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Direct Action

Thinking about Anarchism

Alan MacSimóin

1996

IN A WORLD where we are taught to leave most of the important decisions to bosses and leaders, it can seem quite novel to suggest that we make up our own minds and carry out our own decisions. When people first began to talk of ‘self-activity’ and ‘direct action’, near the end of the last century, it meant discarding trust in ‘better’ politicians who promised to change things from above.

In the workplace today it means using work-to-rules, strikes and occupations to win claims rather placing our trust in Labour Relations Commission, Labour Court or any other supposedly impartial body. In the community it means tenants & residents associations organising the non-payment of water charges instead of trusting the local politicians to keep their promise to get rid of them.

What those with authority don’t like is that by involving everyone who will be effected it rejects the idea that most people are stupid and powerless, and so must leave the important decisions to someone else. Most major improvements were not just benevolently handed to us by bosses and governments. Most

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had to be fought for, even things as basic as having the weekend off work or being able to buy a condom.

For anarchists, capitalism is not only about rich and poor, it is also about order-givers and order-takers. There is a pyramid of power and the lower down you are the less control you have over your own life. Anarchists hold that control over one's life ought to be a basic right of every person and group of people.

Living in a society where you can be bossed around, where the decisions that effect you at home and at work can be made by someone else, is not a good way to live. Fundamental to anarchism is that everyone can be involved in making the decisions that will effect them.

Our goal is a free society where production will be to satisfy human wants and everyone can have their say in how their job and community is run. Means and ends are connected, the means used must be ones that increase confidence, that encourage participatory democracy. When people challenge the order-givers at work or in their area, anarchists argue for those effected to take control of their own struggles, to decide how their struggle is to be conducted.

This is the antidote for apathy, for what apathy often signals is not a lack of interest but a lack of belief that anything can be achieved. Encouraging real involvement in day-to-day struggles builds up people's confidence and belief in their own ability to change things for the better. By showing people their potential power we help to politicise them, and make them see that they can have the main role to play in changing society.

This emphasis on self-activity stands in marked contrast to most other socialists. Rather than encouraging people to use their ability to change things, they seek instead to encourage dependency. Trust the politician, the party, the leader ...trust a minority to make the rules for everyone else.

If one wants to do away with the division into workers and bosses, why not also the division into rulers and ruled? Perhaps a great many socialists do not believe that ordinary work-

ing class people can run their lives, can run a modern industrial country? One of the most ludicrous results of this was Lenin and the Bolshevik Party deciding during the Russian Revolution that the working class was not capable of running industry.

The problem for Lenin was that in factories, on railways, in mines and lots of other industries workers had taken over, elected their own factory committees and were showing they were more than capable of managing their own workplaces. Not going to let reality get in the way of a good theory, the Bolshevik government outlawed the committees.

Absurd in their arrogance, they still hand down a useful lesson for us today. The Bolsheviks did not start out as self-seeking despots. They had ideals, though not enough of them. We learnt there is no pre-condition more important for a successful revolution than working class self-confidence. If there is not enough of this the running of society will be taken over by whoever can sell the image that they are the most 'expert' and 'professional'.

When this happens you can forget about socialism. A minority is running things. At first they convince themselves that it is a 'temporary' measure, but a 'necessary' one. But rather than handing away their power they begin to develop into a group with its own interests, and then into a fully fledged ruling class. This is what happened in Russia, and every single time a minority has been trusted to rule a country after a revolutionary upheaval.

Only a self-confident, active and politically aware working class can create the true democracy that will prevent this happening. We start getting that confidence through taking direct action.