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Anarchism, Oppression, and Exploitation

A Workers Solidarity Movement Position Paper

Workers Solidarity Movement

October 2016

This paper outlines how we the intersections of exploitation and oppressions and what approach the WSM takes in relation to this. Our collective theoretical understanding is framed in the WSM Constitution's core point of unity number 7: *"We actively oppose all manifestations of prejudice within the workers' movement and society in general and we work alongside those struggling against racism, sexism, [religious] sectarianism and homophobia as a priority. We see the success of a revolution and the successful elimination of these oppressions after the revolution being determined by the building of such struggles in the pre-revolutionary period. The methods of struggle that we promote are a preparation for the running of society along anarchist and communist lines after the revolution."*

That theory is informed by the individual and collective experiences of WSM members over 30 years and our adaption of anarchism to our local contexts which includes specific experiences of oppression and personal & historical experiences of the anti-colonial struggle in Ireland and elsewhere. The de-

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velopment of this paper involved our own experiences being placed alongside our discussions of the broad set of writings and observations emerging from the anarchist and feminist study of the relationship between gender, class and race and in particular what is often referred to today as 'Intersectionality'.

1. In what follows we distinguish between exploitation and oppression/domination. Exploitation being the process by which workers receive less than the value of what they produce, the difference being taken by the capitalist. Oppression/domination being the mechanisms of violence used to marginalise groups of people based on real and imagined characteristics. So while workers are exploited many are also dominated through white supremacy, patriarchy, snobbery and a wide range of other methods of domination. These are not stand alone experiences separated off from each other, rather exploitation and oppressions interact in a way that reinforces class rule and often serves to conscript the more privileged sections of the class against the most oppressed, sometime literally as police and soldiers.
2. The historical workers movement, of which anarchism is a part, has traditionally seen its task as the self-emancipation of the working class from economic bondage and exploitation. Therefore it is necessary to understand how that relates to the struggles for liberation from domination and oppression.
3. All unfree societies throughout history have been based on relations of domination and oppression as well as exploitation. Relations that are social rather than just per-

sonal. In pre-capitalist societies the relations of production were such that exploitation was imposed from the outside through the structures of domination. In such societies the relations of domination and exploitation are effectively one and the same. In capitalist society exploitation becomes integrated into the relation of production. Coercion appears as an anonymous force (poverty) and social relations are increasingly separated into political and economic spheres.

4. This relative separation means that liberal society becomes possible. Liberal society is the specifically capitalist unfree society where the exploited are politically free from bondage to any particular master, but remain economically unfree. This opens the possibility for liberation from oppression of categories of identity whose domination is a legacy of the social system recently replaced by capitalism. But it allows also for the proliferation of new categories of identity, as identity is decoupled from the specific capitalist relations of production and exploitation. This can allow the positive freedom of exploring new ways of being and personal relations. But it can also provide a means of creating new oppressions specific to the current phase of a particular capitalist society's need to stratify, hierarchise and divide the working class. Class consciousness must thus transcend, without suppressing, any particular identity. But that cannot happen in the absence of solidarity in the struggle to overcome the oppressions that divide the class.
5. Historically there has been a tension in the left (including much of our own previous work) between recognising what is outlined above and still strategically going on to see unity as being a question of identifying the main con-

tradition in society and lining up behind a single unifying identity, most often that of a white, male industrial worker. A 'Unity is Strength' approach has then all too often meant the silencing or minimising of voices that do not easily fit into this identity.

6. In contrast to this approach we argue that there is a need to give voice to all oppressions, even those that may not affect large groups rather than to silence such voices behind a single representative figure. We recognise that, depending on their life circumstances, people experience oppressions in different ways.
7. Neither is the route to solidarity found by competing to identify who are the 'most oppressed' so as to make them the alternative 'representative figure' whose voice can then override those of the 'less oppressed'. The idea of trying to create a hierarchy of oppressions, ranked in order of severity, is futile and counter-productive. Solidarity requires accepting that difference cannot be subsumed under any single representative figure whether of the most supposedly common or the most oppressed.
8. We aim to 'join the dots' – that is to look at how oppressions and the intersections of oppression relate to each other and impact the relationships between those in struggle. It is through such an understanding and through ensuring that all voices are heard that a meaningful unity in struggle will be forged and maintained.
9. However we see the need to recognise that people have multiple identities and our challenge is to create a revolutionary movement capable of overthrowing all of the oppressions and collectively creating a free society.
10. While we believe our movements must be based on our experiences this means movements including WSM are

shaped by who composes them. This composition will determine what struggle they see as priorities, what they overlook and even the methodology they bring to struggles. We aim to be conscious of and develop ways of counteracting such tendencies in our own organisations and others we work in.

11. This theoretical recognition requires a collective effort towards minimising the effects of marginalisation and privilege on the internal culture of the WSM by developing both facilitation processes and anti-oppression consciousness-raising / training programs for members & supporters.
12. Our role is to collaborate in the cultivation of spaces where those historically marginalised by their oppression can speak and self organise. As an organisation we are in solidarity with such organising efforts which of course will often also include some of our own membership. We will will collectively support such work and amplify the agency of the oppressed.