

The Weekly Worker, Anarchists and Genoa

Anarcho

December 22, 2008

Contents

Democracy the Answer?	3
Bolshevism and Democracy.	5
G8 or Central Committee?	6
Nothing changes?	7
Subordination or free agreement?	7
First Follow-up Letter	8
Second Follow-up Letter	11

As to be expected, the **Weekly Worker** used the events in Genoa as yet another opportunity to attack anarchism and anarchists. Sadly for them, the various articles in issue no. 394 present not only a distorted account of anarchism but also what anarchists did at Genoa.

The basic flaw in their argument and analysis is simple. They equate the Black Bloc with all anarchists. Indeed, such inaccuracy is to be expected as they also equate “Ya Basta!” with anarchism even though they are not anarchists. But facts are clearly the last thing the Weekly Worker cares about.

For example, Sarah McDonald stated that “the anarchists did not want to march with anyone,” so ignoring the majority of anarchists who did march with others. Take, for example, the fact that in Genoa, numerous anarchist organisations (such as the Italian FAI and FdCA, the French AL and others) were in the mass demonstration called by base-unions on general strike (CUB, RdB, SLAI-cobas). Why did McDonald not mention this little fact?

Tina Baker, not to be undone, states that the anarchists “did not attend the migrant workers’ demonstration on Thursday, where 30,000 people demanded open borders and an end to immigration controls. Far too political for our anarchists.” Sadly for her, the BBC news showed a large number of anarchists on that demonstration carrying Red and Black Flags. But why let the facts get in the way?

Mark Fischer in his “Black bloc’s history” tries to link it with the activities of the non-anarchist (indeed, anti-anarchist) ideas and activities of the followers of Auguste Blanqui. If he actually bothered to investigate the real history of the Black Bloc tactic, he would have discovered it in the decidedly Marxist (and non-anarchist) German Autonomists in the 1980s. The tactic was applied by some North American anarchists in Seattle and elsewhere, but in Europe the Marxist Autonomists use it as well.

Does this mean we can generalise about Marxists as the **Weekly Worker** generalises about anarchists? Of course not.

These examples indicate the general level of the Weekly Workers’ account of anarchism in Genoa. They basically label anyone they dislike as “anarchists,” equate anarchism with the Black Bloc tactic and write out of history those anarchists (the majority) who do not meet their stereotypes.

Their political analysis is as flawed as their factual reporting.

Democracy the Answer?

For the CPGB, the answer for the anti-globalisation movement is “democracy.” They constantly stress this in their “critique” of anarchism (or at least what **they** think anarchism is). As they put it:

*“This lack of democracy is not something to celebrate – it points to the inherent arrogance of the anarchist movement and the reality of its position outside the organised working class – **the** revolutionary force which will conquer a new society and truly liberate humanity.”*

Funnily enough, Tony Blair and the other G8 leaders also made a big deal that they were democratically elected. Does this mean that the leaders of the capitalist world are “inside” the “organised working class”? Simply put, supporting “democracy” does not place you inside or

outside of the “organised working class.” After all, many trade unions and “socialist” political parties are run bureaucratically from the top-down with purely formal levels of democracy. Are they an example to follow?

Clearly, “democracy” is not enough. In the class struggle the working class creates new forms of organisation which are based on ideas which bourgeois democracy shuns. These are mass meetings, mandated and recallable delegates, federalism and so on. As Bakunin argued in the 1860s:

“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...”

This is a form of organisation that creates an alternative to bourgeois “democracy” — namely self-management. This is the active participation of working people from below upwards. The Weekly Worker fails to mention that anarchists support self-management (direct democracy). That was why the majority of anarchists in Genoa took part in COBAS march. Self-managed workers organisations, run from the bottom, is a key aspect of anarchism. Sadly, the CPGB does not bother to inform the reader of the real anarchist position nor how working class self-organisation cannot be reduced to a very non-specific term as “democracy.” After all, Blair and company argued that they represented “democracy.”

Perhaps we can see what the Weekly Worker means by “democracy” from Tina Baker’s article. She notes that a Daily Telegraph reporter “claims he was easily integrated into the core group which organised the riots,” the UK-based Wombles. She then argues that “with their undemocratic and sect-like organisational structure anarchists can easily be infiltrated and manipulated.”

This seems a strange argument, given the organisational structure of the Wombles. Let us quote the Wombles press release on this event:

“The Wombles are an open network. We do not have a membership and all meetings are publicly advertised... People are Wombles if they take part in the civil disobedience actions and can become part of the organising of them at public meetings. This also allows journalists like ‘Tom’ Thomas Harding {who most of us thought was an OK person} to be part of it. We do not have anything to hide and are open about our intentions on demonstrations and how we are going to react to police attacks.”

Now, how is this “undemocratic”? Indeed, the reverse is the case. It is ultra-democratic (i.e. self-management). How is this sort of “infiltration” be overcome? Only by eliminating face-to-face democracy in favour of hierarchical top-down leadership by a few. Perhaps this explains why they did not quote from this press release? Nor explain the actual organisational structure of the Wombles? After all, how can such a structure be “undemocratic”? And if this is “undemocratic”

then what of a strikers assembly or democratically mandated and accountable delegates to a workers council? If these are “undemocratic” then what is democracy? Party dictatorship?

Clearly, then, for the *Weekly Worker* direct democracy, elected, mandated and recallable delegates, workers councils, control from the bottom up are all “undemocratic.” Perhaps this explains why these fundamental ideas of anarchism are not mentioned in their paper when they discuss anarchism – such facts would confuse the reader and so are better left unmentioned.

And, equally as dangerous, lead their readers to question the Bolshevik tradition and practice. A topic we now turn to.

Bolshevism and Democracy.

As for the Bolshevik tradition that the CPGB places itself in, well, that is hardly democratic (even in the limited sense that Blair and company meant). Tony Blair was not the first leader of an “organised working class” party to be elected into power with 25% of the vote. The Bolsheviks received a similar share in the elections to the Russian Constituent Assembly in November 1917. Faced with a overwhelming vote against them, the Bolsheviks rejected democracy and disbanded the Assembly. True democracy in action.

It will be argued that they disbanded the Constituent Assembly because the Soviets represented a “higher” form of democracy. So what of Soviet democracy? The spring of 1918 saw the success of Menshevik-SR opposition in soviet elections in all provincial capitals in European Russia. The Bolshevik then disbanded the opposition controlled soviets and repressed the subsequent wave of working class protests and revolts. To stay in power, the Bolsheviks had to destroy the soviets. These steps generated a far-reaching transformation in the soviet system, which remained ‘soviet’ in name only. Faced with a overwhelming vote against them, the Bolsheviks rejected democracy and disbanded the Soviets. True democracy in action.

Similarly, the Bolsheviks also eliminated democracy in the armed forces as well as in industry. The soldiers’ committees and elected officers were abolished in March 1918 by Trotsky: “The principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree.” Officers were appointed from above by the government. In the workplace, Lenin argued against workers self-management of production, supporting (appointed from above) “one-man management” invested with “dictatorial powers” in early 1918. By 1920, Trotsky was advocating the “militarisation of labour” and implemented his ideas on the railway workers.

Clearly, Bolshevism is hardly democratic. The *Weekly Worker* interviewed Guiseppe de Cristofaro, secretary of the Young Communists, the youth section of Rifondazione Comunista. In reply to the question “Do you think the black bloc could be integrated into the protests?” he replied “Never. They have no politics, they are not interested in democratic organisation and they are full of police infiltrators. They are a danger to our movement.” We wonder why he and the *Weekly Worker* do not apply this criteria to their own political tradition. The Bolsheviks were also full of police infiltrators. Lenin, for example, noted that “in 1912, when an **agent-provocateur**, Malinovsky, got into the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks” and “betrayed scores and scores of the best and most loyal comrades.” Neither, as indicated above, were they interested in democratic organisation. As for having “no politics,” well, that is obviously nonsense with regard to the genuine activists who use the Black Bloc tactic.

To state that the ideological followers of Bolshevism are also a danger to our movement would, I am sure, be labelled as “sectarian” by the likes of the CPGB — yet that will not stop them urging that anarchists be purged from the movement (in the words of Tina Becker, “we must also protect our movement from the enemy within” — ironically using the same words as that great democrat Thatcher did with regards to the striking miners in the 1980s).

G8 or Central Committee?

Ironically, they quote Carlo Giuliani’s father, who argued that “*Carlo didn’t accept the notion that eight leaders of the world should decide the life and death of hundreds of thousands of people.*” Very true. Let us see if the Bolshevik method of organising is an improvement. Looking at Lenin’s **Left-wing Communism** we discover the following comments:

“The Party, which holds annual congresses ... , is directed by a Central Committee of nineteen elected at the congress... Not a single important political decision is decided by any State institution in our republic without the guiding instructions of the Central Committee of the Party..”

As such, the difference is clear. Under Bolshevism, 19 people made life and death decisions for millions. Under capitalism, 8 people make them. A massive improvement in terms of democracy, I am sure all would agree.

Lenin’s comments were made in regard to the discussion going on in the international revolutionary movement. A left-wing had developed which argued for a self-managed revolution from below and which rejected the idea of party power or dictatorship in favour of mass working class organisation and direct action. Lenin opposed this and stressed that “*all talk about ‘from above’ or ‘from below,’ about the dictatorship of leaders’ or ‘the dictatorship of the masses,’ cannot appear but ridiculous nonsense*” and “*the very presentation of the question — ‘dictatorship of the Party’ or dictatorship of the class, dictatorship (Party) of the leaders or dictatorship (Party) of the masses?’ — is evidence of the most incredible and hopeless confusion of mind.*” Needless to say, the only confusion of mind was with Lenin who could not see that a handful of leaders being in power did not equal the working class running society.

Clearly, then, Bolshevism is hardly democratic. As Lenin argued (again in 1920):

“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 direct exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard ... for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.”

Why repeat the mistakes of the past? Why embrace a set of politics which confuses party power and class power? Luckily, few are — and so the distorted and inaccurate diatribes against anarchism by the representatives of the dying tradition of Bolshevism (not only the CPGB, we must stress, but also the likes of the UK’s SWP).

Nothing changes?

Perhaps it will be argued that past and is past. Today, the followers of Lenin and Trotsky have mended their way and are real democrats. Obviously this means ignoring a considerable slice of Bolshevik ideology and practice (Trotsky and Lenin, for example, both argued for party dictatorship until their deaths). It also means rejecting what they considered as a key lesson of the Russian Revolution. But never mind, let us see if Bolshevism has changed.

According to the *Weekly Worker*:

“The black bloc shunned the democracy of Genoa. Acting on their own agenda, they refused throughout to organise with other political and social centres in order to unite our efforts.”

As noted above, this comment ignores the majority of anarchists who did take part in the COBAS demonstrations. Written out of history, like so many before them, its useful to recall this little fact and save it from the Memory Hole. However, the key issue is that the Black Bloc (which only a minority of anarchists took part in) “shunned democracy” and “act[ed] on their own agenda.” This, of course, has happened before at anti-globalisation demos. In Prague a political tendency also shunned democracy and acted on their own efforts. Who was it? Let us quote the post-Prague issue of the **Weekly Worker**:

“Farcically, the organisers had decided to split the march into three, each with its own route and composition — blue (anarchist), pink (trade unions and left organisations) and yellow (NGOs and Jubilee 2000)...

“Come the march itself, the damage was partially repaired by the decision of a majority of the ‘pink’ contingent (with the SWP and its international sections to the fore) to simply veer off the agreed route. This pink section then partially merged with the yellow to advance on the conference.”

Clearly agreeing with this decision to act independently of the agreed plan, the CPGB expose themselves as hypocrites. The difference between what they did and supported in Prague and the actions of the Black Block in Genoa is narrow, but important. It is that the CPGB approved of it in Prague. As such, the *Weekly Workers* shows that Bolshevism has not changed — undemocratic actions are acceptable as long as its the Bolsheviks who are doing it.

Subordination or free agreement?

Lastly, Andy Hannah argues that as long as anarchists “remain separate from the class, and refuse to be subordinated to it politically and democratically, their impact will be entirely negative.” What does it mean to “subordinate” yourself “democratically” to “the [working] class”? Does it mean having a referendum of the whole working class every time you try to make a decision? What if “the class” decides that all anti-capitalist protestors should be shot? Or does it mean that we “subordinate” ourselves to the decisions of the majority of protestors? Does that mean holding a referendum of all protestors? Or does he mean a majority of the groups organising a

demonstration? As Prague showed, the CPGB will happily ignore any such decision if it feels like it. Ultimately, Hannah's comments mean very little in practice.

Anarchists, being (in general) working class people, are part of the class struggle and try to influence it. We do not, however, think that working with our fellow workers in our common struggles mean we "subordinate" ourselves. Quite the reverse, it means we co-operate with them. This means that we also discuss our ideas and try and convince others of their validity. That was why the likes of the Italian Anarchist Federation and other anarchist groups were in the COBAS march. Street fighting is far more noticeable than the slow unexciting work of convincing our friends, neighbours and workmates that anarchism is something they should consider and apply in their struggles and class organisations. But that is what most anarchists do and what most anarchists did in Genoa. They concentrated their efforts in the militant mass unions of the COBAS – which apply many anarchist ideas successfully in their struggles – but that does not get into the media – be it capitalist or so-called "communist." It is sad I have to note this, but the *Weekly Worker* is not the only "revolutionary" paper to ignore this aspect of anarchism in Italy (and across the world). A distortion may make good polemic, but you only defeat straw men arguments of your own invention.

Anarchists argue for free agreement between equals. We do not "subordinate" ourselves to others but will work with them. This means self-management within the anti-globalisation and labour movements, not hierarchy. As such, Hannah's vision of "subordination" gives the game away – we must, in good Leninist style, "subordinate" ourselves to a "democratically" elected leadership who make decisions for us. The same old division between leaders and led continues, except the new bosses claim to be "radical" and "revolutionary." Let us not forget Lenin's argument that the dictatorship of the leaders was the same as the dictatorship of the masses. Hardly a vision to inspire the struggle for a new society.

Little wonder more and more people are embracing anarchism – and why the likes of the *Weekly Worker* go to such lengths to distort the ideas of anarchism.

First Follow-up Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

I see that my article (**Weekly Worker** no. 396) has produced some debate. Circumstances have excluded my replying until now and space excludes answering every point.

Phil Kent (letters no. 398) argues that Lenin's "preferred model was for an open, legal, public organisation." Looking at the 21 conditions for entry into the Communist International we find a somewhat different position. The parties adhering to the Comintern were "obliged everywhere to create a parallel illegal organisation which at the decisive moment will help the Party to do its duty to the revolution." Needless to say, this illegal organisation would be the real controlling body, as it would have to be made up of trusted communists and its members could only be appointed from above. Open, legal, public? Closed, illegal and secret would be a better description. And supporters of Bolshevism attack Bakunin for his secrecy!

Kent argues that anarchists are not in favour of centralism, but rather seek a federal system. True, but federalism exists to co-ordinate joint activity and so anarchism does emphasise "the need for disciplined unity in action" but this unity is not imposed from above. It comes from below. He argues that anarchism raises "individualistic concerns of the various elements – with

the concomitant risk of encouraging narrow interests against universal ones.” The Bolsheviks partly justified their undermining of workers’ democracy precisely in these terms. By pure coincidence, the “universal” interests happened to coincide with the needs of Bolshevik power. Kent fails to understand that the centralised structures he stresses raises narrow interests over universal ones — those of the handful of people at the centre who have real power.

He argues that anarchism will be “built exclusively from the bottom up, as if the most underprivileged, desperate sections of society actually had all the answers.” Anarchists argue for a mass, working class revolution. If working class people do not have “all the answers” then who does? If socialism is not built from below, by the working class, then who builds it from above? Clearly the party. In this Kent echoes Lenin, who argued for “From above as well as from below” and that “renunciation of pressure also from above is anarchism.” In summary: “Pressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.”

As the experience of Bolshevism in power showed, “from above” was far more powerful. Indeed, it soon became party dictatorship, with the Bolsheviks arguing explicitly that democracy would mean the defeat of the revolution. This is best seen from March 1923, when the Central Committee summed up the lessons of the Revolution and stated that “the party of the Bolsheviks proved able to stand out fearlessly against the vacillations within its own class, vacillations which, with the slightest weakness in the vanguard, could turn into an unprecedented defeat for the proletariat.” Vacillations, of course, are expressed by democracy. Little wonder the statement rejects it: “The dictatorship of the working class finds its expression in the dictatorship of the party.”

This position, I stress, was being argued by all the leading Bolsheviks from at least 1919. Zinoviev argued it during the discussion on the Party at the Second Congress of the Comintern. Trotsky and Lenin did not disagree (quite the reverse!). Even after the rise of Stalin, the need for party dictatorship was stressed (the 1927 Platform of the Joint Opposition argued for “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”).

And Kent argues that *Anarchists* “do not try to build unity around the majority, but expect a revolutionary elite, taught principally by harsh experience, to force the majority into action”!

Does the working class have “all the answers”? Perhaps not, but they have more answers than a self-perpetuating elite who justify their power because the working class makes what *it* considers mistakes!

He finishes by arguing that the “Bolshevik programme was democratic.” In that case, why did they reject democracy at every turn? The Bolshevik programme, for example, called upon the creation of a Constituent Assembly. It was called and then disbanded as it did not have a Bolshevik majority. The same thing happened with soviets in the spring of 1918 (and the committees in the army as well as the factory committees). Kent argues that “it is true that under the impact of the White terror democracy collapsed.” Yet, this destruction of democracy occurred *before* the start of the Civil War. However, as this is a common argument, I will ignore that slight problem and address its logic.

To refute it, I need only quote Trotsky. In 1937, he argued that the “leaders of the CNT ... explained their open betrayal of the theory of anarchism by the pressure of ‘exceptional circumstances’ ... Naturally, civil war is not a peaceful and ordinary but an ‘exceptional circumstance.’ Every serious revolutionary organisation, however, prepares precisely for ‘exceptional circum-

stances.” If Kent’s argument *was* factually correct (and let me stress that it is not) then it is a damning indictment of Leninism. Not that Trotsky was in favour of democracy during a revolution. In the same year he was talking about the “objective necessity” of the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party.” Indeed, the “revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution.”

Kent echoes this position by stating that the CPGB “think the Bolsheviks were right to try and hang on to power in the hope of the revolution spreading, which offered the only real hope of a civilised outcome.” I thought it was the working class which was meant to have power under socialism? And he opens the door to party dictatorship over the working class by his comments. This *was* the logic of Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev, after all. And Kent wants us to believe that Bolshevism is “democratic”!

Eddie Ford’s article (no. 398) on Bakunin was truly terrible. The usual quoting of Bakunin from his pre-anarchist days (perhaps we can discredit Fascism by quoting Mussolini when he was a Marxist?). The usual quoting of anti-Bakunin “authorities” as if they were objective. And, of course, the usual disgraceful selective quoting from Bakunin’s works. Space excludes a detailed reply to his distorted account of Bakunin’s letters to Richards and Nechayev. I will just urge the reader to consult those letters and see for themselves how Ford distorts their message. Compare, for example, his comment that Bakunin thought that “‘official power’ (i.e., one which is accountable) is abhorrent, but ‘unofficial power’ is OK” with Bakunin’s statement that his group “*acts on the people only by the natural personal influence of its members who are not invested with any power.*”

Ford argues that “in comrade McKay’s article, we have echoes of Bakunin and his flat **rejection** of ‘the authority of the majority over the minority’ (i.e., democracy)” and yet does not answer the questions I raised. Until you do no one will take you seriously. Here is another one. From Ford’s comments, I take it he supports the actions of the anti-war minority in the SPD’s Reichstag faction in 1914? Rather than denounce the war and vote against war credits, they followed the “democratic will of the majority” and voted for them. Were they right to betray the working class and socialism? If not, why not?

Ford ends by stating: “In our view our anarchist comrades should also reconsider their dogmatic and essentially elitist rejection of democracy. Far from representing a barrier to genuine self-liberation – which must be the act of the majority – democracy is our main weapon against capitalism, bureaucracy and counterrevolution.”

Tell that to the Bolsheviks! They rejected democracy repeatedly when the majority rejected them. Rather than submit themselves to the “authority of the majority,” they raised the dictatorship of the party to an ideological truism. Yet he calls Anarchists elitists! Nor does he explain how working with others as equals is “elitist.” And accepting the decisions of a majority before you know what they are is the true dogma.

And what kind of “democracy” do you have in mind? As indicated in my original article, anarchists argue for working class self-management of the class struggle and revolution. Workers councils organised and run from below, based on assemblies who elect mandated and recallable delegates. It implies collective decision making and co-ordination of common affairs. It also means rejecting what Bakunin called “*the authoritarian conception of discipline*” which “*always signifies despotism on the one hand and blind automatic submission to authority on the other.*” Rather, we must organise a new kind of discipline, which is “*voluntary and intelligently understood*” and “*necessary whenever a greater number of individuals undertake any kind of collective*

*work or action.” This is “simply the voluntary and considered co-ordination of all individual efforts for a common purpose ... In such a system, power, properly speaking, no longer exists. Power is diffused to the collectivity and becomes the true expression of the liberty of everyone, the faithful and sincere realisation of the will of all ... this is the only true discipline, the discipline necessary for the organisation of freedom.”*In other words, self-management.

Rather than “control” authority, we must abolish it and manage our own affairs directly and collectively (because those in authority will have the effective power, not those “controlling” them). It seems ironic to call anarchists elitists when, in practice, “democracy” under both capitalism and “socialism” means running a society from the top-down by a handful of individuals who claim to know what the majority wants. Is a society where the decisions that affect millions are made by 19 people of the central committee “democratic”? If so, no wonder more and more people are embracing anarchism.

yours

Iain McKay

Second Follow-up Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

Apologies again for replying so late to the debate provoked by my letter.

Phil Kent (*Letters*, issue 406) states that the “position of the *Weekly Worker* is, however, to defend the democratic content of the Bolshevik programme, not any backsliding or compromises forced upon them by adverse circumstances.” However, the point is that it was jettisoned as soon as they got into power. Why did they manage to “backslide” so easily and without regret? Does that suggest a “democratic content”? Far from it. And it bodes ill that advocating the “dictatorship of the party” can be considered a “compromise”!

Kent argues that “prior to 1917, Lenin advocated the democratic dictatorship (i.e., rule) of the workers and the peasantry.” Actually, before and during 1917 Lenin equated the rule of the workers with rule by the Bolshevik party. After 1917, “many soviets” did *not* “simply [fall] part – and not due to any evil plan by the Bolsheviks” – rather, they were deliberately disbanded by force when the Bolsheviks lost soviet elections. By 1919, Lenin was arguing “Yes, it is a dictatorship of one party! This is what we stand for and we shall not shift from that position.” In 1920, Zinoviev was arguing at the Comintern that “the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.” The path is clear. Any political ideology that confuses party power with working class power will obviously see democracy as less than essential.

Kent states that I am quoting Trotsky “out of context” when I used him to refute the argument that “exceptional circumstances” can explain this change. Far from it. Anarchists have long argued that a social revolution would be marked by economic disruption and, therefore, to blame the degeneration of Bolshevism on the economy collapsing is hardly convincing. Unless you think a revolution is a walk in the park, you will have to recognise that it will face “exceptional circumstances.” That the followers of Bolshevism continue to justify the dictatorial policies of the Bolsheviks in these terms suggests a similar process will occur again. To argue as Kent does that “in the circumstances a dictatorship of the revolutionaries was the only way to maintain the

revolution” suggests that Bolshevism (unlike anarchism) sees working class power and freedom as something which can be left out (if need be) without harming the nature of the revolution.

He argues that “Trotsky criticised and tried to advise the Spanish revolution from its inception. The full meaning of his remarks only becomes apparent when you compare his programme with that of the anarchists.” Which raises the questions, what was his advice and what was his programme? In Trotsky’s words: “*Because the leaders of the CNT renounced dictatorship for themselves they left the place open for the Stalinist dictatorship.*” In case this is not clear enough, in the same letter he talked about the “*objective necessity*” of the “*revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party*,” explicitly **rejecting** the idea that “*the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toiling people without any party.*” He stressed that the “*revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution.*” [Writings 1936–37, pp. 513–4]

Now, “which was more likely to maximise the working class’s chances of success?” Party dictatorship (Trotsky) or a federation of self-managed workers’ councils (anarchism)? I will leave it up to the reader to decide!

Even after the rise of Stalin, Trotsky was still advocating party dictatorship! Does this suggest a “backslide” due to “exceptional circumstances”? Far from it! So, rather than defend the “democratic content” of Bolshevism, I would suggest investigating Bolshevik ideology and understand why it could so easily, and with no regrets, take the positions it did and, of course, alternatives like anarchism.

Kent then turns to anarchism. He argues that “working class democracy does and always has involved authority.” Far from it. The most radical forms of working class self-organisation have been based on self-management and the rejection of hierarchy (“authority”). Like Engels, he fails to understand revolution from a working class perspective. In class society, workers are subject to the authority of the boss and the state. Revolution involves working class people making their own decisions within self-managed class organisations and so it means the destruction of authority. As the Russia shows, a revolution which creates a “revolutionary” authority soon ends up seeing it use coercion against the very class it claims to represent!

Kent wonders how my “plan for bottom up democracy through revolutionary councils electing mandated and recallable delegates ... square with [my] anarchist theory?” Quite easily. By governing ourselves we exclude others governing us. He supposes that “anarchists would refuse to be bound by votes not to their liking. What a jaundiced view of human collectivity and reason.” What *is* jaundiced is an ideology that cannot envision human co-operation without “coercion” or being subject to hierarchical power (“authority”). Are human beings really so backward that they cannot work together without the master’s stick? Luckily, anarchism has a more positive perspective on humanity.

Kent comments that “fear of authority leads not to liberation but to paranoia.” Only someone with little faith in humanity could dismiss the desire for participation and accountability at the heart of anarchism in such terms. It also reminds me of Trotsky’s argument that workers should not fear state appointed managers and officers because the Bolsheviks were in power. Elections, mandates and recall (“fear of authority”) are essential to ensure that we do not have dictatorship. History shows that it is not “paranoia” to oppose top-down, centralised power and to insist that working class people govern themselves – it is liberation.

Socialism must be based on freedom (both individual and collective) if it is to succeed and that implies collective self-discipline. It means recognising that there is a difference between co-

operation and coercion. It also means recognising that the majority can be wrong. I look forward to Kent explaining why the anti-war minority in the German Social Democrats was right to betray socialism by submitting to the pro-war majority in 1914. And the fate of Social Democracy confirmed the reason why anarchists “stand aside from democratic politics” – participation in bourgeois politics destroys the radicalism of those involved.

Kent argues that “all democracy is a form of the state.” What an impoverished perspective on human social relations and organisation! Really, “democracy” takes many forms, the vast majority of them not remotely state-like (i.e. based on centralised power in the hands of a few). As he himself recognised by noting that democracy will “continue to exist in a classless society but not as a form of state.” Ironically, Kent is arguing that self-management *is* possible, but only *after* the revolution. I will note the obvious contradiction – how do people become capable of self-government post-revolution if they do not practice it now and during a revolution?

Democracy, he stresses, “is the only viable revolutionary programme for a class that wants human liberation.” Surely communism is the only such “viable” programme? Statist “democracy” simply becomes a “pseudo-democratic” form that maintains minority power (hence bourgeois and Bolshevik support for it). As such, Kent is correct to argue that “democracy” is a “revolutionary class programme” – that of the bourgeoisie. We can do better than them, surely? Can we not envision a programme based on achieving *real* human libertarian by the abolition of wage labour and the state by self-management (i.e. a system of workers’ councils).

Perhaps this explains why Kent argued that Bolshevism in 1917 could “only succeed” if exchange would be organised “between town and country whereby the peasants would ... steadily become proletarianised.” “Proletarianised”? I thought the aim of communism was to abolish capitalism? If the peasants become “proletarianised” then they are separated from the means of production. Like Lenin, does he see “socialism” as universal wage slavery to the state, without workers’ self-management of production? Like his defence of “democracy,” does this comment indicate the (state) capitalist nature of Bolshevism?

Kent argues that, for me, “the greatest evil is the state.” How boring, the usual Marxist invention that anarchists view the state as the “greatest evil”! Anarchists see many evils in the world (e.g. capitalism) and do not say one is greater than the rest – we aim to abolish all of them! Similarly, anarchists reject the simplistic Marxist idea that the state is “an armed machine.” This fails to address the *real* issue, namely that of power. Anarchists from Bakunin onward have taken it as a truism that a revolution would need to be defended. The real question is who has the power. Is it the working class, in its own class organisations, or will it be a “revolutionary” government, a small minority of leaders at the top using the state machine to impose its own concept on socialism onto the masses? Bolshevism, both in theory and practice, clearly supports the latter. This explains why so many people are becoming anarchists.

Yours,
Iain McKay

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho
The Weekly Worker, Anarchists and Genoa
December 22, 2008

Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com
A critique of Leninist attacks on anarchism after the Genoa demonstrations of 2001. Corrects factual mistakes and refutes assertions that anarchists are “anti-democratic” (while pointing out that Leninism is hardly democratic itself). Also includes two letters which appeared after the article was published in The Weekly Worker itself (which was amazing in itself!).

usa.anarchistlibraries.net