

What Anarchism and Syndicalism offer the South African Left

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Contents

Aims	3
Strategy: Counter-Power	3
Reform, Revolution?	3
Against Elections, Corporatism	4
From UDF to ANC	4
Bakunin vs. Marx	5
The East Bloc	5
Strategy: Syndicalism	6
Record: Struggle, Justice	6
Unfinished National Liberation	6
Red and Black	7

The 21st century is a time of both despair and hope: despair at the evils of contemporary society, hope that a new world is possible.

The ideas of the broad anarchist tradition can contribute greatly to this new world. They are integrally tied to an inspiring body of practice in working class, anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and civil rights struggles, back to the 1860s. And they are relevant to South Africa today.

Aims

Anarchism's basic aim is the most complete realisation of a revolutionary democratic vision, abolishing hierarchy and exploitation:

- ending social and economic inequality, including by race, nation and gender, to create a society based on free, cooperating individuals;
- revolutionary reconstruction of the family as a site of freedom and cooperation;
- participatory-democratic control of the means of production, coercion and administration, through multi-tendency worker/ community councils, not corporations and states; and,
- self-management at work, global economic participatory planning, and distribution on the basis of need, not markets.

Strategy: Counter-Power

Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin – two anarchist luminaries – were clear that the “new social order” must be constructed “from the bottom up” by the “organisation and power of the working masses,”¹ by revolutionary *counter-power* and *counter-culture, outside and against* the ruling class, state and capital.

“Anarchist communism” must be created *from below*, through *self-managed* struggles, by participatory-democratic movements of the broad working class and peasantry. The movements must embody in the *present* the forms and values they seek—they must *prefigure* the future; to use hierarchy is to reproduce it.

Secondly, without a radical vision, Bakunin insisted, the popular classes will instead just see ruler replace ruler, exploiter replace exploiter. Thus, the need for anarchism's “new social philosophy”² becoming the *leading idea* – as opposed to the *leading party* – of the movement.

Reform, Revolution?

For most anarchists, this meant “mass anarchism”: only mass movements can create revolutionary change; these are built through struggles around immediate issues, economic and political; anarchists participate to *transform* the movements into levers of revolutionary change, not “civil society” pressure groups.

¹ M. Bakunin, 1953, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (Free Press / Collier-Macmillan), pp. 300, 319, 378

² M. Bakunin, [1871] 1971, “The Programme of the Alliance,” in *Bakunin on Anarchy* (George Allen and Unwin), pp. 249, 250–251

Reforms must be won *from below*: reforms-from-above breed passivity, patronage and state control. This is not a strategy of socialism through incremental gains. Every gain is valuable. But no reforms can alter the basic structure of contemporary society. So, struggles for reforms must help build a *revolutionary* movement.

Against Elections, Corporatism

Rather than seeking state power, anarchists favour a powerful, pluralistic, mass movement, forged in struggles and freely won to anarchism, as the new society emerging in the old, eventually overwhelming it. Power is *not* abolished, but held by everyone.

The alternative to neo-liberalism is neither Keynesian nor nationalisation, but *autonomous* counter-power and counterculture.

Participation in parliaments, municipalities and corporatism bureaucratises, weakens, and co-opts movements. And in the neo-liberal era, even the best of the statist systems – the Nordic welfare states – are failed and fading.³

The state is a centralised organisation whereby a ruling minority oppresses the popular classes. For anarchists, class centres upon *both* ownership/ control of the means of production *and* the means of coercion/ administration. This is expressed through two interlocking centralised bodies, states and corporations – centralised *so that* a minority can rule.

The state-based ruling class segment has an *autonomous* power base in coercion/ administration. It promotes capitalism, *not* as capital's servant, but because state managers' and private capitalists' interests largely *converge*.

Every elected politician is *part of the ruling class*. A new state leadership is a personnel change. Thus, the broken promises of Chiluba, Ebert, Lula, Mandela and Obama. As Bakunin said, the "iron logic" of position makes them "enemies of the people."⁴

Many still believe *their* party will be different. But it is *not* parties that change the state: *it is the state that changes parties*.

From UDF to ANC

There is a fundamental incompatibility between state power and popular self-management. 1980s South Africa saw the formation of structures of "people's power" and "workers control" that even aspired to replace the *apartheid* state and corporations with an alternative, participatory, socialist democracy.⁵

The 1990s deal—besides critically changing the personnel and form of the class system—also entailed popular demobilisation as politics moved "from the people to the state."⁶ The ANC's role as nexus of the post-colonial elite was matched by its promotion of passivity and unaccountability.⁷

³ L. van der Walt, 2010, "COSATU's Response to the Crisis: an Anarcho-Syndicalist Assessment and Alternative," *Zabalaza*, no. 11

⁴ Bakunin, [1873] 1971, "Statism and Anarchy," *Bakunin...*, p. 343

⁵ M. Neocosmos, 1996, "From People's Politics to State Politics: aspects of national liberation in South Africa, 1984–1994," *Politeia*, 15(3): 73–119.

⁶ Neocosmos, p. 77

⁷ Neocosmos, p. 114

Bakunin vs. Marx

No state can break this mould. Historical Marxism – the *mainstream* Marxist tradition, as opposed to could-have-beens – bears this out.

There *are* elements in Marxist thought with a democratic and emancipatory component, and anarchism is indebted to Marxist economics.⁸

However, the overwhelming tendency in Marxism is statist, centralist, and vanguardist, with rivals seen as necessarily anti-proletarian. Marxist theory is strikingly thin on human rights, participatory democracy, self-management– issues which define anarchism. Every single Marxist regime has been a brutal dictatorship.

Bakunin praised Marx’s learning and commitment, but rejected Marx’s outlook: capturing state power through revolutionary party; claiming that this party alone will “always and everywhere” represent the proletariat; advocating state control of labour and the economy.⁹

The East Bloc

This would lead, Bakunin said, to a dictatorial “barracks” regime of “centralised state-capitalism.”¹⁰ This claim, central to the Marx/ Bakunin debate, is vindicated by history.

The Soviet Union cannot be blamed on external forces, wartime conditions etc.¹¹ At every step, the Bolsheviks followed the statist, centralist, one-party logic Marx outlined. V.I. Lenin’s and Leon Trotsky’s repression of rivals, closure of *soviet* and military democracy, party-run secret police, Taylorism and one-man management, started before the May 1918–November 1920 war and economic collapse.

Repression *increased* in 1921 and 1922, against Petrograd’s general strike, Kronstadt’s revolt, peasant struggles, the Ukrainians, Georgians and Armenians, reinforcing the pattern; the *gulags*, running since 1918, were full long before J.V. Stalin.

Lenin insisted “the dictatorship of the proletariat *cannot* be exercised through an organization embracing the whole of that class ... *only* by a vanguard.”¹² In socialism, Trotsky said, the “working masses” must “be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded,” with “deserters” “formed into punitive battalions” or “concentration camps.”¹³ In the Trotsky/ Stalin debate, both *agreed* on the need for forced industrialisation by a one-party state.¹⁴

Genuine popular democracy cannot be suspended to “save” the revolution, anarchism argues, since this is an *essential* part of revolutionary *means and ends*.

⁸ L. van der Walt, M. Schmidt, 2009, *Black Flame*, (AK Press), ch. 3

⁹ K. Marx, F. Engels, [1848] 1954, *The Communist Manifesto* (Henry Regnery), pp. 40, 55–56, 58–78

¹⁰ Bakunin, [1872a], 1971, “Letter to *La Liberté*,” *Bakunin...*, p. 284; P. Kropotkin, [1912] 1970, “Modern Science and Anarchism,” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets* (Dover), pp. 170, 186

¹¹ See L. van der Walt, 2011, “Counterpower, Participatory Democracy, Revolutionary Defence: debating *Black Flame*, revolutionary anarchism and historical Marxism,” *International Socialism*, no. 130, pp. 191–206

¹² Lenin, [1920] 1962, “The Trade Unions, the Present Situation and Trotsky’s Mistakes,” *Collected Works* (Progress Publishers), volume 27, p. 21, my emphasis

¹³ M. Brinton, 1970, *The Bolsheviks and Workers Control, 1917–1921* (Solidarity), p. 61

¹⁴ J.E. Marot, 2006, “Trotsky, the Left Opposition and the Rise of Stalinism,” *Historical Materialism*, 14(3): 175–206.

Strategy: Syndicalism

Syndicalism – a much abused term – does *not* mean narrow bread-and-butter unionism, a narrow workplace focus.

It is an *anarchist* strategy, maintaining that unions are *potentially* revolutionary. Through coordinated occupation of workplaces, working people can take over production through union structures.

Not all unions can do this! Workplace councils must be prefigured in daily struggles, radically democratic practice, anarchist education, and an explicit *counter-power* project. Syndicalism promotes global solidarity, not national competitiveness; global wage minimum wages and rights, not protectionism; and struggle, not corporatist pacting.

Many such unions have existed (below), embedded in larger popular movements, central in community and political struggles, revolutionary propaganda and revolutionary risings.

Record: Struggle, Justice

The movement was not Marxism's poor cousin.

Into the 1920s, Benedict Anderson says, anarchism and syndicalism were “the main vehicle of global opposition to industrial capitalism, autocracy, latifundism, and imperialism.”¹⁵

Anarchists/syndicalists have led the main unions in many countries, with powerful union minorities elsewhere, including Egypt, Mozambique and South Africa (where key activists included Bernard Sigamoney, T.W. Thibedi and S.P. Bunting).

They played an important role in national liberation struggles into the 1950s, led many insurrectionary risings, and three anarchist revolutions: Ukraine (1917–1921), Shinmin (Manchuria) (1929–1931) and Spain (1936–1939).

Strong into the 1950s, they entered dark decades, partly due to severe repression by states, right and “left.” Even then, they remained important in unions, armed struggles and undergrounds in Asia, Latin America and Europe into the 1980s.

Now, with the 1990s resurgence, anarchists are the main pole of attraction for many “anti-globalisation” militants.¹⁶ There is a global spread of anarchist values: bottom-up organising and direct action outside the official political system.¹⁷

Anarchists played a key role in events like the 1999 Battle of Seattle, the 2008/9 Greek uprising, the 2010 Spanish general strike, and today's North African revolts. In Spain, the anarcho-syndicalist General Confederation of Workers (CGT) represents nearly two million workers.¹⁸

Unfinished National Liberation

And locally?

¹⁵ B. Anderson, 2006, *Under Three Flags: anarchism and the anti-colonial imagination* (Verso), pp. 2, 54

¹⁶ B. Epstein, 2001, “Anarchism and the Anti-Globalisation Movement,” *Monthly Review*, 53(4): 1–14.

¹⁷ K. Goaman, 2004, “The Anarchist Travelling Circus,” in J. Purkis, J. Bowen (eds), *Changing Anarchism* (Manchester UP), pp. 173–174

¹⁸ In terms of the 2004 union election process: “Spain: CGT Is Now the Third Biggest Union,” *Alternative Libertaire*, November 2004.

South Africa's transition was a *massive victory* against national oppression, won from below. The most "imperfect republic" is a "thousand times better," said Bakunin, than the most "enlightened monarchy."¹⁹

It is nonsensical to speak of the current situation as "white supremacy." There have been huge gains in legal and social rights; many routine *apartheid* practices are illegal, while affirmative action etc. is mandatory; there has been the rapid expansion of the African ruling class segment, centred on the state.

Yet the national liberation struggle was left *incomplete*.

Said Bakunin: an "exclusively political revolution" that did not "aim at the immediate and real political and economic emancipation of the people" will end "a false revolution," controlled by elites.²⁰

The country has dangerous levels of racial and national divisions. The ruling class itself is split along African/ white lines, corresponding to the state manager/ private capitalist division.

The majority of the working class historically suffered capitalist exploitation *and national oppression*. The ruling class can hardly abolish the former. It can end the legacy of national oppression for the African ruling class, not the *working class*; a redistribution of incomes and power cannot be resolved in the context of a crisis-ridden semi-industrial economy.

The working class majority's national liberation struggle needs a class-based, African-centred, yet multi-national, movement of counterpower and counterculture. This movement's fight includes an end to the *racialised* division of labour, wealth and power, and to the racialised state, and a break with *colonial* culture and attitudes, as part of the anarchist project.

This cannot be waged through the ANC, a ruling class party that fosters racism and anti-immigrant sentiment, that breaks township risings, while its leading cadre enriches themselves.

Red and Black

It is increasingly accepted that socialism requires participatory democracy. Anarchism / syndicalism have historically been the core repository of these ideals; mistakes have been made, but they have no history of statist tyranny or betrayal. That is why this praxis is being rebuilt by people across the world today.

¹⁹ M. Bakunin, [1872b] 1971, "The International and Karl Marx," *Bakunin...*, p. 318

²⁰ M. Bakunin, [1867] 1971, "Federalism, Socialism, Anti-Theologism," *Bakunin...*, p. 9

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