Organising against Capitalism

Andrew Flood

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Over the last few years I have taken part in many forums which have discussed the collapse of the left, the changes in capitalism and the need for a new opposition. Not all of these have been exclusively anarchist, I attended the 'Intercontinental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism' organised by the Zapatistas in Chiapas in the summer of 1996 for instance, but most have been held by anarchists in Britain or Ireland. A common feature of these events is a recognition that everything has changed in the last decade, that many of yesterday's answers are discredited today and that there is a need for the construction of a new movement. Such discussions cannot remain on the theoretical level, we must start to put these ideas into practice in building a new anti-capitalist movement.

Seven years ago the Berlin wall came down, bringing to a definitive end the period of history begun by the Russian revolution in 1917. Since the 1950's this was known as the Cold War. To supporters of the Western status quo the end of this period was a signal that history had ended. Not in the sense that nothing interesting would ever happen again but rather that the most perfect model of society had been found and tested in the form of the 'western democracies'. Now it was only a question of allowing time for the rest of the world to catch up. The future was rosy since the 'peace dividend' along with the new markets and productive capacity of eastern Europe would usher in a new era of prosperity.

Five years ago the peace dividend collapsed with the 'war' against Iraq. A war that was no more than a high tech light show for western viewers, but which led to the loss of up to 200,000[1] relatives and friends for those in Iraq. Parallel to this, civil war was brewing in Yugoslavia, and the economies of eastern Europe were collapsing, resulting in widespread poverty, civil war and — particularly for the old — a dramatically reduced life expectancy. The 'New World Order' that was coming into being, we were assured, would indeed introduce global prosperity but first some belt tightening and the removal of 'new Hitlers' was required. This of course required the maintenance of a strong military!

Three years ago this 'New World Order' received its first real resistance when rebellion[2] broke out in one of its show pieces of improvement and modernisation. Mexico was a 'model' of how developing countries which started to move from a state led to a free market economy could also reach the 'end of history' and join the first world. The Zapatista rising blew away this smoke screen to reveal an end of history that excluded most of Mexico's population. The period since has been scattered with examples of capitalism not only failing to provide for people's needs but, more importantly, people recognising this and organising on a mass scale against it. This resistance has spread to the very western countries which were supposed to have moved beyond the need for the population to take to the streets to oppose the state. History, we have learnt, is not over yet.

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[1] This casualty figure is the maximum estimate for actual war deaths I have seen. It is a sign of the continued acceptance of the rationale behind the war in the West that no-one actually seems to either know or care how many died on the Iraqi side, or that perhaps 500,000 Iraqi children have died since the end of the war due to the combined effects of destruction at the time of the war and sanctions since.

[2] The EZLN rising of 1 Jan. 1994 in Chiapas; see Red & Black Revolution No. 1 for an analysis of the Zapatistas.

Dead and buried

State socialism has died as an attractive alternative to anyone, that much is a welcome truth. The need for an alternative to capitalism continues to be strong. Supporters of state socialism have become dwindling cadres of various Leninist groups, 'New' social democrats indistinguishable from conservatives and the occasional dinosaur whose brain has yet to recognise that there is a difference between sloganeering about 'socialism from below' and actually organising in such a manner. The end of these organisations — which mostly served as barriers to workers organising themselves — is welcome, but there is a price to pay. The weakness of libertarian ideas in Britain and Ireland means the possibility of an alternative to capitalism died with these fake 'alternatives' in the minds of many activists. This is not terminal but the message that alternatives to capitalism, other than the state run (non-) alternatives that were on offer, exist will have to be widely spread.

Another legacy of the domination of the authoritarian left is that we are left with a tradition of working class struggle being almost immediately tied to a particular political organisation. Workplace struggles, for instance, take place through the organisational structures of the trade unions but the left, rather than encourage self-activity in economic struggle and the extension of this self-activity to the political arena, have instead sought to tie the unions to the Labour party. This is of course just a reflection of the left's strategy on the economic level which, instead of encouraging workers to take direct control of their struggles, have instead directed the attention of militants towards electing left wing bureaucrats to run the union on 'their' behalf.

This pattern extends outside the workplace as well, in Britain in recent years we have seen an often obscene struggle between different left groups as to who can control working class militancy against fascism and racism. Campaign after campaign arises that pretends to be independent but on examination is obviously controlled by one organisation alone. Even where joint work occurs, large amounts of energy may be squandered in attempts to control the decision making structures of campaigns. Many activists have become demoralised and then exhausted by these bureaucratic squabbles.

The party and the class

This pattern of organisation occurred because the key thing for the authoritarian left was the relative strength of their organisation and not the level of self-activity of the class or even the strength of the class. Historical and current defeats of the working class were analysed as being due to the absence of a strong enough vanguard that was equipped with the right slogans, rather than due to a weakness of self-organisation and a reliance on minority leadership by the class. An excellent recent example of this logic was provided by Tony Cliff, the leader of one of the surviving Leninist groups, the British Socialist Workers Party. In 1993 mass demonstrations took place all over Britain aimed at preventing the Tories closing the remaining coal mines. These demonstrations however remained firmly under the control of union bureaucrats and Labour MPs with workers playing the role of a stage army to be marched up and down hills under their control.

To the SWP though, the weakness of this movement was that they did not have enough members to control it. As its leader, Tony Cliff, said at the time

"If we had 15,000 members in the SWP and 30,000 supporters the 21 October miners' demonstration could have been different. Instead of marching round Hyde Park socialists could have taken 40 or 50,000 people to parliament. If that had happened the Tory MPs wouldn't have dared to vote with Michael Heseltine. The government would have collapsed."[3]

This sort of logic, which can only see the strength of the struggles of the working class in terms of the strength of the party, is precisely the same logic that kept Leninists defending policies they knew to be rubbish year after year. It was what kept Communist Parties all over the world together as the Russian tanks rolled over the working class of Hungary in 1956 and of Czechoslovakia in 1968. To go further back again it was what caused the Workers' Opposition[4], in the process of being purged from the Bolshevik Party in 1921, to be to the forefront of attacking the revolutionaries who had risen in Kronstadt. This despite the fact that these sailors they were massacring had a programme far more in common with their platform than that of Lenin and Trotsky, who directed the massacres!

This is putting the party first, so well described by Trotsky in 1921 when he rounded on the Workers' Opposition declaring

"They have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have placed 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 !".[5]

This is the logic behind the decades of sabotage of working class struggles by Leninists, justified by the recruiting of a few extra people into the party. This is also why gaining positions of power is so central to Leninist doctrine, so that through these positions they can control struggles — even if they lose popularity within them.

With the attraction of 'actually existing socialism' or 'degenerated workers' states' consigned to the dustbin of history, many Leninists have reconsidered their position and abandoned Leninism. Indeed it seems just about everywhere discussion groups have formed made up of ex-members of Leninist and Social-democratic organisations trying to sketch out a new left. So far these initiatives have tended to run around in circles or to partially re-invent the wheel. Few appear to have considered anarchism seriously as having already answered, at least in part, many of the 'new' questions they are now puzzling over. Sometimes because they have judged anarchism on the poor state of the local movement, but commonly due to a combination of a fear of breaking with the last idol, Marx, alongside a failure to understand that the organisational purpose of anarchist groups is completely different in aim and content to that with which they are familiar. If you are familiar with an organisational practice that constantly seeks to take things over then the anarchist method of organisation can seem worse than useless.

Anarchist organisations exist not to obtain leading positions in the organisations of the working class, but rather to achieve influence for anarchist ideas. From this point of view there is

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[3] Quoted in 'The SWP and the Crisis of British Capitalism', 1992

[4] A faction within the Bolshevik party that was based on the unions and demanded a return to some workplace democracy. The main result was that factions were then banned in the Party!

[5] R.V. Daniels 'The Conscience of the Revolution' Pp. 145–6

absolutely no point in loyalty towards an organisation whose ideas you do not agree with. The anarchist organisation should seek neither to absorb the whole class under its leadership nor to simply become the class by recruiting every worker regardless of their understanding of anarchism. Rather our organisation(s) need to be nuclei for anarchist ideas and organisation that will be active in all the struggles of our class and so carry these ideas into and between these struggles. Our aim must not be the creation of one big anarchist organisation through which all the struggles of our class will be conducted, but rather aiding the growth of a tradition of working class organisation that is based on direct democracy and independent of all political organisations.

The role of the anarchist organisation is not to compete in the destructive rat race for control of working class organisations, but rather to seek to undermine the rat race itself by creating an alternative tradition of self-organisation of struggles. Such a tradition cannot be built either through attempting to guide struggles within anarchist organisations (the classic tradition of anarcho-syndicalism) or by withdrawing from broad struggles to create narrow anarchist dominated groups operating on the edges of them. Anarchists must be wherever workers are entering into struggle, attempting to influence the direction and organisational strategy of that struggle towards self-organisation. In practice this means anarchist organisations must encourage their members to join and become active in organisations of working class struggle like Trade Unions and community campaigns despite the fact that we may share nothing in common with the leadership of these organisations.

The struggle goes on

In recent years a host of grassroots movements have demonstrated not only that the class struggle is very much alive but, on single issues at least, capitalism can be defeated. Even in Ireland the struggle against Water Charges shows the continued power of ordinary people. The December 1995 French strikes against neoliberalism demonstrated the potential for these struggles to begin to develop an alternative vision of society. 1996 saw mass strikes and demonstrations in Canada, Germany, and parts of Australia where demonstrators also stormed the parliament building. If such movements are limited to being protest movements against aspects of capitalism, they also offer a very positive strategy as they were based on direct action that frequently took them outside the narrow confines of protest allowed under capitalism.

Yet it was only France which showed the potential in such struggles for the growth of anarchism. In the aftermath of the December strikes all French anarchist groups reported a marked increase in interest in anarchism and the anarcho-syndicalist CNT-F[6] grew from just over 1,000 members to 6,000 by late summer of 1996. France is also where the struggle is moving from a defensive to an offensive one, the lorry drivers' strike which brought the country to a halt in November of 1996 demanded a lowering of the retirement age and working week. Contacts with French anarchists since December 1995 have indicated that a new mood is entering the workers' movement there, large numbers of people are talking about different ways of organising society.

In Britain and Ireland[7] however, while anarchists have continued to play a major role in local struggles throughout the 1990's, they have completely failed to break out of the very small circles

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[6] This is split into two sections, the section with its HQ in Paris was expelled from the IWA-AIT at its December 1996 Congress.

[7] This article is referring to the anarchist movement in Britain and Ireland except where I state otherwise. This is the area where I am very familiar with the internal life of organised anarchism but from what I am told similar prob-

of activists they relate to. What is more disturbing in many cases is the lack of interest in or discussion of doing so. Rather than looking for ways of winning numbers of people to anarchism, many groups have become content with providing a service to local struggles on the one hand or on the other providing commentaries for the left in general on how such struggles are (or are not) good, bad or indifferent.

In terms of national organisations, of those that existed in 1990 in Britain and Ireland (WSM[8], Organise!, ACF[9], Sol-Fed/DAM[10], Class War[11]) none have grown significantly although we can note the addition of the SFA[12] and the self destruction of the AWG[13]. Excuses of course can be provided, some good, some indifferent but in an overall sense the complete failure of any of these organisations to win a significant number of new people to anarchism, despite both the potential in terms of struggle and the redundancy of the alternatives has to say something. The fact that the same experience has been reflected in the USA, Australia and New Zealand underlines that something, somewhere is badly wrong. The question is what?

Where are we going?

This failure in a period which saw anarchism proved 'right' in many respects should cause anarchists to pause and think. Does it reflect a fundamental failure in Anarchism, perhaps an inability to deal with the conditions of the modern world? Or is it something to do with the way we have been organising over the last few years? If we are serious about revolutionary change and do not want to be just a permanent protest movement, we need to confront this question head on. The easy answer of course is to blame it all on the international circumstances we find ourselves in, the general swing to the right found throughout society.

According to this perspective the failure of the organised anarchist movement to grow[14] in the post-Cold War period is due to the lack of opportunity. Circumstances, which include the collapse of Soviet style 'socialism' and the boost this gave to capitalism, mean that very few people believe there can be an alternative to capitalism. From this point of view there is little anarchists can do except wait for workers to enter into mass struggle and re-discover the need for an alternative to capitalism.

Yet in terms of anarchism a strategy of waiting for 'the workers' to enter into prolonged periods of struggle before expecting large numbers to become anarchists is deeply flawed. The level of struggle itself brings things to a head long before this process can be completed as capitalism, rather than waiting for the revolutionary movement to gather its strength, will precipitate the

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lems apply in the U.S., Australia and New Zealand. These countries all share a common tradition of union and political organising, dominated by struggles for the leadership of the movement and where self-organisation of struggle has seldom progressed beyond a slogan.

[8] Workers Solidarity Movement (publishers of Red & Black Revolution)

[9] Anarchist Communist Federation

[10] British section of the IWA, now called Solidarity Federation, formerly the Direct Action Movement

[11] Although including Class War in a listing of national anarchist organisations is problematical as they keep changing their minds about whether they are or are not anarchists.

[12] Scottish Federation of Anarchists

[13] The Anarchist Workers Group which self-destructed in 1992 when it abandoned anarchism, changed its name to Socialism from Below and then vanished.

[14] There has been an increase in interest in anarchism as a set of ideas but in English language countries this has not translated into a significant growth in organisation.

revolution by attacking first. This was what happened in 1936 in Spain when the majority of the capitalists opted for backing a military coup rather than allowing the anarchists to continue to gain in numbers and influence. During the Spanish revolution many anarchists laid their failure to complete the revolution on the not unreasonable[15] grounds that the anarchists, being a minority[16], could not make the revolution for fear of creating an 'anarchist' dictatorship. If the majority of an organisation of anarcho-syndicalists with over one million members could feel this unprepared after a couple of decades in existence as a mass organisation, the suggestion that we can afford to wait for the next revolutionary wave before growing is perhaps not the wisest of strategies.

Many of those at the forefront of the struggle in Spain were aware of this problem, even in the anarchist stronghold of Barcelona on the outbreak of the revolution. They were aware of how the moment of revolution is always forced prematurely on revolutionaries rather than being something they can hold back until the time is ripe

> *"There was total disorder. We formed a commission and thereafter all arms were handed only to revolutionary organisations … 10,000 rifles, I calculate as well as some machine guns, were taken. That was the moment when the people of Barcelona were armed; that was the moment, in consequence, when power fell into the masses' hands. We of the CNT hadn't set out to make the revolution but to defend ourselves, to defend the working class. To make the social revolution, which needed to have the whole of the Spanish proletariat behind it, would take another ten years…but it wasn't we who chose the moment; it was forced on us by the military who were making the revolution, who wanted to finish off the CNT once and for all.."*[17]

This is one of the key questions anarchist have to tackle in the aftermath of the Spanish revolution, for it should be clear that far from being a combination of exceptional circumstances the environment in which the revolution took place is typical of the environment all revolutions have taken place in. Unlike the Leninists we cannot advance a strategy where a small minority of activists, prepared with the right ideas before a revolutionary upsurge, can then manoeuvre themselves into the leadership of such an upsurge. A successful anarchist revolution requires not only huge numbers of conscious anarchists but also a massive confidence throughout the working class in its ability to immediately move to take over the running of the workplaces from the local to the global level. Such a confidence can only come from experience of self-managing struggle in the years before the revolution. Here and now anarchists cannot be content to exist in isolated propaganda or activist groups but must seek out ways to draw in wider and wider layers of society.

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[15] Not unreasonable in the context of syndicalism where either the union is capable of taking over the economy on its own or it is not. In terms of non-syndicalist anarchist politics, however, the idea of completing the revolution on a non-syndicalist basis through the creation of other organs of workers' self-management was open. By 1937 a sizeable minority of the CNT were willing to explore this possibility in the form of a revolutionary junta elected (and recallable) by the CNT and CGT workers.

[16] The CNT had about one million members at the start of the revolution, this may have risen as high as two million by 1937.

[17] CNT textile worker Andreu Capdevila, quoted in 'Blood of Spain' P.72

Playing a waiting game

We could hope for revolutionary periods that last decades but historically such periods are far shorter and revolutions begin when the revolutionaries are in a small minority. It seems more sensible to lose our complacency about being small 'guardians of the faith' now, while awaiting mass upsurge, and look for ways to win over at least a sizeable and militant minority in the period before the next revolutionary upsurge. For when it comes we need to have the numbers and confidence to make sure it does not stop short of overthrowing capitalism but also goes on to defeat the authoritarian left that will argue for a new state.

This means organising alongside our class in the here and now, despite whatever differences we may have with the way unions or community campaigns are structured. Our role in the unions or community organisations must be to bring anarchist ideas into them and gain an audience for these ideas by being the best activists. Anarchist methods have to be shown to work in people's day to day lives. We cannot gain this audience by carping from the outside about flaws in their structure and refusing to involve ourselves until these flaws are spontaneously rectified. The authoritarian tradition of organisation will not be changed by small numbers of activists criticising from outside. Instead it will be eroded over time if anarchists enter struggles and argue for different methods of organisation as the opportunities arise.

It is useful to consider why it seems necessary to make these arguments, ones that should be self-evident. To start answering this question it is useful to examine the forces that created the anarchist movement in the English speaking world.

Anarchism re-emerged in the English speaking countries in the post-WWII period in two forms, one was a kind of liberal radical democracy that paid lip service to the historical movement and the movement elsewhere but never really had all that much to do with anarchism. Essentially it combined a utopian wish for a nicer world with a rejection of any and all of the methods needed to achieve such a world. It comprised a minority of those who called themselves anarchists but received the bulk of the attention of the media because it included a number of prominent intellectuals.

Secondly there were groups formed by activists who were inspired by anarchism as a fighting ideology that seemed to avoid the pitfalls of Leninism. The label 'class struggle anarchist' is sometimes used to distinguish this second set from the liberals above. But because these groups were a tiny minority in a much larger social democratic or Leninist left they came to adapt themselves almost completely around the issues and practices of that left. They tended to define themselves not in a positive fashion but in a negative one, against some aspect of the existing left, so they would

1. seek to build 'real revolutionary unions' rather than social democratic ones

2. write a funny and aggressive paper rather than a boring and complaining one

3. expose the authoritarian practices of the left

4. not bore people with talking about politics but 'do stuff' instead.

Cold War Culture

This is part of the cultural legacy of the Cold War for anarchists, an attitude where the idea of mass national and international organisations may get lip service but very little energy or enthusiasm goes into constructing them. Another legacy is that many anarchists have come through the destructive mill of Leninist politics and are nervous about seriously addressing organisational issues in case this is seen as 'latent' Leninism.

This culture also arose in part as a reaction, often by ex-members, to the manipulative practices and authoritarian internal organisation of the left in general. This also resulted in a tendency to shy away from anything too closely connected with recruitment, spreading ideas (paper sales/ public meetings) or trying to advocate a strategy for a particular struggle (as opposed to criticising someone else's).

This culture was never useful but it is entirely useless for anarchists today in a situation where there are a vanishingly small number of authoritarian left outfits to expose or be mistaken for. There is a very serious need to junk a lot of the prejudices and traditions developed in the long years under Leninism and initiate a positive, outgoing, organising and growing movement to take its place. We can no longer be satisfied with being a 'pure' opposition, we must begin to move into a position where anarchist ideas lead struggles rather than simply explaining why they are failing or will in the future be sold out.

In Britain it may be said that 'sure the national organisations have not grown but locally there are far more anarchists around and involved in stuff'. This might be true but while these groups may be useful in aiding struggles they are very limited in building a wider anti-capitalist movement. Where this is discussed local groups tend to repeat on a local scale the problems of 'national' organisations (discussed below). This does however raise a second question, why do so many otherwise active anarchists reject not only the existing national organisations, but it would appear organisation at the national level altogether?

A large part of this must be the experience of national organisations, which in most cases has been negative. There is a sharp tendency in many countries for national organisations to become little more than propaganda groups which criticise but are seldom seen as doing anything, while local groups become the centre for activity but seldom manage to develop strategies for promoting anarchism. So while national organisations are associated with sectarian feuding, at least local organisations are seen as doing something, even if that 'something' isn't particularly coherent. This division is disastrous as it separates theory and action into two separate spheres and commonly two separate and mutually suspicious sets of people. It is impossible to build a movement on this basis and until organisations arise that are capable of bringing together theory and action such groups that exist will be condemned to continuing irrelevance.

Make love not war

This conflict is also avoidable. While there is a clear and pressing need for coherent national (and international) organisations, this in no way precludes anarchists coming together on a geographical basis to work on common projects. In fact local co-operation between organisations with political differences would seem to be essential in preventing or overcoming sectarianism. There are many projects that need considerable resources but don't require more then a minimum of

political agreement, for instance the opening and running of centres and bookshops, that will obviously benefit from such co-operation and indeed, in areas where anarchism is weak, cannot take place without it. Likewise joint activity around campaigns will commonly be possible and make the anarchist input very much stronger. The holding of regional gatherings of anarchists can only help the flow of information.

Almost everyone's experience of first encountering the left is to find the divisions and rows that go on frustrating and puzzling. 'Why can't everyone just come together and be more effective?' is a common plea of newcomers. With time you understand that many of the differences are actually important, and indeed from the perspective of vanguard organisations it is a central part of their politics to see similar organisations as the biggest problem because they are 'false prophets'. Anarchists have been influenced by this practise too but it is entirely nonsensical for us. Where we disagree we are competing on the terrain of ideas alone, we are not competing for leadership positions in working class organisations. So adopting the sectarianism of the vanguardists towards each other is suicidal and has to be overcome. As long as anarchist groups are on the fringes of society this sort of behaviour is likely to continue. It's both a product of and a cause of being on the fringe. But revolutionary change requires that we move into the centre of society.

The anarchist organisation(s) has to become a centre for struggle in today's society. In this way, although it may not be possible to win a majority of workers, it should be the case that a very large minority have either worked alongside or in anarchist organisations and so a large minority have experience of libertarian practice and know it can work. The organisation needs to not just preach the need for social revolution but organise the fight against the day to day grind of capitalism now.

This implies an organisation quite different from any that currently exist. The advantage of the syndicalist method is that, where it can be applied, it results in an organisation that is based very much on day to day struggles in the workplace or, at a more advanced stage, in the community. If the limitations[18] of anarcho-syndicalism have caused us to reject it as an adequate organisational tool, this should not prevent us from recognising its strength in creating genuine, mass, grassroots organisations.

Stop and think

Let us stop for a moment and consider what level of organisation we're talking of. We mean not only activists on every street and in every workplace but social centres in every neighbourhood, weekly or even daily papers with circulations in the tens or hundreds of thousands, radio stations... and all this of sufficient strength to resist the state oppression that will come before the revolution. It must have activists who are known and trusted in all the struggles occurring throughout the class.

What is the role of our organisations instead of being social clubs or talking shops? That role must be to become a 'leadership of ideas' within the struggles and organisation of the working class. That is for the organisation to gain the credibility and acceptance, so that when it speaks people listen and seriously consider what it has to say. At the moment, particular individuals within a group often succeed in doing this on an individual level by becoming known as a 'good

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[18] See the article Syndicalism: Its strengths and weaknesses in Red & Black Revolution No. 1

head', with whom it is worth talking to about a new situation in a struggle. This may give a certain local influence to that individual, but it does not give a wider influence to the organisation, or lead people to realise that it is anarchism as a set of ideas that is worth looking at as the motivation of this 'good head'.

If the organisation hopes to influence the struggles and ideas in the class, it must speak with an agreed voice. This idea was put forward in the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists as the need for "Tactical and Theoretical Unity".

Because it is difficult to talk of a leadership of ideas because of the negative connection most anarchists draw between the word leadership and authoritarian politics, I want to explain the term and then move onto discussing a practical example of what this means in practice.

Bourgeois politics is based around the concept of the 'leadership of position'. This means that you get to a particular position and, because you are in this position, you then get to implement your ideas. The position may be that of a politician or a union bureaucrat but the basic idea remains the same, the position gives you power over people. In fact, once in power you don't even have to pay any attention to those you claim to represent. It is not unusual for this sort of leader to claim some sort of special understanding which the people he represents lack because they lack the time or information to form this judgement. Obviously anarchists completely reject this form of leadership.

However Leninists deliberately confuse this form of leadership with a second form, that of the 'leadership of ideas', into the general term 'leadership'.[19] Many anarchists make the mistake of accepting this deliberate confusion and so end up rejecting or feeling uncomfortable with the idea of becoming a 'leadership of ideas'[20]. This is the source of confusion, not just in politics, but also on more general questions like that of the role of specialists in the workplace (e.g. surgeons, architects etc.).

What the leadership of ideas means is not that the organisation holds any special position but rather that it has built up a record of being 'right' or 'sensible' so people are inclined to take its advice seriously and act on it. Its power lies solely in its ability to convince people. But obviously to develop such a reputation, it must be able to speak with a common voice in its publications and at strategy meetings. Otherwise, although individuals may develop this reputation the organisation cannot!

Follow the leader?

So why do we need to develop organisations that are seen as a 'leadership of ideas'? There are two answers to this. The first is that it is a bad thing for this development to take place at the individual level as it tends to lead to informal cults of the individual.

The second though is more profound. The world is a big place, if we ever hope to see an anarchist revolution we will require to be able to address the majority of the population with libertarian ideas. It's unlikely the capitalist media will ever allow any individual the sort of

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[19] Which is why we must be careful not to imagine that the Leninist concept of democratic centralism, which means no more than democratically selecting who gets to decide party policy, has anything in common with the anarchist concept of theoretical and tactical unity.

[20] Bakunin discussed the difference in the two forms as being two different forms of meaning of the word authority; i.e. to be an authority on something as opposed to being in authority over something.

media access this would require (and, even if they did, this — for the reasons outlined above — would not be a good thing). So this is going to have to be achieved on an organisational basis.

There are two reasons for joining an organisation. The first is to meet like minded people and in the end tends to result in a small organisation that consists of a circle of friends (and feuding partners). The second is because you believe that the organisation is trying to achieve what you are trying to achieve, that the parts of it you can't see (because of geographical separation or just complexity) will act in a similar way to how you will act, that in the event of a crisis you will then be part of a large number of people acting in a common way on the basis of prior agreement. All these require tactical and theoretical unity.

The main misunderstanding which arises from discussion of the need for theoretical and tactical unity is that an organisation which has such agreement will consider itself to hold the 'true' ideas of anarchism and all others as heretics. It's not hard to see where this idea emerges from, again from the culture of the left and the 57 feuding brands of Leninism. But for anarchists such an attitude has to be impermissible. It is also obviously incompatible with the role of the organisation I argued for earlier — that of being a nucleus of ideas and activists within the struggles of the working class rather than something which seeks to become the formal leadership of the class.

A final area of controversy around this idea is the surrender of individual sovereignty it entails. The original 'Platformists' talked about this as a *"Collective responsibility"* the organisation shared for the action of its activists. Alongside this is the responsibility of activists to implement the decisions of the organisation even where they clashed with their own views on this matter. Some anarchists see this as being akin to the organisational discipline required by many Leninists where party members are required to give the party a *"monopoly of their political activity"* and follow *"democratic centralism"*.

Of course there are similarities but there are also similarities with respecting a picket line even if you voted against the strike. In fact every day in our lives we voluntarily adhere to a "collective responsibility", when we share cooking or holiday arrangements with others, or even settle on going to a pub we are not all that keen on because that's where our friends want to drink! Doing things that are not your first preference are pretty much part of all social interactions, the only way to avoid this in any society would be to live the life of a hermit.

Follow the Party?

What makes these decisions different and acceptable to us is in fact what separates "collective responsibility" from "party discipline". The first and most important of these is that we have an equal say in how these decisions are reached. In the anarchist organisation all have an equal say and vote in defining the organisation's position through conference discussions or mandated delegates. In the Leninist organisation the closest you get to this is getting some sort of vote on which party leader tells you what to do[21]. Secondly, in the anarchist organisation the nature of this discipline is voluntary in the sense that members should be free to leave organisations they disagree with and join ones they agree with without being regarded as "class traitors" (readers

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[21] In practice, though, this selection is fixed through mechanisms like the use of slates. Leninist groups are infamous for having the same leader 'elected' again and again until he dies and the organisation then splits!

will be aware of how Leninist groups relate to each other)[22]. A third difference is that members would be free to carry on whatever activity they were interested in providing it did not contradict the agreed policy of their organisation, rather than having their political activity monopolised by the party leadership.

Many of the readers of this article may find themselves agreeing with the sort of organisational structure and principles it outlines. But this is not written merely as a set of ideas to be thought about and then laid aside. If you agree with the core ideas presented here then you have a responsibility to start to put these into action by searching out others who also agree and taking the first steps in building such organisation(s). It is my experience that many of the anarchists I have met are completely selfless when it comes to putting themselves in exposed physical positions in the struggles of our class, it is time to put the same sort of energy into building anarchist organisations that can re-define the traditions of working class struggle and prepare for a successful revolution.

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[22] In fact, as usual, we can observe that the Leninists have adopted the methods of capitalist organisation on this issue, with a division between those who make decisions and those who carry them out whereas collective responsibility models the future anarchist society, where those making the decisions will be all of those effected by those decisions (workers' self-management in the economic context).