

You don't get owt for nowt

Solidarity Federation

Spring 1998

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Millions of people do not vote in British General Elections.

At every General Election there is a concerted effort on the behalf of anarchists to encourage potential voters to abstain.

Why is abstention considered to be of itself a 'good' thing?

In the last election in May 1997, when Tony Blair was swept to power on a 'landslide vote', 28.4% of those registered and able didn't vote; the highest post-war percentage and noticeably up from 1992. Is this a success? Over a quarter of the eligible population didn't vote, and anarchists advised them not to, coz anarchists are against voting ...well, maybe not.

For a start, there is little evidence that the majority of those abstaining do so deliberately. Of those who do not vote the vast majority do not persistently abstain, most vary from election to election as to whether they turn out or not. Of those who at any one election do not vote, when asked, two thirds of them give reasons for not voting which could be classed as involuntary, e.g. sickness, unable to get time off work and, by far the single biggest category; on holiday. Of the one third of non-voters who could be said to deliberately abstain, most do so because they could not be bothered to vote, not because they chose not to vote, or made a political decision not to vote.

Non-voting is slightly more common amongst the young working class in London and metropolitan areas than elsewhere. However, while surveyed differences in attitudes between voters and non-voters are not generally big, the largest rise in non-voters at the last election was amongst those who identified with the Tories. Those that don't vote generally express a slightly lower level of interest in politics, very rarely discuss it, and have a weaker grasp of current affairs and politics. Then again, those who vote regularly, generally also have a fairly low level of interest or knowledge. Various surveys have found that around 40% of those who always vote have no real interest in politics outside voting in elections.

Turning our attention to an active, political minority — anarchists are not against voting. Well, I am not. I am opposed to Parliamentary Democracy as we know it and I am against voting for representatives as a political and social system because it is not in most people's interest. A negative campaign against each election based purely on the lines of 'don't vote, a vote every five years for a crooked liar who merely claims to "represent you", and who is more likely to rip you off' is not really to the point. A more constructive approach would be to spend the whole of the five years working using the tools of direct action and direct democracy, fighting and organising in terms of self-management and mutual aid (solidarity) in the community and workplace. Then, when the election comes, rather than sitting around waiting for it, we can just say "oh yes that; I don't want a system that is inherently unfair, in which I get a minor say in appointing a representative who is beyond my influence once elected, and who, even then, will probably only have a negligible role." We can point to our way of organising, point out that the parliamentary system is all about keeping the powerless where they are whilst giving it a shine of respectability. Calling for not voting is not a goal. It is not really a useful tool in itself. It is largely irrelevant whether someone votes in a general election or not.

Is it really so bad if someone votes to kick out an incumbent, as long as they recognise full well the bankruptcy of the system and how minor their representative's role is in it? I can see the joy of putting a cross to get rid of Michael Portillo and his ilk, even if it is purely for personal satisfaction rather than political ends. I can even dream of the same thing happening to Jack Straw! But we need to see this for what it is; a negative thing.

the apathy trip

When people vote against someone, let's not get in a tizzy about it. They are not voting for the system — although the act of voting is used as a case for legitimising it by its supporters. What we need to do is to channel people's anger and frustration into the desire to achieve something more positive — direct democracy, with mandated recallable delegates and officers, appointed only for a limited period: Decisions taken with everyone taking an active part in the process.

Apart from the in-built bias in the capitalist democracies against anything that seeks to challenge in a meaningful way the power of the city and other elites, one of the major problems is that it actively encourages apathy. The act of voting in a general election takes little effort, even less thought, and from that little effort and little thought, the individual receives little in the way of direct influence.

making a difference

Which brings us back to the large proportion of the electorate who, when asked, express little or no interest in politics, rarely if ever discussing politics with friends or family (not even using BT). Even amongst those who state that they always vote, around 40% still claim they have no interest in politics.

We need to move away from the idea that not voting is something we do (or rather don't do). Anarchosyndicalists definitely do vote. We vote for mandated, accountable and recallable delegates. We vote for motions and we vote for actions — we prefer to work by consensus and a genuine consensus should always be sought. What anarchosyndicalists don't do is vote for someone to go away and take all our decisions away from us.

Given the appalling nature of the New Labour Government, it is all too tempting to sit back and say 'told you so' to the despondent people around who put a lot of hope in change of government. And why not? But what needs to be addressed is how we let people see the fundamental flaws in the current system — and that there is a viable alternative or two. We need to point out that those who actively seek to 'represent' us, who use hierarchical institutions and who rise in them, are those that are best at manipulating hierarchical structures to gain positions of power. To expect them to actually give a toss about anything except the maintenance and development of their own position is naive. We need to point out that voting in modern western democracies is one of the lowest forms of political involvement going. It involves little conscious thought or inconvenience. It gives even less benefit. We need to point out the real alternatives.

crocodile tears

Crocodile tears of politicians over the apathy of the electorate are just that; as long as people are content to come out to vote once every five years and do nothing in between, then politicians are happy enough. It can only be an abject and rather sad need for self-justification which makes them think about forcing us to vote by law.

But apathy to us is something to really cry about. It is not possible to build a movement based on direct action and direct democracy unless that movement is based on activism. That **requires** active interest and involvement, in all aspects of our social and political movement.

In short, apathy and successful anarchosyndicalist organisation are not compatible. Structures on their own don't make things democratic; activists do.

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