

For Revolutionary Struggle...

Not Activism

Asher

June 22, 2008

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“We need more people!” — “If only there were more anarchists...” — These phrases and others like them are all too common amongst our anarchist communities across Aotearoa (and no doubt the rest of the world). But in themselves, they betray a fatal mistake in our goals, in how we see our role in moving towards a revolutionary situation.

An anarchist revolution will not come if we simply seek to convert more people to anarchism. Rather, more people adopting anarchist theory will be a by-product of successful anarchist organising and solidarity. There are a few issues we need to examine in order to best understand the role of anarchists in capitalist society. Who will make a revolution?

An anarchist revolution cannot be made by a vanguard, by an elite group of activists, politicians or anarchists. A truly libertarian revolution, which all anarchists seek, can only be made by the great mass of the working class, in a broad sense of the term. This revolution will not magically appear the day we manage to get 51% of the population to call themselves anarchists, but rather by constantly seeking to expand upon the consciousness and militancy of the working class.

Genuine revolution will not be created by a specialist group of “professional revolutionaries.” While many anarchists have a sound critique of groups such as Greenpeace, SAFE or Amnesty International in that they posit themselves as the experts on activism, who the majority of people can pay to do political work, anarchists frequently fail to see that much of what they are doing is exactly the same, except they’re silly enough to do it for free! A large chunk of activism done by anarchists in Aotearoa in the last few years has been of this bent — we call the marches, we show up (perhaps with a few others, but rarely from outside of the wider activist circles), we hand out leaflets to bemused onlookers (who either ignore us or laugh at us, but certainly wouldn’t join in), then we go home. Ongoing organising be damned, we’re making a stand!

What are we doing?

Almost all anarchist activity in Aotearoa falls into two broad categories — activism (covering protests, single-issue groups etc.) and propaganda (infoshops and publishing). It is activism that I will deal with here.

Activism deals primarily with issues far removed from the everyday lives of most people in Aotearoa — NZ troop involvement in overseas invasions, coal mines on the West Coast, a meeting of rich countries on the other side of the planet. In focusing on this type of issue, we ensure that we remain invisible to the vast majority of the working class, and out of touch with the very forces that can create the revolutionary situation we so desire.

In activism, we separate ourselves from the majority of the populace — protesting, marching, direct action etc. are activities undertaken by “activists,” a specialist cadre of experts on social change.

Of course, there is no continuity in our activism, no real ongoing organising. Just jumping from protest to protest, deluding ourselves that we are having any effect whatsoever. Even our ongoing campaigns (for instance anti-war, or Save Happy Valley) are generally little more than semi-regular protests, with the odd press release in between. Almost nowhere is there any long term, strategic, grassroots organising taking place. Almost nowhere do we seem to acknowledge that things do take time to come to fruition. Instead, we bang our heads against a brick wall for a while, then move round the corner to the wall made of concrete, deceiving ourselves into thinking that we’re making progress.

Our activities are primarily oriented to other radicals, both in Aotearoa and overseas. We go to protests with each other, then head to a computer and post reports and photos on Indymedia, so our activist friends around the country can see what we did. If the demo was especially interesting, we might even all go together to a flat so we can see ourselves on the evening news! We are an insular collection of people, and even when we have the appearance of interacting with the public (for instance, on a march), we still ensure that we are separate from them, the “normals.” We don’t engage in conversation, just hand them a flier then move on, and after a while retreat back to the other radicals, safe behind a line of banners.

Against a subcultural orientation

The anarchist community in Aotearoa is thoroughly mired in subcultural politics. The punk and hippy subcultures between them supply the bulk of self-identified anarchists, with most of the remainder coming through the “alternative” liberal (ie. — Green Party, fair trade, organics etc) community. That’s not to say that none of those people are working class, but rather that they are getting involved because of their subcultural identity.

There is a huge difference between a working class movement that is oriented to working class struggles and therefore attracts working class people, and a subcultural community that is oriented to specific subcultures and therefore attracts people from those subcultures. One of the above options could lead to a revolutionary situation. The other keeps us in our self-built ghetto.

For struggles of everyday life

If we are seeking to expand the consciousness and militancy of the working class, we need to stop focusing on battles which for most people appear to have little relevance, and are totally unwinnable for us few anarchists in Aotearoa, anyway. We need to move away from the WTO and towards the workplace, away from the coal-mine and towards the community, away from the spectacular summit demo and towards the struggles of everyday life.

We need to stand in solidarity with workplace struggles that are taking place — standing on the picket lines and engaging with the workers taking part. We also need to be agitating with our workmates in our own workplaces. There are always grievances, it is our task to do all we can to promote collective action to fight for better wages and conditions, of course without any illusions that this will ever be enough in and of itself.

We need to be engaging with our own communities, whether they be geographical, ethnic or otherwise. In our geographical communities, we need to agitate with those around us and build a sense of purposeful connection now, so that when attacks come, we already have a base from which to struggle. When city councils attempt to impose extra charges (such as bin taxes or water metering), destroy community facilities such as libraries or swimming pools, or raise rents on council flats, we need to stand with our communities in opposition and fight.

This type of organising around the struggles of everyday life isn’t easy, it isn’t quick, and it isn’t sexy, but it is vital if we are to build a revolutionary movement against capital and state. The more we struggle, the more we build our bases in our workplaces and communities, the better chance we have of winning, and the broader and more interlinked our struggles will become.

For the broadening and intensification of struggle

“I am an anarchist not because I believe Anarchism is the final goal, but because I believe there is no such thing as a final goal. Freedom will lead us to continually wider and expanding understanding and to new social forms of life”.

Rudolf Rocker, a German anarcho-syndicalist

It is the task of anarchists to always be broadening the terms of any given struggle, and to fight against its recuperation. In workplace struggles, we should be wary of union attempts to sell out workers. In community struggles, we should be wary of NGOs and community groups who may seek a swift resolution without the meeting of all demands.

We must always seek to bring to light the systemic roots of what we are fighting against, and to link our struggles with others happening within our communities and around the world.

We must also realise that the odds are stacked against us, and, for a long time, we will likely lose more than we win. This doesn't mean that we should stop fighting, or retreat into our activist ghettos. For if we fight, we have a chance at creating a better society, but in giving up or retreating, we lose any chance we ever had.

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Retrieved on 14th October 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
Article from the anarchist journal "Imminent rebellion" #9, from Aotearoa/New Zealand.

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