

Anarchism today

After the collapse of “socialism”

Workers Solidarity Movement

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AT THE MOMENT the “Socialist Movement” has all but collapsed. Despite the fact that high unemployment, war and mass starvation would point to the need for a coherent anti-capitalist alternative most socialists are confused and demoralised. The reason is simple, both the reformist and Leninist parties are paying for their legacy of betrayal of socialism in this century. What they conceived socialism to be has been totally discredited. As anarchists it is important to realise that there are both advantages and drawbacks to these developments.

The vast majority of those that referred to themselves as socialists saw the Stalinist countries as being ahead of capitalism, a large amount even went so far as to refer to these regimes as “actually existing socialism”. To these people the collapse of these regimes has resulted in the belief that socialism itself cannot work. To anarchists there is no such problem, we realised that the USSR stopped moving towards socialism when the Bolsheviks destroyed workers democracy between 1918 and 1921.

IS SOCIALISM DEAD?

The fact that most of yesterday's ‘socialists’ are now saying socialism is no longer on the agenda is and will have a major effect on the level of struggle in society over the next few years. Most of those workers who were activists in unions and campaigns were either members of the various state socialist groups or were broadly sympathetic to them. Many of these people are affected by the inevitable demoralisation of seeing their parties disintegrate.

In the ideal situation we anarchists would be in the position to move in and fill this gap. We would be able to get across the argument that it is not socialism that has collapsed but rather reformism, Leninism and Stalinism. We could say that anarchism demonstrates that there is no authoritarian way to socialism. In reality however the anarchist movement is much too small in most countries to be able to get across these arguments on a mass basis. Rather those few small organisations like ourselves are trying to make what impact we can.

This means that although it is now easier to put across anarchist politics to people searching for an alternative to capitalism there are now far fewer people looking for such an alternative. This is the problem we face in the short term.

LABOUR PARTY BLUES

Those groups who drew their traditions from Lenin and Stalin are already collapsing or have collapsed. A few who have the tradition of not being such hard line Leninists are trying to defend Lenin from anarchist criticism. That other large ‘socialist’ tradition of Social Democracy (or labourism) is also in deep trouble. The reasons for this are not hard to find.

The labour parties always accommodated that section of the ruling class who saw stability as being insured through policies of co-operation with the trade union bureaucracy. The labour parties were the creation of the trade union bureaucrats and fought to reduce class antagonism through the introduction of the welfare state, arbitration procedures, national plans between the bosses and the union bureaucrats etc. In the past the far-left convinced large numbers of activists to join the labour parties either to transform them or expose the party leadership.

Internationally these policies meet with various degrees of success from the end of the second world war on as a mixture of expanding capitalism and the threat of industrial unrest led to most

states taking up many parts of the Labour parties programme. By the late 70's however this expansion had slowed or stopped and the Labour parties where they remained in power led the offensive on behalf of the capitalists to drive down wages and living standards. In Britain this offensive was continued by the Thatcher government which held power in England throughout the eighties. In many other European countries and in Australia it was the Social Democrats who carried out the cuts in the 80's.

A DECADE OF DEFEATS

Naturally enough workers resisted this offensive and won a few initial victories. The trade union bureaucracy however turned increasingly to trying to work out plans which would limit job losses rather than outright opposition to these cuts. Strikes like those in Liverpool, the printers at Wapping, the P+O workers and the national miners strike of 1984 were isolated, with the bureaucrats doing all they could to prevent sympathy action. The left in the unions was unwilling to fight the bureaucrats so such strikes lost despite heroic efforts by those on strike.

The lesson most workers took was that job losses could not be fought against, the 80's in most of the western countries was a decade where defeat followed defeat. The left rather than seeing these losses as coming from their reliance on the Labour party and the union bureaucrats to led the fightback drew entirely the wrong lesson. They thought "Thatcherism" represented some sort of new, undefeatable phenomenon. A variety of theories which sort to explain that the working class no longer existed or that class politics were no longer relevant came into being. There was nothing new in this, in the mid 60's similar ideas that the western working class had sold out to consumerism abounded, these of course were smashed by the events of 1968, particularly the general strike in France.

Most of those on the left who didn't go along with this analysis were Leninists of one sort or another who looked to the soviet union as some sort of example. The collapse of the soviet union had a similar if not larger effect on these people. Thus at the start of 1992 we find the situation where despite the fact that capitalism is in obvious trouble there is almost no organised alternative to it. The radical alternatives of yesterday have become to-days jokes.

SOME THINGS CHANGE

The collapse of the confidence of the reformist labour parties may not be final. A British Social Attitudes survey reported in the Guardian (Nov 20 '91) revealed 83% supported the "Keynesian policy of fighting unemployment through investing in construction planning" and 9 out of 10 people wanted more investment in the NHS even if taxes had to be raised to pay for it. Yet at a time when Thatcherism has been abandoned as inadequate by the bosses, many on the left still consider it to have destroyed the whole socialist project.

In the 80's there were many changes in the composition of the working class. In the west at least the industrial working class dwindled as the white collar working class grew. Many of the largest industrial workplaces were broken up and dispersed commonly with the aim of weakening the unions involved. In Ireland there are only 6 sites employing over 1000 people in the same company. For those who saw socialism as being introduced by steelworkers and miners wearing cloth caps and clogs this represented a big blow

In Ireland Irish companies have increasingly come to replace multinationals. Of the top 10 companies by turnover only two (at positions 5 and 10) are multinationals. In the top 50 there are a total of 10 multinationals. This demonstrates how the southern Irish ruling class has successfully established itself as a junior partner of international capitalism. Those socialists in Ireland who saw the multi-nationals rather than our native capitalist class as the main problem in the south are being forced to reconsider.

There is nothing new in all this, throughout his century conditions have changed for socialists. Similar ideas that socialism was dead were being thrown around before the struggles of 1968 shook the world. We have to continually take these changes into account. We have to continually elaborate our ideas, and test them by involving our self where-ever there is struggle against the bosses. Any theory is only as good as the practical guidance it gives in day to day struggle. One of the most important aspect of any socialist organisation is the ability to throw out all that is irrelevant (or wrong) in its tradition.

WHY ANARCHISM?

It is becoming clear that the bulk of what has been referred to as socialism up to now is in fact nothing of the sort. The vast bulk of the theory and practise of the last 70 years needs to be thrown in the bin. Unfortunately most of the Leninist groups are avoiding such an exercise preparing instead to do a botched plastering job over the appearing cracks. They have chosen to follow the same paths as the Communist parties did and will probably suffer a similar fate.

The vast bulk of those leaving the Leninist and labour parties are just disappearing from any form of politics or activism. The few who are trying to continue the anti-capitalist fight in a new way are making old mistakes. For the most part rather than seeing their version of socialism as flawed they have come to see capitalism as triumphant. There is a tradition however which refused to see socialism as something being imposed by a minority wielding state power on behalf of a majority. The tradition of anarchism always rejected both the crude authoritarianism of Leninism and the reformism of the labour parties.

It is for this reason that we call ourselves anarchists. Anarchism as a tradition is no doubt flawed, at times even badly flawed but it has always been better than any of the alternatives on offer. What's more, it has been capable of the sort of fierce self-criticism needed to continually develop. Throughout the last 120 years it has always been the anarchist (or a sub-group of anarchists) that has developed the best position on the events of the day. Most importantly anarchism unlike reformism, Leninism and Trotskyism has never imposed dictatorship and massacre on the working class.

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL

Within the first international, in the last century the anarchists consistently argued against a turn to reformism and parliamentary elections. They argued against the view that the state apparatus could be seized and used to introduce socialism. The introduction of socialism could only be carried out by the working class itself not by a minority of revolutionaries acting through the state. They also argued against the emerging strain within Marxism that argued that the revolution could only come about if the working class was under the dictatorship of a minority

of intellectuals. With the advantage of hindsight it is clear that these arguments explain much of what went wrong with the socialist movement in the 20th century.

At the same time the anarchists showed they were capable of organising the scale of struggle needed to threaten capitalism. In the USA in the 1880's the anarchists were organising a huge campaign for the 8 hour day involving demonstrations of greater than 100 000 workers. Here the anarchists showed their ability to connect building for a socialist revolution with the winning of reforms from the bosses. In 1886 this was to result in 8 anarchists being sentenced to death in Chicago, an event May day originated in.

At the end of the century Anarchists in the US, most notably Emma Goldman were to take up the fight to unionize women workers and break the ban on contraception. At a time when most other socialists saw women's liberation as a side issue the anarchists were fighting against those aspects which most oppressed working class women.

THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL

The anarchist fight against the use of parliament by socialists continued when the Second international (labour party) was set up in 1889. Anarchists attempted to argue against reformism at the first three international congresses in 1889, 1891 and 1893. The 1893 congress passed a motion excluded all non-trade union bodies which did not recognise the need for parliamentary action. The next congress in 1896 however included anarchists who had been made delegates by trade unions. They were physically assaulted when they attempted to speak and a motion from the German social-democrats Liebknecht and August Bebel and Eleanore Aveling (Marx's daughter) banned all those who were 'anti-parliamentarians' from future congresses. The anarchists then went on to form their own international, which still exists in the form of the IWA-AIT, an international organisation of anarcho-syndicalist trade unions and groups.

The Russian revolution of 1917 confirmed the warnings made by the anarchists some 50 years earlier in the first international. The degeneration of the revolution was due to the attempt to use the old state apparatus to introduce socialism and the Bolsheviks belief that the working class were incapable of making the decisions required to insure the revolution survived. Similarly in 1919 the massacre of German workers by the German labour party confirmed the anarchist warnings to the first and second international of the logical outcome of parliamentary action.

The Russian revolution was the first real test of anarchism in a revolution. The anarchist movement at the time was comparatively small but it had major influence particularly in the factory committees and in the Southern Ukraine. The anarchist were amongst its foremost supporters and were the only group to support the dissolving of the constituent assembly on the grounds that the Soviets were a more democratic form of government. (In contrast the Bolsheviks were clear that they wished to use the soviets rather than the constituent assembly because they had more support in the soviets).

The anarchists fought to push the revolution as far as it would go, recognising that this would maximise the willingness of Russian workers and workers internationally to defend it. When the Bolsheviks started to impose their dictatorship the anarchists fought them through the soviets and factory committees. By 1921 the anarchists alone recognised that the revolution had been destroyed and either died trying to bring about a third revolution or fled into exile to warn the worlds workers of what had happened.

One major (correct) criticism of the anarchist tradition was that during the Spanish revolution, four of the 'leaders' of the CNT went into government. A sizeable portion of the anarchists in the CNT formed the only consistent faction pushing for finishing off the revolution. This group called the Friends of Durutti are discussed elsewhere in this issue.

FASCISM AND WAR

After 1936 Anarchism in Europe was wiped out. From the rise of fascism under Mussolini in Italy in the early 20's the anarchists had stressed the need for workers to physically smash fascism. In Italy at the time however there attempts to do so were undermined by the Social-democrats. In Germany the anarchists were smashed by Hitler as he came to power, many of them dying subsequently in concentration or death camps. With the fascist occupation of Europe during the second world war many of other anarchists were to share their fate.

In Italy, France and Bulgaria at least there were anarchist resistance groups throughout the war. In Italy they were involved in the land seizures after the war but were defeated by the combined forces of the Italian communist party and the Allies. In Bulgaria the anarchist movement after the war grew rapidly but was wiped out in 1948 by the Bulgarian C.P. Again hundreds were executed or sent to concentration camps. Anarchists in Poland and other Eastern European countries shared a similar fate.

Anarchism to-day is growing in all of the Eastern European countries. As it was isolated for some 70 years in the soviet union and 40 years in Eastern Europe it will be a slow and painful process. In the west the anarchist movement grew slowly throughout the 80's and is now in the process of re-examining the anarchist tradition. Long years of isolation meant that a lot of rubbish has accumulated so this re-examination is vitally important

The tradition in which the anarchists stand is one that socialists need to identify with. For many on the left this will be a difficult process. They were weaned on a diet of slander when it came to anarchism, either being told that anarchists were police agents or that they were not real socialists at all and wanted a return to feudalism. We must resist the temptation to avoid this problem by going "beyond anarchism". The state has been the Achilles heel of 20th century socialism, it is not an issue to be fudged.

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