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Direct Action and Unmediated Struggle

South London Solidarity Federation

2012

If we are to stand any chance of winning the world, we need direct action, self-organisation, and solidarity. Jumping through the hoops of representation and the legalism of trade unions and political parties only serves to dilute our struggles and sacrifice our control over them, rendering us passive ‘stakeholders’ or ‘shareholders’ in the process. Rather than being spectators in a mediated struggle, we must act for ourselves and represent ourselves.

Our actions are informed by two closely linked aims:

1. The desire to improve our situation in the day-to-day, through struggle and building different social bonds.
2. The need to put an end to the underlying system of social relations, capitalism.

Throughout the history of the movement to end the present state of things, there have been currents that have argued for these goals, and which have sought to make the means and ends of the

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struggle against capitalism and class society consistent.¹ If we want to effectively engage in class struggle, we need to recapture and re-vitalise this repressed and neutralised tradition.²

When we speak of class struggle, we mean the skirmishes and battles between workers and bosses, oppressors and oppressed, rulers and ruled. The vast majority of the UK's population (indeed, of the world's) are workers. We recognise that there are many divisions between workers based on the amount of power, security and privilege they have, but we don't find the concept of a stable middle class useful. Groups of workers considered middle class a generation ago now find themselves impoverished and under attack. The terms and conditions, to our mind, which marked them out have been salami-sliced away in the last 30 years. So anyone who has to work for a living, or claim benefits, or just scrape by in the margins, is working class.

It is in the interests of all workers to abolish work, by which we mean wage labour. We want freedom, both to govern ourselves and to create new social relations. The ruling classes will not voluntarily give up their power, which is why this change has to be a revolutionary one. The state, which emerged with the purpose of running society in the interests of the ruling class, cannot be turned to another use, such as the administration and re-forging of a free society.³ Rather it needs to be destroyed along with capitalism and its social and economic hierarchies and institutions.

Anarcho-syndicalism represents our living knowledge of tactics and methods, which have been passed through generations of class struggle. It is the application of anarchist methods to the workers' struggle, through unmediated free association

¹ If our aim is libertarian communism, we must organise and act along the principles of this new society in the here and now.

² See V. Damier, *Anarcho-Syndicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Black Cat Press, 2009).

³ For more on this see R. Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (AK Press, 2004), pp. 12–14.

to themselves, their fellow workers and community for solutions. Anarcho-syndicalist groups around the world strive to bring the politics and methods we have described to the class struggle, because these ideas work and that's what counts. There is a rich history and living tradition there for anyone to grasp.

We are trying to revitalise this tradition, building from the bottom up and organising action around our collective grievances in our workplaces and communities. We cannot rely on spontaneous class struggle emerging. We need to be spreading anarcho-syndicalist methods and ideas and creating struggles, however small, that use direct action and bring about improvements in our lives. In time, these struggles will escalate and broaden, with the aim of bringing them together to create a workers' movement capable of challenging capital and state.

in the places of work/oppression. Key to this is direct action, self-organisation and solidarity. We apply these approaches to everything we do, from building workplace committees, to community organising, to the internal functions of our organisations.

Direct action is a notion of such clarity, of such self-evident transparency, that merely to speak the words defines and explains them. It means that the working class, in constant rebellion against the existing state of affairs, expects nothing from outside people, powers of forces, but rather creates its own conditions of struggle and looks to itself for its means of action. It means that, against the existing society which recognises only the citizen, rises the producer. And that that producer, having grasped that any social grouping models itself upon its system of production, intends to attack directly the capitalist mode of production in order to transform it, by eliminating the employer and thereby achieving sovereignty in the workshop – the essential condition for the enjoyment of real freedom.

– Emile Pouget, *Direct Action*

Most of what the media calls direct action takes the form of spectacular public relations stunts designed to gain attention for a cause that is otherwise fought by legalistic means (i.e. hard lobbying). Direct action, as we know it, is a more immediate tactic which can take many forms: strikes, boycotts, blockades, occupations, pickets, go-slows, sabotage, expropriation and social revolution.⁴ The power of direct action lies both in its efficacy and in its immediacy. The anti-poll tax movement demonstrated the strength of direct action, making the tax unworkable and leading to the downfall of Thatcher. Through non-payment and anti-bailiff

⁴ E. Pouget, *Direct Action* (Kate Sharpley Library, 2003).

actions – self-organised solidarity – members of the community were able to resist this attack.

Direct action does not have to be spectacular to succeed. Maintenance workers on the London underground used work to rule (obeying health and safety regulations to minute detail in order to slow down production) to their advantage over a period of several years around the turn of the millennium. Upon hearing of proposed shift increases, workers instituted a so-called ‘piss strike’. Every time a worker needed to urinate, they would insist that their Protection Master went with them, leaving the rest of the workers unable to continue without his supervision. Management were shocked by the track workers’ suddenly weak bladders and apparent interest in health and safety regulations! Meanwhile, work on the tracks slowed to a snail’s pace and management were forced to abandon their plans. Whether in the workplace or in the community, direct action has been employed by the working class for centuries and it is as relevant today as it has ever been.

The ruling class have been using the latest capitalist crisis as an opportunity to attack the working class and the historically accumulated benefits of the liberal welfare state. In response, it has seen an outbreak of mass protests, and, on occasion, economic disruption. This has been both on a small scale, such as protestors storming Town Halls to disrupt council budget meetings, and on the much grander scale of UK Uncut actions, student protests⁵ and the autonomous actions of 26 March 2011.⁶ It is evident that the new British coalition government were not expecting such a response, given that they are cutting the police as well – a mistake Thatcher never made.

Street demonstrations may not be the most effective form of action but they allow us, and the ruling class, the opportunity to

⁵ For more on the student protests and UK uncut actions see D. Hancox, *Fight Back! – A Reader in the Winter of Protest* (openDemocracy, 2011).

⁶ The TUC-organised march of 26 March 2011 featured an occupation of Fortnum and Mason’s and a large black bloc presence.

rulers use to keep us weak. One of the most effective forms of solidarity is secondary strike action, which is now illegal in Britain. Secondary action consists of striking in support of other workers in struggle, augmenting the stoppage’s impact. Striking workers often find themselves ignoring the laws of the ruling class, not because it’s fun (although it may well be), but because otherwise they’ll lose.

Solidarity is not a matter of sentiment but a fact, cold and impassive as the granite foundations of a skyscraper.

– Eugene V. Debs

With the globalisation of capitalism we have become more vulnerable to attacks. We have to respond in turn with global solidarity. This is already happening to an extent, with groups such as the International Workers’ Association taking action in support of its constituent groups and other groups of workers. A recent campaign saw six Serbian anarchists and IWA members, falsely accused of international terrorism, released from prison following worldwide pickets of Serbian embassies and businesses. The concept of solidarity is gaining currency with the burgeoning anti-austerity movement, but it needs to be more than a hashtag. Rather, solidarity must be to the proletarian class like granite to Debs’ skyscraper.

We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing in this minute.

– Buenaventura Durruti

In this moment of crisis and class confrontation the stakes are high and how we fight will affect generations to come, even if we do not win. We see direct action spreading out of necessity. The more that people come to realise the futility of representative politics and moribund trade unionism, the more they will have to look

blies formed in support of shipyard workers taking industrial action demonstrated the strength of self-organisation. As one CNT member explains, 'every Thursday of every week, in the towns and villages in the area, we had all-village assemblies where anyone connected with the particular issue [of the rationalisation of the shipyards], whether they were actually workers in the shipyard itself, or women or children or grandparents, could go along ... and actually vote and take part in the decision making process of what was going to take place'.¹¹ With such popular input and support, the shipyard workers won their demands and the assembly continued after the strike of 1987, creating structures 'very different from the kind of structure of political parties, where the decisions are made at the top and they filter down'.¹²

It is necessary to organise the power of the proletariat. But this organisation must be the work of the proletariat itself ... Organise, constantly organise the international militant solidarity of the workers, in every trade and country, and remember that however weak you are as isolated individuals or districts, you will constitute a tremendous, invincible power by means of universal co-operation.

— Michael Bakunin

Solidarity is one of our most powerful weapons. When we stand and act together we are stronger than when we act alone. As anarcho-syndicalists, we support each other in our day-to-day struggles and argue for the working class to unite across the divisions and boundaries created or perpetuated by capitalism, such as race, gender, employment status or anything else our

¹¹ Solidarity Federation, *Anarcho-Syndicalism in Puerto Real: From Shipyard Resistance to Direct Democracy and Community Control* (Theory and Practice, 2011), p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

gauge what is the real strength of feeling, to show our colours and meet in solidarity. We cannot, however, demonstrate our way to a better world, nor does being right guarantee us our rights. We know that symbolic demonstrations of opinion, such as against the war in Iraq in 2003, can easily be ignored. We cannot be sure that direct action would have stopped the Iraq invasion, but we can see from the state's response that peace campaigners trying to disrupt military bases was much more threatening than a million people walking from A to B.⁷

The trade unions in Britain have always generally been against using direct action, partly because of their social-democratic mindset, though the anti-strike laws also play a role. There are laws against solidarity in the UK which prevent workers from striking unless they have a trade dispute with their employer and have jumped through hoops designed to let lawyers and big businesses take unions to court for minor infractions. The most militant of the unions, the RMT, regularly has to re-ballot for strikes over technicalities concerning the delivery of ballot papers to a handful of workers, yet even their isolated persistence has led to calls from Conservative politicians and think-tanks to impose tougher restrictions.⁸

In reality, as the 2009 Lindsey oil refineries strike showed, laws can be ignored if you are strong enough and well-organised.⁹ Refusing to use direct action is like fighting with one hand tied behind

⁷ The state happily broke its own laws to detain protesters and stop them passing along a public highway.

⁸ Policy Exchange made a number of suggestions including that a majority of employees in the balloted workplace vote, a policy endorsed by Boris Johnson, who's election as Mayor of London would have been discounted if the same logic were applied to the electorate. See 'Modernising Industrial Relations', 9 November 2010, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/modernising-industrial-relations/>

⁹ The Lindsey workers organised unofficial action against attempts by employers to undermine national wage agreements. While there was media controversy about the alleged nationalist content of this dispute, the most important

your back, while kowtowing to anti-strike laws takes care of the other hand. Small wonder the unions are more fat-cat than wildcat. For anarcho-syndicalists, strikes are not only vehicles for winning concessions but an opportunity to generalise and weave together resistance and solidarity, en route to our strongest tool: a general strike.

In the Syndicate the members control the organisation – not the bureaucrats controlling the members.

– Tom Brown, *Syndicalism*

The Solidarity Federation is not a union, but a revolutionary union initiative which seeks to integrate the economic and the political, the day-to-day struggle and the revolutionary struggle. There is a further difference we should note: the trade unions are tied to a model of representation. They represent their members at work, and are tied (either formally or informally) to the Labour Party, who allegedly represent the workers' interest in Parliament and local authorities. This is so far removed from reality that only the blindest of leftists still parrot this line. Labour are just another political party supporting big business. However, even if the more militant unions were to shift their support to, say, the Socialist Party, the top-down model, where workers do not control their representatives and cannot recall them, it would continue to inhibit our struggle.

We favour horizontal organisation which provides democratic unmediated structures of social relations. In contrast to the existing union structures, we are building for workers' councils and democratically controlled mass assemblies. If we think we can run the whole world, we ought at least to be able to run our own struggles. This is sometimes called a prefigurative approach, because it mirrors the new world we want to build through our actions in the here

thing for us is that it showed workers can successfully ignore the anti-strike laws if they are strong enough.

and now. This acts as a school of struggle, with participants learning as they go and becoming aware of their own power. Workers who take action start to demystify the processes involved, seeing through the specialisations they are told are necessary – whether of management or union – and start to take that power back.

Self-education leads to self-organisation. Our workplace organiser training provides the tools with which to fight the boss and facilitate bottom-up organising. With the low level of strikes and the halving of union membership in the last two decades, it is evident that militancy needs to be relearned. Some think revolt can happen spontaneously, but whenever you look deeper into a 'spontaneous' action, you find agitators laying the groundwork. Although we accept that for most of the time we are going to be part of a militant minority, we reject the ideas or organisational models of vanguardism. Unlike the trade unions, we are not subject to the anti-strike laws and make a point of inoculation – discussing potential disciplinary procedures and knowing your enemy when planning action.¹⁰ What we can do, at the moment, is support people from outside the workplace, with pickets, leafleting and other forms of pressure.

The prefigurative approach does not preclude bread and butter issues. Rather, it informs how we fight to improve our lives. We reject the idea that day-to-day struggles are somehow subordinate to the struggle for revolution. Standing up for ourselves in our day-to-day lives to improve our quality of life as workers, against racism or sexism, building solidarity and self-organising are all seeds of libertarian communism. In Puerto Real, Spain, community assem-

¹⁰ This means preparing people involved for the risks, including the worst possible ones, creating support structures and plans for resisting repercussions and victimisation. It is against the law to sack strikers or union organisers, but that does not mean it doesn't happen. In our view, the best defence against it is the solidarity of your colleagues and workmates, not a slow-grinding employment tribunal process whose decisions rarely go in favour of workers and are often ignored when they do so.