

Anarchism, Class Struggle and Political Organization

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As Cindy Milstein points out in her essay “Anarchism’s Promise for Anti-capitalist Resistance,” anarchists have been involved in numerous visible protest actions, such as the various protests at meetings promoting corporate globalization from the 1999 “Battle of Seattle” on, or the Direct Action to Stop the War protests in San Francisco in 2002. Activists who are already radicalized converge in such actions. Of course a variety of organizations mobilize to participate in some of these protests, from environmental groups to the unions who mobilized for the 1999 World Trade organization meetings. But what is the relationship of the anarchists to the other social movements and mass organizations?

Anarchists are a part of the layer of already-radicalized activists. But this is a very thin layer in American society. What about the majority of the population who make up the exploited and oppressed in society? What is the relationship between anarchism and anarchist activists and the mass of the population?

The slogan “the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the workers themselves” was included by Marx in the principles of the “First International” in the 1860s-70s and anarcho-syndicalists and other social anarchists have always strongly supported this principle. But what is the relationship between anarchism and anarchists, on the one hand, and the masses who are supposed to be, in libertarian Left thinking, the agency of social transformation?

Cindy Milstein writes:

“Anarchism has valiantly tried to meld the universalistic aims of the Left and its expansive understanding of freedom with the particularistic goals of the new social movements in areas such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and ableism.”

This is a reasonable summary of much of the discussion and thinking among anarchists, but it doesn’t quite answer my question about the relationship between anarchism and the mass of the population and their potential for self-liberation.

During the past decade a number of anarchists have developed a critique of various weaknesses in American anarchism, such as anti-organizational prejudices, fragmentation, “tyranny of structurelessness” and excessive focus on “actions” without relating this to ongoing mass organizing in workplaces and communities. Some of the influences on anarchism mentioned by

Cindy Milstein...such as European “autonomism,” Situationism and the model of the small informal “affinity group”...have contributed to these weaknesses. Some anarchists believe that any sort of formal or large organization is “inevitably authoritarian.”

Some of the anarchists who had been involved in “protest hopping” have, in more recent years, become more interested in workplace and community organizing, building a more long-term presence in working class communities, and building a social base for libertarian Left ideas.

Last year about a hundred activists (from the USA and Canada) attended a Class Struggle Anarchist Conference in New York City. To ensure a productive and friendly experience, the conference was invitation-only. There were panels on “Anarchists in the workplace,” “Anarchism and Feminism,” “Anarchists in Communities of Color,” “Anarchists in Anti-fascist/Anti-racist Movements”, and a variety of other subjects. According to the report in issue 14 of Northeastern Anarchist:

“One comrade said that ‘The discussion went beyond all regional differences, and commonality was emphasized.’ The ‘presenters were not afraid to learn from failures, and there was a lack of posturing.’ ‘There was an overall broad class focus,’ said another.”...On the panels themselves, one person said ‘the panels on feminism and communities of color were for everyone, not...just by those interested in the subjects.’ Another comrade said ‘the focus of the workshops was experiential, not theoretical, but the two...were merged in many instances.’”

Since then two inter-organizational discussion bulletins have been produced and another Class Struggle Anarchist Conference is scheduled for later this year. The purpose of this process is to see what level of agreement we have, share experiences, and develop a better-organized and more coordinated movement.

This process has involved three regional federations (on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts), five local groups (in the Great Lakes area), and one continent-wide organization. I would estimate that these organizations include between three and four hundred activists... overwhelmingly people in their 20s and 30s. I haven’t obtained permission to name all the groups, but I can say that North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists, Workers Solidarity Alliance and Solidarity & Defense have played a role in initiating and organizing this process.

Except for the continent-wide group (Workers Solidarity Alliance), which was founded 25 years ago, all the groups have been formed within the last decade. Activists in these groups are involved in anti-racist organizing, support for immigrant rights, for reproductive freedom, tenant organizing, workplace organizing and support for worker struggles, radical popular education, and dissemination of anarchist ideas, among other things.

I would estimate that pro-organizational anarchism with a class struggle perspective in the USA has reached its highest point since World War 2.

In what follows I’m giving my own interpretation of this sector of anarchism.

“Anarchism with a class-struggle perspective” doesn’t mean it is “class reductionist” but that it disagrees with Bookchin and others who fail to see the continued reality and importance of the class structure that is at the heart of capitalism and the struggle that grows out of this. To change society, it’s not adequate to appeal to “humanity” or “citizens” in general, as Bookchin proposed. The capitalist and coordinator classes are also part of humanity but they are entrenched in maintaining their power and privilege. At the same time, the division of society along the various lines of oppression generates movements and struggles in opposition.

In the years after World War 2, seeing the increasing cooptation and bureaucratization of unionism in the industrial countries, Bookchin adopted the view that there was, somehow, an epochal change in which struggles in workplaces were no longer relevant to popular empowerment and the struggle for social transformation. Other anarchists in that era, such as Paul Goodman and Colin Ward, followed a similar path. In the period of the Cold War, talk of “class struggle” was also readily associated with Communism.

At its heart capitalism is a system of exploitation of people who are subordinated in the work process, and a continual resistance or tug of war ensues because of this... sometimes on a small scale, sometimes breaking out in large social events such as general strikes. Ultimately there is no liberatory replacement for capitalism unless workers are able to gain control over their own productive activities and potentials. If we take seriously the principle that “the emancipation of the working class is the work of the workers themselves,” it’s hard to see how this emancipatory result is going to happen without a movement actively developed by workers themselves.

That said, class isn’t just about struggles in workplaces between workers and bosses. The power of the dominating classes spreads outward throughout society, in their control over the state and media. Class struggles occur at the point of consumption, among tenants and public transit riders for example.

The working class is highly heterogeneous. Workers are women, African-Americans, gays and lesbians, skilled and less skilled, and so on.

Many anarchists who work with a class struggle perspective these days operate with an “intersectional” analysis of oppression. Structural racism and structural gender inequality (patriarchy) or homophobia/transphobia have their own sources though they are also exploited by capitalism, to weaken the working class. It is equally important to fight all of them. They intersect in the lives of actual working class people. An African-American woman working as a postal clerk at the post office is subject to the gender, race and class systems, but she lives her life as a totality...these oppressions aren’t in separate worlds.

How does this large and heterogeneous population acquire the ability to change the society? Here it is useful to consider the process that Marxists call “class formation.” “Class formation” is the more or less protracted process by which the working class develops from an objectively oppressed group...a class “in itself” ...into a group with the consciousness and capacity to liberate itself...a class “for itself,” in Marx’s words. People are shaped by the power relations and oppressive systems they face within the current society. Workers are in a relatively powerless position and, if they are isolated, may have little sense of having an ability to change things. The social relations of production may develop a conflicted consciousness...both resentment and also going along or deference, or even accepting the idea that the bosses must be the right people to make the decisions because they have more formal education. These same social relations in the work process also encourage the managers and professionals and owners to have a bloated sense of their entitlement to make the decisions.

Much of the working class is forced into dead-end or de-skilled jobs where they have few opportunities to develop themselves, their knowledge or sense of self-esteem. Working class people are also less likely to have access to resources to help them develop their knowledge, such as college education or better schools.

There are effects of this we need to consider. First, this tends to generate passivity and inaction, if a person doesn’t see collective struggle as an avenue for enhancement of their circumstances.

And, second, it also generates inequality in skills and knowledge that can effect the way organizations or movements are run. Gender and race/national oppression also shape this inequality.

This also tells us why a liberatory social transformation is unlikely to occur “spontaneously”...contrary to the thinking of “autonomists” and some anarchists. As Marx pointed out, it is through the process of mass struggle and building their own movements that the working class...the oppressed and exploited in general...develop themselves...their knowledge and capacities to effectively “self-manage” their own movements and create the conditions for their social liberation. Because collective action can be a source of power...as when workers shut down a workplace, it encourages a belief in the ability of the participants to make change.

Developing a unity of social movements that develop in opposition to the various forms of oppression that working class people are subject to is an essential part of this process. I believe this presupposes that people from a variety of backgrounds and situations and movements have an opportunity to come together to explore their concerns and achieve mutual understanding.

To have the power to transform the society, the various social movements and strands of struggle have to come together, to forge a unity through alliance. To be an authentic alliance, it must take seriously and incorporate the concerns of the various movements.

In my own essay in the Reimagining Society discussion I referred to this as a labor/social movement alliance. That is, the mass organizations created by workers in the struggles with the employers develop an alliance with other social movements that emerge in the struggles against the various forms of oppression in society. In a period of fundamental challenge to the dominating classes, this alliance might be expressed through the kind of decision-making body that Ezekiel Adamovsky calls an “assembly of the social movements.”

Thus I think anarchists who emphasize organization and a class struggle perspective see mass struggles and mass organizing as the process for changing society...because it is through the active participation of growing numbers of ordinary people, building and controlling their own movements, that they develop the capacity and aspirations for changing society.

From the point of view of “organized anarchism with a class-struggle perspective,” two kinds of organization are needed: (1) forms of mass organization through which ordinary people can grow and develop their collective strength, and (2) political organizations of the anarchist or libertarian socialist minority, to have a more effective means to coordinate our activities, gain influence in working class communities, and disseminate our ideas. In the World War 1 era, Italian anarchists coined the term “dual organization” for this perspective.

An organization does not have to be large to be a “mass organization” as I’m using this term. If 30 tenants in a building get together and have meetings and form a tenants union, this is a “mass organization.” A mass organization is put together to fight in some area and people join because they support the aims...such as having a union at work to oppose management or an organization at a college to fight tuition hikes. Membership in a political organization, on the other hand, is based on agreement with a particular ideology or political perspective.

A political organization is desirable for a variety of reasons. To pool resources for projects, to provide each other feedback and support, to achieve greater public visibility for social anarchism, to coordinate organizing. We learn from trying to put our ideas into practice, and political organizations enable activists to discuss lessons of practical experience and develop their ideas.

Of course, a major historical example of “dual organizational anarchism with a class-struggle perspective” was in the Spanish revolution in the ‘30s. The Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI) was formed as a loose federation of groups active in the National Confederation of Labor (CNT).

It was formed originally to better coordinate responses to efforts by a Leninist organization (a predecessor of the POUM) to gain control of CNT unions, also opposition to tendencies of some union officials to become less accountable to the rank and file.

Spanish anarchism of that era was “dual” in three ways.

First, there was the distinction between the political organization (FAI) and the mass organizations – both neighborhood centers and CNT unions. Second, in addition to the FAI there was another anarchist political organization – Mujeres Libres. This was an organization dedicated to the organizing of poor peasant and urban working class women. The activists in this organization were anarcho-syndicalists but they viewed women’s liberation and class liberation as distinct, equally important, aspects of social liberation.

And, third, class struggle was viewed as occurring not only in workplaces but also in the community. In the mid-‘20s anarcho-syndicalist union activists had begun to worry about being boxed in through collective bargaining with employers. Catalan syndicalist theoretician Joan Peiro recommended building neighborhood organizations and developing a broad discussion over issues of importance to workers outside the workplace. This organizing eventually led to the massive rent strike in Barcelona in 1931, which brought into action new sectors of the population...for example, women played a dominant role in the rent strike.

It was because of this experience with community struggle that the anarcho-syndicalist movement in Spain modified its “vision” at its congress in May 1936, adding neighborhood assemblies and resident-based councils as an equal building block of governance in a libertarian socialist society along with workplace assemblies and worker councils. Bookchin also drew on this concept of “libertarian municipality” rooted in assemblies.

But this was not separate from class struggle. Most of the actual “free municipalities” formed in the revolution of 1936 were in rural villages and towns in Aragon. But it was the CNT rural unions who took the initiative to overthrow the old municipal councils, invoke an assembly of the residents, elect a new revolutionary committee, and collectivize land. The collectivization of land was directed in particular against the Spanish kulak class...wealthy farmers who employed farm hands. The aim of both the Socialist and anarchist rural unions in Spain was destruction of wage-slavery in the countryside. This is why the rural unions insisted that no farmer could privately control more land than he could farm through his own labor.

During the Spanish revolution in 1936 the FAI moved away from the very “affinity group model” that Bookchin recommended. To have a more effective organization to counter the growing influence of the Communist Party, the FAI moved to large geographic chapters. After this change the FAI grew to 140,000 members.

In recent years many dual organizational working class-oriented anarchists in the USA have moved away from the older model of an anarchist federation formed as a link among pre-existing collectives. Through various experiences with such formations, from the ‘70s to more recent years, it was found that this tends to get in the way of the level of theoretical and practical unity needed to work effectively together. Thus many dual organizational anarchists these days tend to think in terms of a unitary organization based on a common program and individual membership, with local branches and a federal council of delegates of some sort.

Dual organizational class struggle-oriented anarchism continued to have a social base in some countries after World War 2...particularly in South America. In the decades leading up to the military takeover in Uruguay, the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation (FAU) had a significant influence in the CNT labor federation and in the housing movement, and also played a role in the resistance

(including armed struggle) to the dictatorship. The legacy of the FAU in that era and the ideas it developed from its experience are still an important influence on South American anarchism.

I will mention one of the FAU's ideas that I agree with...the idea of "social insertion." They believed it was necessary for the anarchist activists to be committed to long-term involvement in organizations and struggles in workplaces and neighborhoods. The role of the organized anarchist minority is not to try to gain top-down control through bodies such as executive committees or manipulate to impose its "line" on the mass organization. Rather, through their long term involvement and personable relations with others they can gain an influence and be a voice for self-management of organizations and for militant collective action. The development of the working class is an organic process but the activists and rank-and-file organizers can play a role.

Dual organizational anarchists often say that the role of the anarchist political organization is to "win the battle of ideas," that is, to gain influence within movements and among the mass of the population by countering authoritarian or liberal or conservative ideas. Bakunin had said that the role of anarchist activists was a "leadership of ideas."

But disseminating ideas isn't the only form of influence. Working with others of diverse views in mass organizations and struggles, exhibiting a genuine commitment, and being a personable and supportive person in this context also builds personal connections, and makes it more likely one's ideas will be taken seriously.

How does this conception of the anarchist political organization differ from vanguardism?

To answer this question we need to start with some idea of what "the vanguard" is. I think there are two aspects to this. Both anarchists and Marxists in the past have talked about "uneven consciousness" within the working class population. People vary in terms of how far they aspire to change society for example or to the knowledge they gained about how capitalism works, and so on. But also there are some people who exhibit more leadership skills than others...speaking ability, self-confidence, a disposition to take initiative, ability to articulate a viewpoint or rally others behind them, ability to write, self-education about various aspects of society, knowledge about how to organize.

This is shaped by various things, including past experience, being involved in organizations, and the kinds of differences in skills, confidence and education that reflect a society that is unequal along class, gender, and race/nationality lines.

To put it another way, some people have more "human capital" as far as being effective in, and disposed to, activism and organizing.

Thus understood, the "vanguard" within the working class consists of the layer of people who are active, do organizing, have some influence through the sorts of leadership qualities I've referred to, take on leadership positions in organizations, can articulate and theorize situations and do things like publishing leaflets and newsletters. The "vanguard" in this sense is extremely various in its ideas but most right now may not be anti-capitalist in their thinking.

The idea of a "vanguard party" is that a political organization is to try to draw to it the layer of the working class that has these sorts of leadership qualities and to use this "human capital" to achieve a hegemonic position within mass movements. It's aim is to use this position of dominant influence to eventually achieve power for its party. And along the way it also thinks in terms of achieving power within the various union or mass movement organizations. This means congealing the party's power through various methods of hierarchical control. This is formal leadership power and not just influence.

Moreover, the idea is that the party's dominant position would flow from its relative monopolization over a certain kind of theoretical knowledge – its absorption of Marxist theory – which is supposed to provide effective guidance for the success of a revolutionary movement.

Putting aside the question of the value of Marxist-Leninist theory, a libertarian Left approach to this question should differ from the “vanguard party” concept in two ways.

First, the aim of libertarian socialism is that the masses themselves should achieve power, through mass direct democracy, not that a leadership group should do so through a party gaining control of a state. Reflecting this, the aim of the libertarian Left activists should be to encourage self-management of movements/organizations.

After the October 1917 revolution in Russia, most of the world's libertarian syndicalist labor organizations... which then had a membership of 3 to 4 million... affiliated tentatively to the new labor international initiated by the Russian Communist Party. However, at the actual founding conference the libertarian syndicalists were confronted by Communist Party officials insisting that the union organizations should be mere “transmission belts” of the Communist Parties in their respective countries. This led the libertarian syndicalist unions to withdraw. Autonomy of the mass movements is itself a libertarian socialist principle.

Second, we shouldn't take for granted the unequal distribution of “human capital” crafted by a highly inequalitarian and oppressive society. Although “We Are All Leaders” is maybe not always an accurate description of what is, it should be the ideal that we strive towards.

We need methods of working against the relative monopolization of skills and knowledge and organizational resources in the hands of a minority. Historically when some activists and organizers gain knowledge through practical experience, it often happens that members of that organization become dependent on them. This was part of the process that led to bureaucratization of unions in the USA.

Thus working to make rank and file self-management effective requires that we have conscious programs and methods for democratizing knowledge, doing popular education, nurturing people as organizers, developing skills from writing to public speaking to theorizing one's experience. For example, local worker schools that draw on the experience of activists and organizers who teach, or share their experiences with, classes.

In the '30s in Spain the Mujeres Libres activists talked about a process of capacitacion – developing the capacities of ordinary people. This was the focus of their organizing of working class women. They created literacy classes, public speaking classes, and circles to study social theory, created child care programs, and worked with the anarcho-syndicalist unions to develop apprentice programs for women. These were all part of their efforts at developing the capacities of women for effective participation in the unions and other organizations and control over their lives.

Direct democracy is necessary but not sufficient for effective self-management of movements. People are better able to participate effectively as knowledge is democratized and skills are more widely developed. This prefigures the more equal sharing of resources to develop people's potential in a libertarian socialist society.

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