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**What can Anarchists and Syndicalists Learn from
Factory Take-Overs and Worker Cooperatives in
Argentina?**

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MORE INFORMATION

“The History of Zanon,” endefensadezanon.com

Oliver Nathan, 2011, “Worker Co-operatives, Markets and the South African State: An Analysis from an Anarchist Perspective,” *Zabalaza: A Journal of Southern African Revolutionary Anarchism*, number 12, zabalaza.net

revolutionary counter-culture, based on the widespread acceptance of a revolutionary worldview – and alternative sites of production and social services and media and education can play an important role, in this struggle.

As part of a larger movement, such alternatives are shielded, assume enormous symbolic power, and can help inspire a fundamental change. But there is no possibility that the current system will slowly and quietly disintegrate because of a few cooperatives, “recovered factories” and worker-clinics. An alternative must mean something new: it is no change if we keep relying on the leaders of the system, its institutions like elections, its stress on what divides us like colour and language and country, and the aims of the system: power and profit for a few. And it must mean something new, from the roots to the branches, a new society that replaces the old.

As the anarchist luminary Mikhail Bakunin argued long ago:

“The various forms of co-operation are incontestably one of the most equitable and rational ways of organizing the future system of production. But before it can realize its aim of emancipating the labouring masses so that they will receive the full product of their labour, the land and all forms of capital must be converted into collective property. As long as this is not accomplished, the co-operatives will be overwhelmed by the all-powerful competition of monopoly capital and vast landed property; ... and even in the unlikely event that a small group of co-operatives should somehow surmount the competition, their success would only beget a new class of prosperous co-operators in the midst of a poverty-stricken mass of proletarians” (in Sam Dolgoff, 2002 edition, Bakunin on Anarchism).

The remarkable “recovered factories” (fábricas recuperadas) movement saw hundreds of closed factories reopened by the workers, run democratically, creating jobs and helping working class and poor communities. It showed that there is only so much protesting can accomplish – at some point you have to create something new. But it also shows it is essential that such alternative sites of production form alliances with, and become embedded, in other movements of the working class, poor and peasantry, including unions and unemployed movements. This assists them in building larger struggles, and provides them with some protection from the capitalist market and the state. It is meanwhile important for unions and social movements to start to systematically develop alternatives to capitalist- and state- run social services and media. However, it is simply impossible to escape capitalism by creating cooperatives, social centres or alternative spaces –almost all means of production remain in ruling class hands, secured by force and backed by huge bureaucracies. It is essential to build a mass revolutionary front of unions and other movements, embracing popularly-run social services, media and production, and aiming at complete socialisation of the economy and of decision-making through a revolutionary rupture.

Documentaries like “The Take” – a movie that has been widely seen in South African labour and left circles – have drawn global attention to a remarkable challenge to neoliberalism. In Argentina, in South America, economic crisis saw a collapse in working class conditions. High unemployment, low wages, attacks on social services: we are familiar with such things in South Africa. But something happened, which is very different. In Argentina, from the 1990s, something new started.

RESIST-OCCUPY-PRODUCE

The “recovered factories” (*fábricas recuperadas*) movement saw hundreds of closed factories and facilities reopened by the workers, run democratically, creating jobs and helping working class and poor communities. For example, the former Zanon tile factory was reopened under workers’ control (it is now called FaSinPat). It was able to create jobs, restore dignity and helped build a community clinic; it also makes donations to hospitals and feeding schemes. Many of these worker-run sites are still running. They have been linked together through two networks: the *Movimiento Nacional de Empresas Recuperadas* and the *Movimiento Nacional de Fabricas Recuperadas*.

What this remarkable experience shows is that there is only so much protesting can accomplish – at some point you have to discuss alternatives. You have to move beyond saying what you do not want, and beyond making limited demands, to creating something new. The workers in Argentina have helped to show an alternative from below. They have rewritten the textbook of economics. The experience – and similar ones before it, and alongside it, such as in the Spanish Revolution in the past and the Rojava Revolution today – show the immense role and creativity of the productive classes. It shows that it is possible produce for need rather than profit. It shows something totally different to the two false choices we are given today: top-down exploitative wage labour under private companies (and privatisation) and rule by state companies (and nationalisation).

SELF-ACTIVITY NOT ELECTIONS

It represents a profound challenge to the system that leaves factories closed, while people need the good and jobs and services they can produce, that closes brickyards while people are

and land occupations; while the capital and the state have the commanding heights of finance, coercion and administration, the system will recover and crush the alternatives. After the disaster in Spain, the notion that the system will quietly die, “asphyxiate,” when faced with large-scale economic disruption and collectivisation – as if its power resides solely in local workplaces – must be rejected.

THE NEED FOR RUPTURE

The aim is not to choose between capitalists: “Buy South Africa,” “Buy Black,” or “people’s capitalism” (*volkskapitalisme* as it was once called by a certain strand of unions here).

It is to link alternatives to capitalism together, coordinate them, and embed them in a larger mass revolutionary front of unions, social movements, and bottom-up social services, and people’s media and people’s education, which is based on struggle and that aims at the complete socialisation of the economy and of administration, a new system based on federations of community and workers councils, based on assemblies, and a serious, co-ordinated defence of the new.

Without this change – a radical rupture, final showdown, the abolition of the state and capitalism – the ongoing pressures of the state and capitalism – and the ruling classes they represent will corrupt or kill off alternatives that do not follow its rules; without this change, the repressive forces of the state will always remained poised to crush what is different, better, democratic.

NO EXIT: RIDE THROUGH

The solution is not to “exit” through refusal, but to confront, through building a massive, unified counter-power based on radically democratic structures and direct action, resting on a

union and its workers — in solidarity with a general strike organised by SACTWU and its federation, the South African Congress of Trade Unions (COSATU).

PREFIGURE EVERYWHERE

But what is essential is to prefigure a better future everywhere, not just in “recovered factories,” social services, centres and media, but in mass formations, like unions, and local protest movements, like those in communities, as well. This means radically democratic organising, solidarity and mass education against the ideas and attitudes and behaviours of the existing order.

IT IS NOT ENOUGH

It is important to be clear here that it is not possible to escape capitalism by creating a few sites of alternative production, by creating cooperatives, social centres or even “recovered factories,” or by “buying worker.” It is not possible to build a “solidarity economy” that can defeat the existing system. The bulk of means of production remains in the hands of private corporations and states, controlled by the ruling class; the ruling class is backed by armies, police and massive bureaucracies.

To think we can exit from capitalism, or that capitalism will crumble, if we build an increasing number of local alternatives is wrong. These will always be on the margins, and the ruling class will crush — peacefully and violently — any significant threat. The notion that we can “crack capitalism” (John Holloway) by exiting the system, ignoring the state, refusing wage labour and building alternative systems is not realistic.

Capitalism and the state will never be suffocated by a proliferation of alternatives: as seen in the Spanish Revolution, it is not enough to have even a massive amount of collectives

homeless, and hotels while people are homeless. It shows how democratic discussion and assemblies, choices based on meeting needs rather than making profits, can work — and work better than the mess we have under current system. In the current system, we have massive waste, corruption and exclusion for the majority. Arms deals and blood diamonds while people starve on the streets.

BEING EMBEDDED

But what the “recovered factory movement,” and the “The Take,” also shows is that it is essential that such alternative sites of production form alliances with movements of the working class, poor and peasantry, including unions, community movements, unemployed movements (in Argentina, called “*piqueteros*”), and in popular struggles. They must be embedded in the movements of the popular classes, as a means of being protected from eviction by the state, and as a means of building struggles. Zanon, for example, has been protected from the police by massive protests, by strikes by unions, and has also participated in a range of struggles. Zanon workers are part of the union in the ceramics sector, the *Sindicato de Obreros y Empleados Ceramistas de Neuquén*. In 2003, community-based protests plus a mass strike by the *Central de Trabajadores Argentinos* (CTA) union federation prevented Zanon being evicted. In 2007, the Zanon workers joined mass protests after police killed a teacher, Carlos Fuentealba, at a demonstration.

Being embedded in this way, alternative sites of production can also be protected to an extent from the logics of capitalism, which, through both competition and monopolies, forces wages down, and imposes authoritarian management systems as the price of survival. It is important to remember here that the “recovered factories” still exist within capitalism. They

face ongoing pressures: for example, the government refuses to provide contracts, and bans block loans; cheaper tiles can be sourced from other plants. Unless they have support from movements, and pressure to operate differently to capitalist state firms, and some space to do so, they can easily degenerate into worker-run capitalist firms.

Unless they have support from movements, they can easily be captured by states, which will impose upon them business plans and other schemes, which will force them to operate as capitalist firms.

SOLIDARITY PRICING

Such embeddedness enables a situation where customers – especially larger organisations, like unions – can pay solidarity prices. This provides essential protection from the capitalist market and the state regulations that impose upon workplaces the pressure to cut wages, fire workers and impose authoritarian management.

Locating the alternative production models within mass movements, helps avoid the situation, seen in some European countries, where valuable alternative spaces –like social centres, squats and radical bookshops –achieve a great deal but can become contained within isolated radical scenes and youth subcultures separate from the masses of working class and poor people. They also avoid the other situation, where their survival rests upon support from wealthy strata, who can afford to pay higher prices and do so as a matter of conscience – while the masses, who cannot pay such premiums, rather choose much cheaper products made in capitalist sweatshops. In such a situation, alternative production becomes dependent upon class inequalities to survive – on ethical “middle class” consumerism – rather than on class struggle.

AFRICAN EXAMPLES

We have wonderful examples of such solidarity in the 1980s in South Africa, although it is not often found today. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) set up cooperatives among re-trenched workers, while the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) did the same among workers who were fired in the course of a major strike at BTR-Sarmcol rubber factory. These cooperatives were then given contracts from NUM (and NUMSA) to supply union t-shirts and similar goods. The Food and Canning Workers Union (FCWU) ran its own medical aid in the 1980s, using this to set up a Ray Alexander Workers Clinic in Paarl. Union aid kept them afloat and allowed workers to also see an alternative.

Today, sadly, unions tend to simply use the cheapest capitalist company, and the cheapest shirts, including from union-bashing, worker-repressing sweatshops; and to sell members, for a commission, contracts with private sector medical aids that are invested in capitalist firms.

It is possible to develop alternatives – as a means of showing something different is possible, and as a means of reducing dependence on the corporations and the states. Union investment monies, for example, should prioritise spending on worker-run clinics, worker cooperatives, a working class media, popular education on a large scale, and mass organising – including of the unemployed – rather than invest in profit-making – a recipe for a profound corruption of unions and a loss of vision.

The best example of this worst-case scenario is the South African Clothing and Textile Workers’ Union (SACTWU) Investment Company, HCI, which has shares in casinos, capitalist TV stations (e.tv) and bus companies – and helped a certain former SACTWU leader become a billionaire. Once a radical union in the “workerist” tradition, in 2017 SACTWU’s HCI refused to close its bus services – in theory controlled by the