries of despotism and submission.” Rather, she “hope[d] to find in Russia at least the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought” and that “the Russian workers and peasants as a whole had derived essential social betterment as a result of the Bolshevik regime.” (*My Disillusionment in Russia*, p. xlvii) Both hopes were dashed. The question is not whether the Bolshevik regime was perfect but whether it was building or destroying socialism – or, at least, the working class forces which would create socialism – and it is clear that Bolshevik centralisation, party power and vanguardism were doing precisely that (see section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* on the anti-socialist nature of vanguardism). Worse, they generalised their experiences (on party dictatorship, for example) and announced to the world that you had to follow them.

So it is important to stress that the Bolsheviks themselves did not view this as a mistake. Nor did they consider their economic policies as a “mistake”, quite the reverse as “the effective conclusion of the Civil War at the beginning of 1920 was followed by a more determined and comprehensive attempt to apply these so-called War Communism policies rather than their relaxation” and so the “apogee of the War Communism economy occurred after the Civil War was effectively over.” With the fighting over Lenin “forcefully raised the introduction of one-man management ... Often commissars fresh from the Red Army were drafted into management positions in the factories.” By the autumn of 1920, one-man management was in 82% of surveyed workplaces. This “intensification of War Communism labour policies would not have been a significant development if they had continued to be applied in the same haphazard manner as in 1919, but in early 1920 the Communist Party leadership was no longer distracted by the Civil War from concentrating its thoughts and efforts on the formulation and implementation of its labour policies.” While the “experience of the Civil War was one factor predisposing communists towards applying military methods” to the economy in early 1920, “ideological considerations were also important.” (Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin*, p. 2, p. 17, p. 15, p. 30, p. 17 and p. 11)

The anarchists, in contrast, tried to warn the workers of the world of the false direction the revolution was taking:

“There is another objection to my criticism on the part of the Communists. Russia is on strike, they say, and it is unethical for a revolutionist to side against the workers when they are striking against their masters. That is pure demagoguery practised by the Bolsheviki to silence criticism.

“It is not true that the Russian people are on strike. On the contrary, the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been *locked out* and that the Bolshevik State – even as the bourgeois industrial master – uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviki this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan: thus they have succeeded in blinding the masses. Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party.” (Goldman, *Op. Cit.*, p. xlix)

Sadly, most revolutionaries failed to see the logic of Goldman’s position – even when Stalinism arose, many on the left refused to believe. What is worse, though, is that today many revolutionaries systematically refuse to learn from the mistakes of the Bolsheviks and instead

try to rationalise and justify them – and so give the distinct impression that if they were in the same position they would do the same...

Unsurprisingly, this puts most working class people off socialism.

Thomas continues:

“Also reasonable is the claim that, in that maelstrom, the Bolsheviks sometimes elevated the exigencies or expedients of adversity into general rules. It is certain that some passages from what they wrote make that false elevation, and plausible that even taken in context those passages skew the arguments out of shape.”

Sometimes? Really? Both Lenin and Trotsky wrote texts defending their policies for the international socialist movement. *Left-wing Communism and Terrorism and Communism* were many things, but they were not “some passages” – they were substantial works defending Bolshevik policies in terms of generalised lessons for the wider working class movement. Zinoviev, for example, proclaimed this to the world revolutionary movement in 1920:

“Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party. The dictatorship of the Communist Party is only a function, an attribute, an expression of the dictatorship of the working class ... the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.” (*Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920*, vol. 1, pp. 151–2)

This was in the context of a congress which was, in part, trying to get syndicalists to embrace Bolshevism. Marxist myths notwithstanding, most syndicalists did not fall for these positions however in the wake of apparent Bolshevik success many on the left embraced this position. The Bolshevik leaders did so until their deaths.

In terms of, say, the necessity of dictatorship of the party Trotsky held this all throughout the 1920s and 30s. As for one-man management, well, this as Maurice Brinton put it, faced “with the bureaucratic monstrosity of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, yet wishing to retain some credibility among their working class supporters, various strands of Bolshevism have sought posthumously to rehabilitate the concept of ‘workers’ control.” The facts show that between 1917 and 1921 “all attempts by the working class to assert real power over production – or to transcend the narrow role allocated by to it by the Party – were smashed by the Bolsheviks, after first having been denounced as anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist deviations. Today workers’ control is presented as a sort of sugar coating to the pill of nationalisation of every Trotskyist or Leninist micro-bureaucrat on the make. Those who strangled the viable infant are now hawking the corpse around.” (*For Workers’ Power*, p. 165)

Simply put, these were not “mistakes.” Imposing a party dictatorship and then making it a core part of our ideology is not a “mistake”, it is a betrayal of the principles of socialism – a betrayal so deep that it you question how a socialist was the Bolshevik perspective. After all, *Ten Reasons to Join the AWL* states:

“‘Socialism’ is a word that can now be used to mean almost anything. But a common thread is that many on the left see it as something handed down from above by a government workers do not control, whether it’s a Stalinist state (like Cuba or the old USSR), a populist-nationalist regime (like Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela) or based on a parliament (like old-style Labour governments in Britain). Most socialist groups think that Stalinist ‘communism’ was, if not really socialist, at least a ‘degenerated’ form of workers’ rule.

“We disagree! For us, socialism will be brought about by workers’ own efforts, our struggles in the workplace and society, the fight for *workers’ power*, or it will not be socialism.”

It seems strange, therefore, to see the AWL make an exception when it is Lenin and Trotsky who are at the end of a “government workers do not control.” If, as this leaflet states, socialism is “a society in which the workplaces and means of producing wealth are owned collectively and run democratically for the benefit of everyone” then the Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky was not remotely socialist. They both helped to eliminate workplace democracy in favour of one-man management. The Bolsheviks did so because they simply did not think democratic workplaces were required for socialism. Lenin, as one expert notes, “never developed a conception of workers’ self-management. Even after October, workers’ control remained for him fundamentally a matter of ‘inspection’ and ‘accounting’ ... rather than as being necessary to the transformation of the process of production by the direct producers. For Lenin, the transformation of capitalist relations of production was achieved at central-state level, rather than at enterprise level. Progress to socialism was guaranteed by the character of the state and achieved through policies by the central state – not by the degree of power exercised by workers on the shop floor.” (S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd*, p. 228)

Unlike anarchists, who had placed workers self-management of production at the core of our ideas since 1840 – as Proudhon put it in *What is Property?*, management had to “must be chosen from the workers by the workers themselves” (*Property is Theft!*, p. 119) Workers’ control of production is not mentioned in the *Communist Manifesto*.

Thomas is aware of this conclusion and tries to answer it:

“Not a reasonable assessment is the idea that when they made mistakes in the direction of being too brusque and too military, those mistakes stemmed from a systematic bias in Marxism and Bolshevism towards authoritarianism and undemocracy.”

If you proclaim that Marxism is inherently democratic (as the AWL, like most Leninists, tend to do) then how can this “undemocracy” be explained? If there is “systematic bias” in Leninist away from “authoritarianism and undemocracy” then why did the leading Leninists of the period so happily embrace party dictatorship and one-man management?

Suffice to say, while Thomas may deny that Leninism has a “*systematic bias... towards authoritarianism and undemocracy*” but he has proven that it has no “*systematic bias*” towards liberty and democracy. In fact, he admits that Leninism will embrace “*authoritarianism and undemocracy*” on an opportunistic basis, when it suits the party leaders and when they are required to secure their power and position. In short, liberty and democracy are considered not as core aspects of socialism but rather optional extras which can be dispensed with if the right people are in power (i.e., Lenin, Trotsky and presumably their real followers, the AWL).

Just as the US military once destroyed a village in order to save it, so the Leninists will destroy the core ideas of socialism in order to save it. Anarchists, however, remember Bakunin’s maxim:

“We are convinced that freedom without Socialism is privilege and injustice, and that Socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality.” (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 269)

Thomas, ignoring the lessons of history, continues on the “Leninism as democratic” theme:

“The Russian Marxists and Bolsheviks had fought the Tsarist state for over two decades primarily under the banners of ‘social democracy’ and ‘consistent democracy’. Most of them, until 1917, believed that a radical democratic revolution was the best possible outcome in Russia, and that a socialist revolution must come after a whole further development.”

Very true – and one of these “*Marxists and Bolsheviks*” was Stalin. To be consistent, Thomas would have to argue that Stalinism does not have “*a systematic bias in Marxism and Bolshevism towards authoritarianism and undemocracy*” for Stalin had fought the Tsarist state for over two decades primarily under the banner of “social democracy.” Has he really forgotten that in 1917 Stalin was a Bolshevik of long-standing?

Ironically, Thomas is echoing Stalin’s 1905 diatribe against anarchism. He denied that Marxists aimed for party dictatorship, stressing that there was “a dictatorship of the minority, the dictatorship of a small group ... which is directed against the people ... Marxists are the enemies of such a dictatorship, and they fight such a dictatorship far more stubbornly and self-sacrificingly than do our noisy Anarchists.” The practice of Bolshevism and the ideological revisions it generated easily refutes Stalin’s claims. The practice of Bolshevism showed that his claim that “[a]t the head” of the “dictatorship of the proletarian majority ... stand the masses” is in sharp contradiction with Bolshevik support for “revolutionary” governments. Either you have (to use Stalin’s expression) “the dictatorship of the streets, of the masses, a dictatorship directed against all oppressors” or you have party power *in the name of the street, of the masses.* (*Collected Works*, vol. 1, p. 371–2) The fundamental flaw in Leninism is that it confuses the two and so lays the ground for the very result anarchists predicted and Stalin denied.

So how did this happen? How did one-time (representative) democrats become advocates and practisers of dictatorship? A combination of ideological positions (such as the privileged place allotted to the party in vanguardist ideology, unquestioning faith in centralisation, etc.) as well as specific institutions (a state) led necessary to certain conclusions and practices. So this evolution is easy to explain – there is a difference between the Bolsheviks before and after they seized power. Once in power they inhabited state structures and these shaped their ideas and perspectives. This, surely, is basic materialism?

Thomas then makes us responsible for the politics of non-anarchists:

“They had separated off from the previous radical movement in Russia, the populists, who were heavily anarchist-tinged, around two basic ideas: that formal-democratic laws and rights were worth fighting for, even short of socialism; and that the way to win them was mass self-controlling action by the workers, not conspiracies by a brave and small elite to strike down the leaders of the old regime.”

Clearly Thomas is unaware of Bakunin’s and Kropotkin’s recommendations to the populist movement! Bakunin wrote *Statism and Anarchy* precisely to urge the populists to follow a syndicalist path. Thus we discover him arguing that the “proletariat ... must enter the International [Workers’ Association] en masse, form factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them into local federations” for “the sake of its own liberation.” The revolution would be “an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward.” (*Statism and Anarchy*, p. 51, p. 179) Of course, Bakunin also argued that revolutionaries had to organise in secret as the autocracy would arrest them – just like the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks did later. Kropotkin followed this position (see his “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System” in *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*).

So the notion that Bakunin or Kropotkin advocated “*conspiracies by a brave and small elite to strike down the leaders of the old regime*” is simply wrong. Quite the reverse, as both urged that anarchists organise unions to fight the regime. Kropotkin repeated this during the 1905 revolution, arguing that unions were “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future order” and that the general strike was “a powerful weapon

of struggle”! (quoted by Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, pp. 81–2) True, some anarchists in Russia rejected this but Kropotkin’s position (as *Black Flame* indicates) was the mainstream libertarian position since the 1870s.

What of the struggle for democratic reform? It should be noted that Thomas fails to mention a key aspect of the Social Democratic position – namely that it was stages theory. First workers would struggle for a democratic regime and then, once capitalism had developed sufficiently, then there would be a socialist revolution utilising the “political power” granted to workers by universal suffrage.

Bakunin rejected this, arguing that (as I note in section H.1.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ*) that a political revolution before an economic one to mean the continued slavery of the workers. As he argued, “[t]o win political freedom first can signify no other thing but to win this freedom only, leaving for the first days at least economic and social relations in the same old state, – that is, leaving the proprietors and capitalists with their insolent wealth, and the workers with their poverty.” With capitalists’ economic power intact, could the workers’ political power remain strong? As such, “every political revolution taking place prior to and consequently without a social revolution must necessarily be a bourgeois revolution, and a bourgeois revolution can only be instrumental in bringing about bourgeois Socialism – that is, it is bound to end in a new, more hypocritical and more skilful, but no less oppressive, exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeois.” (*The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, p. 294 and p. 289)

Needless to say, Bakunin was also aware that “the most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than even the most enlightened monarchy.” (quoted by Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism*, p. 20) However, he always stressed that economic and political transformation “must be accomplished together and simultaneously.” (*The Basic Bakunin*, p. 106) This perspective was repeated by a Russian worker in 1906 when he expressed his impatience with Menshevik strategy:

“Here [the Mensheviks] ... tells us that the workers’ congress is the best means of assuring the independence of the proletariat in the bourgeois revolution; otherwise, we workers will play the role of cannon fodder in it. So I ask: what is the insurance for? Will we really make the bourgeois revolution? Is it possible that we will spill blood twice – once for the victory of the bourgeois revolution, and the time for the victory of our proletarian revolution? No, comrades, it is not to be found in the party programme [that this must be so]; but if we workers are to spill blood, then only once, for freedom and socialism.” (quoted by Abraham Ascher, *The Mensheviks in the Russian Revolution*, p. 43)

In 1917, this lesson was well learned and the Russian workers initially followed Bakunin’s path (mostly spontaneously and without significant influence by anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists). The Bolsheviks rejected their previous positions and embraced the anarchist one (as advocated by Kropotkin in 1905, for example) and started to advocate economic and political change. Sadly, they confused state capitalism with socialism and so failed.

Thomas then states:

“*The urgency and importance of democratic rights were central to the cause for which they faced persecution, jail, and exile.*”

Quite true but, sadly, the irony that the Bolsheviks persecuted, jailed and exiled those fighting for democratic rights from *their regime* is quite lost on Thomas. Ironically, this included (on the left) the Bolshevik’s old comrades in the Social Democracy (the Mensheviks), the Left-SRs and anarchists.

He then tries to rationalise Bolshevik authoritarianism:

“They also knew that no-one can go through history reading off all their actions from a pocketbook of democratic rules. They knew that civil wars require emergency measures. That their choice of emergency measures included mistakes is plausible, and in the circumstances almost certain to have been true.”

Interesting. Anarchists are well aware that revolutions produce difficult objective circumstances. Indeed, Kropotkin spent sometime stressing the economic disruption a revolution would face and lived to see that confirmed in the 1917 Russian Revolution. He also lived to see the centralised Bolshevik state make it worse, again confirming his analysis. We are also aware that in the middle of combat decisions need to be made quickly but as the Makhnovists and the CNT militias show, you do not need to abolish military democracy as the Bolsheviks did to achieve that. We also are aware that sometimes decisions need to be made which violate standard processes.

That is not why we oppose Leninism. We oppose Leninism because it took these emergency measures and made them principles. We oppose Leninism because it systematically concentrated power into the hands of a few party leaders and so undermined working class democracy. We oppose Leninism because it systematically repressed the working class and peasantry and did so to remain in power. We oppose Leninism because it systematically took these measures and made general principles from them. We oppose Leninism because its ideological prejudices in favour of centralisation, its flawed analysis of the state, its vanguardism, its equation of state capitalism with socialism made all these so-called “mistakes” inevitable – and, indeed, they were expressed before the civil war started.

Let me take a concrete example. The Leninist support for centralised state power results in the affairs of millions being decided upon by a handful of people in the Central Committee of the vanguard party. Trotsky’s arguments against the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine shows this well.

For Trotsky, the Makhnovists were against “Soviet power.” This, he argued, was simply “the authority of all the local soviets in the Ukraine” as they all “recognise the central power which they themselves have elected.” Consequently, the Makhnovists rejected not only central authority but also the local soviets as well. Trotsky also suggested that there were no “appointed” persons in Russia as “there is no authority in Russia but that which is elected by the whole working class and working peasantry. It follows [!] that commanders appointed by the central Soviet Government are installed in their positions by the will of the working millions.” He stressed that one can speak of “appointed” persons “only under the bourgeois order, when Tsarist officials or bourgeois ministers appointed at their own discretion commanders who kept the soldier masses subject to the bourgeois classes.” When the Makhnovists tried to call the fourth regional conference of peasants, workers and partisans to discuss the progress of the Civil War in early 1919, Trotsky, unsurprisingly enough, “categorically banned” it. With typical elitism, he noted that the Makhnovist movement had “its roots in the ignorant masses”! (*How the Revolution Armed*, vol. II, p. 277, p. 280, p. 295 and p. 302)

In other words, because the Bolshevik government had been given power by a national Soviet Congress in the past (and only remained there by gerrymandering and disbanding soviets), he (as its representative) had the right to ban a conference which would have expressed the wishes of millions of workers, peasants and partisans fighting for the revolution! The fallacious nature of his arguments is easily seen. Rather than executing the will of millions of toilers, Trotsky was simply executing his own will. He did not consult those millions nor the local soviets which had, in Bolshevik ideology, surrendered their power to the handful of people in the central committee

of the Bolshevik Party. By banning the conference he was very effectively undermining the practical, functional democracy of millions and replacing it with a purely formal “democracy” based on empowering a few leaders at the centre. Yes, indeed, truly democracy in action when one person can deny a revolutionary people its right to decide its own fate!

Unsurprisingly, the anarchist Nestor Makhno replied by arguing that he considered it “an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call congresses on their own account, to discuss their affairs. That is why the prohibition by the central authorities on the calling of such congresses ... represent a direct and insolent violation of the rights of the workers.” (quoted by Peter Arshinov, *The History of the Makhnovist Movement*, p. 129)

So the counter-example of the anarchist influenced Makhnovist movement shows the impact of Bolshevik ideology on the fate of the revolution (see Peter Arshinov’s *The History of the Makhnovist Movement* or Alexandre Skirda’s *Nestor Makhno Anarchy’s Cossack* for more details). Defending the revolution in the Ukraine against all groups aiming to impose their will on the masses (including the Bolsheviks!), the Makhnovists were operating in the same objective conditions facing the Bolsheviks – civil war, economic disruption, isolation and so forth. However, the policies the Makhnovists implemented were radically different than those of the Bolsheviks. While the Makhnovists called soviet congresses, the Bolsheviks disbanded them. The former encouraged free speech and organisation, the latter crushed both. While the Bolsheviks raised party dictatorship and one-man management to ideological truisms, the Makhnovists stood for and implemented workplace, army, village and soviet self-management.

As one historian suggests, far from being necessary or even functional, Bolshevik policies “might even have made the war more difficult and more costly. If the counter-example of Makhno is anything to go by then [they] certainly did.” (Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets*, p. 265)

The Makhnovists were not perfect and, as would be expected, deviated from the ideal standards of anarchism on many occasions. However, they did their best to encourage those standards whenever they could – unlike the Bolsheviks, who happily turned their back on all their previous positions (except, of course, party power). Anarchists argue that the Makhnovist movement shows that the failure of Bolshevism cannot be put down to purely objective factors like the civil war: the politics of Leninism played their part.

Thomas ends his response with a classic piece of gibberish:

“A response to them which says: ‘Oh no! Things would have gone better if the Soviets had organised no central authority, no Red Army, no military discipline, and submitted to being slaughtered by the counter-revolutionaries with the consolation that they had proved themselves as democratic idealists’ is, in effect if not in intention, an abandonment of practical revolutionary politics.”

Ignoring the awkward fact that the Bolsheviks disbanded their fair share of soviets and broke strikes by force, it is fair to ask where, oh where, is an account of what anarchists *actually* argue? Nowhere – instead we get yet more false dichotomies.

Yes, anarchists argue against “central authority” but we also argue for federalism and do so precisely because we recognise the need to co-ordinate activity, including the defence of the revolution. As the Bolsheviks showed, a “central authority” quickly becomes as serious a threat to working class self-management as the self-proclaimed counter-revolution.

Yes, we are against the Red Army but in favour of democratic armed forces (like the Makhnovist army). And to quote Trotsky (yes, really!) the “demobilisation of the Red Army of five million played no small role in the formation of the bureaucracy. The victorious commanders assumed leading posts in the local Soviets, in economy, in education, and they persistently introduced

everywhere that regime which had ensured success in the civil war.” (*The Revolution Betrayed*, p. 90)

And what of “*military discipline*”? Is Thomas *really* suggesting that the AWL’s goal is to recreate the norms of the bourgeois army in the forces of the revolution? Anarchist reject this but are, of course, in favour of discipline within the federated workers’ militias defending a revolution. Let me quote Durruti:

“I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again: I’ve been an anarchist my entire life and the fact that I’m responsible for this human collectivity won’t change my convictions. It was as an anarchist that I agreed to carry out the task that the Central Committee of the Anti-Fascist Militias entrusted me.

“I don’t believe – and everything happening around us confirms this – that you can run a workers’ militia according to classic military rules. I believe that discipline, co-ordination, and planning are indispensable, but we shouldn’t define them in terms taken from the world that we’re destroying. We have to build on new foundations. My comrades and I are convinced that solidarity is the best incentive for arousing an individual’s sense of responsibility and a willingness to accept discipline as an act of self-discipline.

“War has been imposed upon us ... but our goal is revolutionary victory. This means defeating the enemy, but also a radical change in men. For that change to occur, man must learn to live and conduct himself as a free man, an apprenticeship that develops his personality and sense of responsibility, his capacity to be master of his own acts. The worker on the job not only transforms the material on which he works, but also transforms himself through that work. The combatant is nothing more than a worker whose tool is a rifle – and he should strive toward the same objective as a worker. One can’t behave like an obedient soldier but rather as a conscious man who understands the importance of what he’s doing. I know that it’s not easy to achieve this, but I also know that what can’t be accomplished with reason will not be obtained by force. If we have to sustain our military apparatus by fear, then we won’t have changed anything except the colour of the fear. It’s only by freeing itself from fear that society can build itself in freedom.” (quoted by Abel Paz, *Durruti: In The Spanish Revolution*, p. 474)

If anyone is expressing “*in effect if not in intention, an abandonment of practical revolutionary politics*” it is Thomas. He is effectively ensuring that the AWL will recreate all the structures which helped defeat the Russian Revolution. The truly sad thing is he is not aware of it.

Conclusions

In my initial leaflet I asked this question: “Is it not time for Marxists to stop producing straw-man arguments against anarchism?” Thomas has answered that question with a resounding: No!

Marxists used to proclaim themselves as exponents of “scientific socialism” (and seem blissfully unaware that Proudhon coined that phrase). The scientific method is not assertion. It is the gathering and presenting of facts then generalising principles and building theories based on these facts. In this context, it at a minimum means reading the people whose ideas you are trying to critique and providing appropriate backing quotes. It at a minimum it means studying history and comparing what happened with what was predicted, trying to explain what happened based on an evaluation of influences – economic and political conditions, social, political and economic structures and ideology.

Leninists do not do that. Rather, they jump between two poles. When discussing the Russian Revolution the focus is on economic and political conditions, rejecting any attempt to bring into the analysis the political ideology of those at the head of the so-called “workers’ state.” When discussing the Spanish Revolution, we get a focus on ideology – everything is explained by the ideas in the CNT-FAI militants’ heads.

That could be tolerable, although still wrong, if Leninists could get these ideas right. As can be seen from Thomas, Leninists have some seriously mistaken notions of what anarchists believe. Given this, the poverty of his account of the Spanish Revolution becomes obvious. Perhaps this is understandable. If he were better acquainted with anarchist theory and Leninist history he would soon realise that the Spanish Anarchists failed because they did *not* apply their ideas in difficult economic and political circumstances while the Bolsheviks failed because they *did* apply their ideas in difficult economic and political circumstances.

Thomas is keen to stress the need for “*a strong, centralised, democratic authority*” and downplays that the Bolshevik regime may have been the first two but not the third. That the Bolshevik regime confirmed Bakunin’s critique of Marx is of little concern to him. Bakunin argued:

“By popular government they [the Marxists] mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people... [That is,] government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of *former* workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers’ world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people.” (*Statism and Anarchy*, p. 178)

Compare this to Lenin’s own description of the “top-down” nature of Bolshevik rule:

“In Russia today, the connection between leaders, party, class and masses ... are concretely as follows: the dictatorship is exercised by the proletariat organised in the Soviets and is guided by the Communist Party ... The Party, which holds annual congresses ..., is directed by a Central Committee of nineteen elected at the congress, while the current work in Moscow has to be carried on by [two] still smaller bodies ... which are elected at the plenary sessions of the Central Committee, five members of the Central Committee to each bureau. This, it would appear, is a full-fledged ‘oligarchy.’ No important political or organisational question is decided by any state institution in our republic [sic!] without the guidance of the Party’s Central Committee.” (*The Lenin Anthology*, pp. 571–2)

Lenin was not lamenting this situation, he was offering it up as an example of a successful revolution in order to refute the “left-communists” who were stressing the need for genuine democracy in the workers’ councils. Thus we have an insurmountable contradiction within the AWL’s ideology. They proclaim that “[w]ithout democracy there can be no socialism and without a socialist society, there can be no real and complete democracy” and that this “simple idea is central to Marxism and inseparable from the work of revolutionary socialists.” Moreover, this must be applied to the economy as the “most basic facet of a socialist society is that ownership and control of the means of production” must “be taken out of the hands of a small group of people.” However, if collective ownership “is unaccountable and the control undemocratic, then by any measure it cannot be ‘progressive’ when compared to capitalism.” (D is for Democracy) Then they spoil it all by proclaiming the Bolshevik regime under Lenin and Trotsky is socialist!

Thus, according to the AWL, there *can* be a socialist regime without democracy and collective ownership based on “undemocratic” control – as long as Lenin and Trotsky are in charge. In

short, “real and complete democracy” is no longer “central to Marxism”, it is an optional extra. The AWL article states that “[a]ny ideas posing as Marxism, socialism or in any way ‘radical’ that fail the democratic measure damage our movement.” Ironically, their own ideology fails such a measure. As the conclusion of one excellent account of the Bolshevik regime put it:

“Effectively many Trotskyists are arguing that, if it is necessary, Marx’s insistence on ‘self-emancipation’ and a democratic workers’ republic can be postponed provided people like Lenin and Trotsky run the ‘workers’ state’ and raise the red flag for international revolution. Yet for the Bolsheviks to suppress the Russian working class – on behalf of a world working class that has no say in this policy – contradicts any concept of proletarian self-emancipation. Workers will never be inspired by a Marxism that offers the possibility of state subjugation in a ‘holding operation’ until the whole world has had a revolution.” (*Beyond Kronstadt*)

Anarchists would also stress the links of Leninism to Marx and Engels who, for all their contributions to socialist theory, also lumbered the left with a confused analysis of the state (see section H.3.7), a prejudice for centralisation (see section H.3.2) and a downplaying on the need for workers’ self-management (see sections H.3.13 and H.4.5). However, it is the Bolshevik regime which always gives the likes of the AWL problems. For while (rightly) denouncing Stalinism as anti-socialist and stressing that real socialism needs extensive democracy and liberties, they make an exception for the USSR under their heroes Lenin and Trotsky. Which raises the question, can socialism exist without freedom? Apparently for the AWL, it can – as long as the right people are dictators. That, for anarchists, just shows a confused mind and, worse, opens the door for future authoritarianism if the likes of the AWL ever get near power.

Ultimately, the likes of the AWL seem to think that the (good) intentions of those in power somehow negate the socio-economic relations – anarchists reject such philosophical idealism and point to the class structures of a society in order to judge it. And from that perspective there is not much difference between Russia in 1919 and in 1939 – except that Trotsky was in exile rather than imposing one-man management and militarising labour as part of the ruling elite of the party dictatorship.

Given the track record of Leninism in power it is unsurprising that Thomas spent so much time trying to make anarchism so unappealing. For if he presented an accurate account of anarchism and its critique of Marxism then quite a few of the AWL’s members may conclude that they are really libertarians.

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