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The Working Class

Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group

23 October 2018

The Melbourne Anarchist Communist Group believes that workers' revolution is the only way to achieve a society of peace, freedom and equality for all. This is not a fashionable view.

It is understandable that our view isn't fashionable for two reasons. First, the capitalist media and capitalist educational institutions work hard to build faith in other roads to a good society, or to discredit the very idea. Second, the failure of States that uphold workers' revolution to achieve a free and equal society has done much to discredit both the objective and the strategy. So people who still believe in workers' revolution have some explaining to do. The MACG believes it can make a good case.

Before the rise of industrial capitalism, dreams of abolishing social class and establishing economic equality were confined to rare intellectuals or occasional outbursts of struggle during revolutionary periods. The intellectuals usually conjured up authoritarian communist utopias which could only be created by a ruler – but which no ruler would want to create. The outbursts of struggle fell away when faced with the problem of dealing with material shortage, and new ruling classes emerged or old ones reconsolidated.

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The Industrial Revolution began in England in the late 18th Century and, over the following hundred years, spread across Europe, the United States, Britain's settler colonies & elsewhere. The working class separated from the middle class, since most workers now had no realistic expectation of advancing to self-employment. It was this new working class that made possible a mass movement towards a free and equal society, because this was a force with the necessary motive and potential power. This movement prefigured a society based on these values because of the organic link between the practices of the movement and the structures of the new society.

Today, the working class is the largest class in the world, outnumbering the peasants and even the 3rd World urban poor, who are largely self-employed in the informal sector. We are vastly more powerful than when we made the Russian Revolution a century ago. The social productivity of labour is so great that many agree the world is rich enough to abolish poverty if only there were the political will to do so. Poverty, once an unavoidable tragedy, is now a crime against humanity.

Since emerging in the late 1860s, class struggle Anarchists have said that it is the working class that will abolish capitalism. We have argued for revolution because we agree with the saying attributed to Lucy Parsons, "Never be deceived that the rich will allow you to vote away their wealth." We believe the working class is central because of our numbers, but more importantly because workers create society's wealth and make society function on a day-to-day basis. We can seize the workplace, the source of the capitalists' power, and build our own power. The struggle for better wages & conditions is the school in which groups of workers learn their strength and come to believe in a society based on the solidarity they have built.

Critics of the class struggle strategy point to reactionary ideas amongst the working class. It is true that many workers have racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes and engage in various forms of

oppressive behaviour. The leaders and propagators of reactionary ideas in society, though, are actually powerful capitalists. Years of racist dog-whistling by John Howard, Tony Abbott and Peter Dutton have been essential, for example, to the rise of Fascist thugs in Australia such as the True Blue Crew and the Soldiers of Odin. The fish rots from the head.

There is also a more powerful argument against dismissing the working class. Workers who hold reactionary ideas are shooting themselves in the foot. Their racism, their sexism, their homophobia, etc, are instruments of their own defeat. As well as barring the way to a just society, reaction defeats workers in the daily struggle for decent wages and conditions. Black workers lose massively from racism, but white workers also lose. Women workers lose massively from sexism, but male workers also lose. And so on. Only the capitalists win from reactionary ideologies and the oppressions they justify.

We cannot put off the struggle against sexism, racism, homophobia, religious bigotry, anti-trans hatred or any other oppression until “after the Revolution”. Doing so would ensure the Revolution never comes. Instead, we must return to the foundation principle that built the union movement – Touch One, Touch All. All forms of oppression, inside the workplace or outside, are an attack on our solidarity and thus on the working class as a whole.

It is in the crucible of struggle that workers learn these lessons most quickly. The most famous example of this was the great Miners’ Strike of 1984–85 in Britain. The coalfields, long-time bastions of sexism, changed when women stepped forward into the struggle. Few women were directly employed in the mines, but women saw the very existence of their communities was at stake. Fundraising activity by immigrant and LGBT groups made more bonds of solidarity that transformed miners’ consciousness. In twelve months miners learned new attitudes that took decades for the rest of the working class in Britain.

The struggle of the working class is linked to the revolution in three ways. First, the struggle is located where capital gets its power – in the workplace. Second, the struggle over wages and conditions shows that economic crises are inevitable within capitalism and the looming threat of an irresolvable crisis is ever growing. And third, it is only through struggle that the working class will learn the iron solidarity necessary for revolution. As it casts aside all reactionary prejudices (what Marx called “the muck of ages”), the working class will remake itself as a body of free and equal people fit for a libertarian communist society.

TOUCH ONE
TOUCH ALL