

Make Libertarianism Working Class Again!

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Ever since the famous communist Joseph Déjacque coined the political use of the term libertarian in a letter to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon back in 1857 as a way to differentiate his views from those of the authoritarian communists within the anti-capitalist movement, the philosophy of libertarianism has always implied working class rebellion. At least until a few dissenting Republicans tried to make common ground with the anti-authoritarian left, adopted much of their language, but largely left out the class analysis espoused by the likes of Déjacque, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Spooner, Tucker, and so many others before and since.

When Proudhon first laid the groundwork for free-market anarchism, he saw it as a way of achieving socialist goals through mostly anti-statist means. In fact, he was a member of the First International alongside Karl Marx. In the U.S. many early American libertarians and anarchists were important allies within the labor movement, from the fight against slavery to the fight for the 8-hour work day and beyond. It was the anarchists who influenced the Industrial Workers of the World's libertarian stance as a labor union.

But since then, libertarianism in America is more commonly associated with capitalist business interests and vulgar "free"-marketers. Some, like Konkin, have tried to correct this by reinserting a class analysis into libertarianism and was successful in creating a philosophy re-uniting market libertarianism with the class struggle and feminism. His philosophy has even crossed over into mutualist libertarian circles with ideas of anti-capitalist agorism, similar in many ways to Proudhon's strategy of dual power. So with Ron Paul and Gary Johnson inspiring more and more people to discover less class-based libertarian ideas, how can those truly concerned about classism bring these new members into the fold and combat a seemingly predominate form of vulgar libertarianism? How can we prove to the left that libertarianism and class struggle can co-exist? In comes the Povertarian Caucus.

"[M]odern expressions of free market principles have everything to do with the state as a weapon of fiscal dominance that masks itself as a free market. A great example of that is the TPP ... calling itself 'free trade'. Libertarians today know this but outside of C4SS it really hasn't been advanced as a coherent narrative that brings back that revolutionary spirit of economic freedom as a benefit not to business but to the individual," explained Mikester of the Libertarian Party Povertarian Caucus.

The Povertarian Caucus arose in response to the "poll tax" required for delegates to participate in the Libertarian National Convention. Defenders of the tax tried to discredit them by referring

to them dismissively as “povertarians” and claiming that they just wanted a “free lunch” but the tables turned when opponents of the tax took back the insult and formed a caucus out of it dedicated to working class libertarian issues.

Since 2014, they have become known most for their bi-annual pizza party which they throw opposite the high-class banquet held at the LNC. The absurdity of a libertarian event being so inaccessible to the poor and working class would make the founders of the term spin in their graves but the povertarians are there to fill your stomach without draining your wallet. But what’s more impressive than their pizza is their championing of worker’s rights.

“[W]e immediately realized there was an opportunity far beyond the boundaries of internal dynamics about floor fees, since libertarian ideas about markets correct predict that intervention has produced widespread poverty. There is so much opportunity for the party to improve how it speaks to issues of market liberation. The reality of modern society is, there are a lot of poor people, and they’re looking for political solutions that we can offer. And when we sat down and really brainstormed into that space we discovered a variety of issues in that blind spot that we can illuminate: homelessness, felon’s rights, the inhumanity of the welfare state, very tight controls over entry to the independent marketplace, the police/prison state as a sources of compulsory labor, and more.”

Classical libertarian thought formed out of a communist analysis of the state. Many who agreed with communist goals of working class emancipation were critical of the idea that the state could be used to achieve such goals when they were a huge part of the problem in the first place in upholding the unfree capitalist market. These libertarians were libertarian because of their views on working class emancipation, not despite them. And now the povertarians, like the agorists before them, are here to help correct the path of the american libertarian movement by rerooting it in class struggle from a free-market perspective.

When asked about the Povertarian Caucus in relation to classical libertarian thought, Mikester responded about how he, “feel[s] like those roots were obfuscated over time as the american political class rose to replace the aristocracy that came before. The language was placed in service of capital as privileged over labor whereas the revolutionary potential had always been the idea that those are inseparable.” And as far as unions, they are seen as, “voluntary associations and private contracts. Workers and workplaces have a right to combine however to establish whatever agreements they wish. The market can’t be healthy unless every form of association is free to flourish. We only oppose what you might call “crony unions” that are functionally bosses. State controls like the NLRB pervert the concept and place labor in service to the corporation-state and that is not OK.”

Well considering that’s the line more labor anarchists already tow, it seems that the Povertarian Caucus might prove to bridge that gap between those who have discovered libertarianism through party politics and those who discovered it through working class analysis. I for one, despite my aversion to party politics, wish them luck.

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