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What, If Anything, Is A Dual Power Strategy?

Wayne Price

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Bring the Ruckus, the statement by the Phoenix Ruckus collective, declares itself for “a dual power strategy”. It defines this as “one that directly challenges institutions of power and at the same time, in some way, prefigures the new institutions we envision...” As an example, it gives its Copwatch campaign. Other “popular protests”, however well meaning, if they do not lead to this so-called dual power strategy, “should be abandoned” by revolutionaries. It gives the example of animal liberation, but could have cited many more popular struggles.

What is “dual power” anyways? The term itself arose during the 1917 Russian Revolution. The Russian word “dvoevlastie” is usually translated as “dual power”, but could be given as “double sovereignty”, or “two-power regime”. It was used in Russia after the old Czarist state had been overthrown and a new, pro-capitalist regime, the Provisional Government, was set up. It claimed to be for capitalist democracy although it did little to carry out a bourgeois democratic program (it did not call elections or give land to the peasants or self determination to the oppressed nations of the

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Russian empire). But at the very same time, another power existed — the popular soviets (councils). Rooted in factory committees and local bodies, these directly represented the workers, peasants and soldiers. Originally they were just popular bodies to coordinate strikes. But they had such support among working people that they came to shadow the new capitalist state. For a period, there were two centers of power, the Provisional Government and the affiliated soviets, and this was the dual power regime. This could not last indefinitely, and eventually the soviets were used to overthrow the Provisional Government. A coalition of Bolsheviks, Left Social Revolutionaries (revolutionary populists) and anarchists used the soviets to smash the previous regime and set up the soviets as the new power. As is well known, the Communist Party eventually replaced the soviets with a bureaucracy as the new state, which is another story.

Trotsky generalized this to other revolutions for the sake of revolutionary strategy (see Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution). Paraphrasing his ideas (as I now understand them): During revolutionary periods, it is unusual for rising classes to establish a new power overnight. Instead, what is more common is for there to be two or more institutions, competing for potential power. At some point this may take the form of outright civil war, with each side fighting for territory. One side tends to include neighborhood committees, workplace councils, associations, directly-democratic forms and councils of delegates, which are counterpoised both to the power of the old state and of the new capitalist state. All too often, the popular organizations do not see the need to stand on their own. They hold themselves subservient to the liberal-democratic forces, until it is too late (which is what happened in Spain in the '30's). It is the job of the revolutionary organization to awaken people, to get them to see the need to overthrow all the states in favor of the popular association as the new power (in Spain, this was finally seen by the 'Friends of Durruti', but too late).

In the current North American anarchist scene, the term “dual power” floats freely with little to no connection to its original revolutionary meaning. For example, it is often used to describe the alternate-institution strategy. That is, capitalist institutions should be gradually and peacefully replaced by cooperatives, communes, intentional communities, worker-run businesses, free schools, etc.

These should spread and grow, behind the back of the capitalist state, until they would take the place of the authoritarian system. This is a program that goes back to the early utopian socialists or to Proudhon. There can be nothing wrong with founding cooperative stores or worker-run enterprises. These are good in themselves and need no justification. But when they are proposed as a strategy for replacing capitalism they are no better than other forms of reformism. Rather than build a movement to confront the system, this strategy means to slip away from it. But the system is not run by fools (or at least, not entirely by fools). If such a movement were ever to threaten them, they would suppress it, and there would be no mass movement to fight for it. More likely, the rulers would have co-opted it long before things reached this stage. Coops tend to fail by success. That is, they do well and merge into the capitalist economy. (I live in a coop building, very well run by its tenants, and no threat to capitalism.)

The Ruckus-ites have a very different intention. They want to confront the capitalist state. But, they tie their hands with a rigid set of rules. Somewhere there may be a document explaining why revolutionaries must directly challenge the state and prefigure new institutions at the same time. I have not seen it. The reasons are not self-obvious. As they know, although the level of struggle has increased, we are nowhere near a revolutionary situation in North America. We are far from a real dual power situation. While Copwatch is a very good program, it does not really threaten the state under current conditions. Union organizing (very difficult in Phoenix) would be a greater threat to business at this point. Instead I propose a strategy of opposition and class struggle.

Revolutionaries should encourage any and all mass struggle from below against the capitalist class and its institutions. We should be for anything that opens up people's eyes to their oppression and leads them to fight for their own interests. We should support the needs of all oppressed people, while connecting these to the struggles of the working class, due to its strategic power to change society. We support demands that would improve the lives of ordinary working people, and we propose demands and methods of struggle which lead to further opposition to the ruling class.

Whether or not this oppositional approach is called a dual power strategy is not important. I do not see any advantage to calling it dual power. There is no point in tying our hands with rigid definitions of what sort of struggles may or may not be supported.