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Workplace Occupations and Anarchism

Anarcho

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As part of our agitation in the student protests, anarchists have raised the necessity of direct action such as occupations. This has a wider application than students and anarchists have long argued that as part of any social revolution workers would need to occupy their workplaces.

In this, we are part of a long and glorious tradition of militant workers struggle. This can be seen from a recent SWP book on this subject imaginatively entitled *Occupy!* The book starts with the September 1920 Italian Occupations and, unsurprisingly, it forgets to mention that it was the Italian anarcho-syndicalists and anarchists (like Armando Borghi and Errico Malatesta) who suggested the tactic to begin with in March of that year (see section A.5.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ*). This is not surprising, as the SWP regularly write libertarians out of history, particularly when they do not fit their “anarchists are petit-bourgeois individualist elitists” nonsense.

Significantly, an *anarchist* book on workplace occupations would start long before 1920. Ten years before, leading Voltairine

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de Cleyre argued in *Mother Earth* that “the weapon of the future will be the general strike” and that it is not clear that “it must be the strike which will *stay in* the factory, not *go out*?” One “which will guard the machines and allow no scab to touch them? which will organise, not to inflict deprivation on itself, but on the enemy? which will take over industry and operate it for the workers, not for franchise holder, stockholders, and officeholders?” Five years before de Cleyre, Lucy Parsons pronounced at the IWW’s founding convention that the “conception of the strike of the future is not to strike and go out and starve, but to strike and remain in and take possession of the necessary property of production.”

These ideas can be traced back further. Kropotkin repeated stressed the importance of expropriation during a social revolution (see *Words of a Rebel*, *The Conquest of Bread* or *Act for Yourselves*). Bakunin’s comments from 1868 also suggest the occupation of workplaces: “All productive capital and instruments of labour [will] be confiscated for the benefit of toilers associations, which will have to put them to use in collective production.”

While these are not an explicit call for occupations as part of a strike, that flows naturally from such a vision of social revolution. Parsons, de Cleyre, Borghi and Malatesta were building upon and applying these ideas. We can, and must, do the same today. After all, turning a strike committee and assembly in an occupied workplace into the decision making bodies of a self-managed workplace is a logical progression:

“The struggle against hierarchy teaches us not only how to be anarchists but also gives us a glimpse of what an anarchist society would be like, what its initial framework could be and the experience of managing our own activities which is required for such a society to function successfully ...

“Thus, for all anarchists, the structural framework of an anarchist society was created by the class

struggle, by the needs of working class people to resist oppression, exploitation and hierarchy ... The necessity of practising mutual aid and solidarity to survive under capitalism (as in any other hostile environment) makes working people and other oppressed groups organise together to fight their oppressors and exploiters. Thus the co-operation necessary for a libertarian socialist society, like its organisational framework, would be generated by the need to resist oppression and exploitation under capitalism. The process of resistance produces organisation on a wider and wider scale which, in turn, can become the framework of a free society as the needs of the struggle promote libertarian forms of organisation such as decision making from the bottom up, autonomy, federalism, mandated delegates subject to instant recall and so on.

“For example, a strikers’ assembly would be the basic decision-making forum in a struggle for improved wages and working conditions. It would create a strike committee to implement its decisions and send delegates to spread the strike. These delegates inspire other strikes, requiring a new organisation to co-ordinate the struggle. This results in delegates from all the strikes meeting and forming a federation (a workers’ council). The strikers decide to occupy the workplace and the strike assemblies take over the means of production. The strike committees become the basis for factory committees which could administer the workplaces, based on workers’ self-management via workplace assemblies (the former strikers’ assemblies). The federation of strikers’ delegates becomes the local communal council, replacing

the existing state with a self-managed federation of workers' associations. In this way, the class struggle creates the framework of a free society." (section I.2.3, *An Anarchist FAQ*)

Strangely, the SWP book fails to mention the workplace takeovers during the Russian Revolution. This is probably because the Bolsheviks *opposed* workers seizing their workplaces (because it was a petit-bourgeois anarchist tactic, needless to say). Rather the correct Marxist position was that the so-called workers' state should expropriate all capital and the workers should wait until that is done (presumably in the cold shut-down workplaces).

Unsurprisingly, as discussed in section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ*, when the Bolsheviks finally got round to doing that the central body charged with doing it had no idea no many factories were under its jurisdiction, whether the workers already had taken them over nor what to do with them in terms of input or output. In short, it was a complete mess, produced by ideology and terrible conditions (conditions, it must be stressed, which Bolshevik ideology helped make *worse*).

The anarchist arguments for local action and federalism to coordinate such self-activity really is the only way to change society was confirmed – centralised bodies, as Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin continually argued, were not up to the task.

The idea of workplace occupations can be added to the long list of anarchist positions which have proven valid by working class struggle. It joins workers councils, the general strike, mandated and recallable delegates, federations of communes, and a host of other ideas which are accepted by the likes of the SWP but were first advocated by anarchists – and usually dismissed and mocked by Marxists before workers apply them in struggle!