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A Short Introduction to Anarchist Communism

Anarchist Federation (of Britain)

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We believe that as long as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and all the rest of it still exist there will always be those who resist. We believe that we have the best chance of winning when we organise using anarchist communist principles. As long as that resistance goes on, the Anarchist Federation and the many groups like us all over the world, will do whatever we can to put these ideas into effect when we need them. Wherever people get exploited, they will always fight back, and as anarchist communists we will always be there to support this as best we can.

Further Reading

The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation

Anarchist Federation, Revised Third Edition, 2015

LibCom Introductory Guide

The LibCom.org Collective, 2006–2014

Anarchy Works

Peter Gelderloos, 2010

What is Anarchism?

Alexander Berkman, 1929

At the Café

Errico Malatesta, 1897–1920

Introduction

The Anarchist Federation is an organisation of revolutionary class struggle anarchists. We aim for the abolition of all hierarchy, and work for the creation of a world-wide classless society: anarchist communism.

This pamphlet will give a short introduction to what all this means and how we think we can do it.

Glossary

The following terms will be used in this pamphlet:

Anarchism

An economic and political system based upon removing oppressive and exploitative structures in society (such as capitalism and the state), and building a society where everyone has an equal input into decisions that affect their life.

Capitalism

An economic and political system based around exploiting those forced to sell their labour, in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit.

Class

A set of people given a shared title based on something they hold in common. Anarchists often talk of class in terms of an economic relationship, which this pamphlet will examine.

Communism

An economic and political system based around common ownership of the means of production (such as factories, fields and workshops), where goods are made available based upon need and ensuring the well-being of all.

Concession

Something given in response to a demand, action, or prevailing standard.

Economy

The system used to work out how goods and resources are produced and allocated to people. The current economy is capitalist, but other forms of economy are possible.

Free Market

A proposed form of capitalism where businesses can act however they want without any legal restrictions. It is often proposed along with removing the state completely, as if the two are completely separate, however the state is required for capitalism to be possible.

Hierarchical

The nature of hierarchy. A system in which members of an organisation or society are ranked according to relative status or authority.

Infrastructure

The basic physical and organisational structures required for a project to function (including anything from a small team activity through to running a country or global capitalism).

Institutional

Of, relating to, or characteristic of an institution. For example: Institutional racism.

Intersections

The points at which different things come together. Often used in anarchist text to talk about the interaction between multiple systems of oppression, discrimination and/or privilege.

Leftist

Used to refer to authoritarian or hierarchical left-wing organisations (such as trade unions and political parties), or their members.

Means of Production

The non-human infrastructure needed for production of items,

Our membership of a broader organisation of revolutionaries gives us access to the experiences of our comrades and allows us to discuss and debate the issues and tactics of any particular struggle without having to worry about the basics. The high level of political agreement within a revolutionary organisation allows us to worry about the crucial details rather than having to make the same foundational arguments time and time again.

It is in these two main ways – preserving and spreading the memory and lessons of previous struggles, and supporting committed but potentially isolated militants in day to day struggles – that a revolutionary organisation contributes towards a culture of resistance. The ideas of anarchist communism work. When we use them to fight, our chances of winning increase because these ideas empower us and show us our own strength rather than telling us to rely on some set of leaders or representatives. The revolutionary organisation is one important way of spreading those ideas, of putting them into action and using them to build a culture of resistance.

Endnote

Anarchist communism is a living, breathing, working class tradition that grows out of the actions and experiences of millions of people in the struggle against capitalism. The one lesson that we learn again and again is that wherever we are and whatever is happening to us, we will fight back. Sometimes we win, more often we don't, but whenever we make progress the principles of direct action and self organisation are usually at the heart of it. Our defeats are never total: there's always something left to move forward and carry on fighting. Our victory will never be final: human beings will always seek to change and experiment, to develop new experiences and new ideas.

The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation

If people are capable of running their own struggles and of fighting for themselves to meet their own needs then what is the point of an organisation like the Anarchist Federation?

We are an organisation of conscious revolutionaries who see ourselves as working towards an anarchist communist revolution but, as we've made clear in this pamphlet, we don't think that any revolution will be down to us. It will be the self activity of millions of working class people that makes the revolution, not the work of a handful of us with some nice ideas. We are not a revolutionary party that will lead the working class out of its 'trade union consciousness', out of reformism and into revolution. We are not the embryo of a workers' council or a revolutionary union that will grow and grow until we eventually take over. We do not lead anyone, we do not act on behalf of anyone but ourselves.

There are, however, some things that revolutionary organisations can do that would be far less likely to happen without them. Anarchist communism is a living working class tradition, but there are times when that life hangs by a very thin thread. In periods of defeat and division, when the working class has few organisations of its own and there is very little struggle, something has to keep the lessons that have been learned alive. The revolutionary organisation is an important store of knowledge and skills. It is a kind of memory that keeps alive a vision of the working class as united and defiant even when the class has been kicked in the head so many times it's starting to forget its own name, let alone its past.

Members of a revolutionary organisation are also militants in their own right and intensely involved in struggles where they live and work. The ideas of anarchist communism spread not just through the words of our organisations but also through things that we do. Whatever we are involved in, we push for direct action and self organisation and resist takeover and co-option by authoritarian groups.

such as fields, factories and workshops (and their associated tools). Keep in mind that workshops can include such diverse locations as kitchens, office space, and laboratories to name but a few examples.

Oppression

The state of being subject to oppressive treatment. The exercise of authority or power in a harmful or unjust manner.

Pragmatism

A way of doing things or of thinking about problems that is seen as reasonable and logical due to dealing with practical outcomes.

Social Revolution

A revolution undertaken by the majority of the working class that removes all class divides. Not to be confused with a political revolution, where the people at the top may change but a class structure remains in place.

Solidarity

The act of undertaking supportive activity towards other people which does not come with the expectation of reward, but instead comes from a sense of mutual aid or common interest.

Squatting

Occupying an abandoned or unoccupied area of land or a building and putting it into use without the owners permission.

State, The

The collected institutions that create and enforce laws created by a small minority of people within a given territory. Through laws the state claims that only it has the right to grant the use of violence. The state uses the law to justify and protect a capitalist economy.

Strike

Taking direct action against a boss, usually in the form of a picket line that will prevent all activity at a workplace.

What We're Fighting: Capitalism and Hierarchy

Capitalism, in essence, is a system of exploitation. It is a class system where a majority, the working class, is exploited by a minority, the ruling class.

The ruling class own and control the places that we work & live, the land that produces our food, and everything that makes life possible. They make the decisions about what kinds of products the factories make or what kinds of services are provided, and they make the decisions about how this work is organised. The rest of us, the working class, must work in the fields and the factories, the call centres and the office blocks, or else get by on benefits or scrape together what we need to survive.

We, the working class, build and provide everything society needs to function. They, the ruling class, suck profit out of our work. We are the body of society; they are parasites sucking us dry.

It follows from this that we don't use the idea of class in the same way as many others, particularly in the press. Class is not about the fact that some of us earn more money than others or that we go to different kinds of schools. This confusion about the idea of class is part of a wider set of tactics that the ruling class use to try and disguise the reality of class from us.

Capitalism needs workers in a way workers simply do not need capitalism. If we were to unite around our common working class interests then we could do away with the ruling class and run society for ourselves. We don't need them, but they need us. Because of this, the ruling class works hard to divide us against each other. It does this through trying to control ideas and the way we think about ourselves, and also through creating small differences in power and wealth that pit us against one another.

we're talking about here. Liberal (and even most radical), ways of talking about the struggles of those oppressed because of gender or sexuality, the struggle against white supremacy, or similar, do not recognise the relationship between these kinds of struggle and working class struggle. Sometimes they are seen as distractions and other times as 'separate but equal', but rarely are they seen as an integral part of the struggle against capitalism as a whole. For anarchist communists capitalism is more than just a class system, it is a system that uses a whole range of hierarchies to maintain the power of a minority. Resistance to all of these hierarchies should be seen as resistance to capitalism.

This does not mean, however, that separate organisations are not needed by people fighting patriarchy, white supremacy and so on. Just because the struggles of, say, women are important in the struggle against capitalism does not mean that those struggles can simply be folded into some 'wider' fight against capitalism. Because of this it is necessary for those of us who experience certain forms of oppression to form our own communities, not only to organise together but also to talk together without having to justify what we say to people who do not have the same struggles. These groups provide a space in which we can understand what is unique about our own oppressions and in which we can be free of the prejudices — conscious or unconscious — of those who do not share the same experiences. These groups can be the basis of communities of resistance, where a shared understanding develops into a set of shared tactics and actions to take on both the state and the everyday prejudice and violence that can make life hell for those of us seen as outside the norm.

ruling class that are (in effect) part of our share of the profits of industry. Healthcare, subsidised and social housing, transport and utilities like water and electricity, libraries and social services, benefits, and many other things can be seen as part of the social wage. Like wage increases and shorter working days these services are often the result of previous rounds of struggle, victories won by the working class in the past.

Struggles over the social wage take many forms but they usually involve a fairly straightforward confrontation between some arm of the state – the local council, for example – and a relatively clearly defined group of people who depend on a particular service. There are many different tactics available to those of us fighting these kind of struggles. Petitions and appeals to representatives are often used, and more often than not fail, but there are also forms of direct action that we can use. Occupations of threatened buildings and services, mass protests outside (and inside) government buildings, blockades and disruptions to the normal running of services, street riots and disorder.

Social wage struggles are often the most imaginative of all struggles in terms of the tactics they use as it is often much harder to hurt the profits of those in charge. To do so we often have to question the legitimacy of the institutions of government themselves. At times of heightened struggle – for example during long lasting general strikes – this questioning can lead to a critical mass of people willing to take over the running of their own communities, providing for themselves the services they rely on. If this change of the social relationship can survive attempts at suppression and co-option then it can become a key feature of social revolution.

Anti-Oppression Struggles

These also get called identity struggles, however the word identity is really not up to the job of describing the kind of struggles

One of the major tools to create these divisions to is the state. The state is made up of all the institutions that regulate and control the lives of ‘citizens’ – that is you and me – for the benefit of capitalism. When the so-called free market can’t achieve something that capital needs to grow, the state steps in and makes it happen. From building the legal and physical infrastructure that capitalism needs, through to directly attacking workers seeking to improve their position, the state is an essential tool of the capitalist class.

Importantly, the state maintains organisations to directly control and coerce us. The army and the police most obviously use direct force to keep people in line, with the police breaking strikes and heads at home and the army enforcing capitalism abroad. Schools, whilst providing an important service, also indoctrinate children and prepare them for a life as workers rather than as human beings. Prisons, immigration authorities, dole offices and more, all intrude into our lives and shape our actions. Some of these things, like schools, hospitals and welfare benefits, we sometimes depend on for our lives. It is often this very dependence that acts to control us. Benefits come with conditions that dictate what we can and can’t do.

Some leftists argue that if the state were under the control of a group that represented the working class, usually a revolutionary party of some kind, then it would behave differently. This ignores the fact that the state is designed to govern from above – it is, by its very nature, hierarchical. This means that it always concentrates power in the hands of a minority. A small number of people give orders and a large number obey. The state is always hierarchical and as a result will end up furthering rather than destroying all the other hierarchies in society.

The power of the ruling class comes from their control of the means of production, but they keep that control by manipulating a whole series of different systems of oppression and exploitation, different hierarchies. These systems give large sections of the

working class just a little bit of privilege. This is enough to turn them against those they should be uniting with, enough to make them defend the ruling class against those oppressed by gender, skin colour, disability, and on and on and on.

To get past this we need a revolutionary movement made up of many different organisations. We need many different ways in which we can take control of our own lives and fight the different oppressions that push us down. We need to completely transform society and ourselves. In the Anarchist Federation we believe that the ideas of anarchist communism offer the best chance of doing this.

Anarchist Communism

Anarchism is a set of revolutionary ideas that are, at root, very simple. Anarchists believe that we are all quite capable of looking after ourselves. No leader can know what you need better than you do. No government can represent the interests of a community better than the community itself. We believe that everyone should have the option to take part in decisions that affect them, wherever they take place. Only in this way can we have a fair and just society in which everyone has the chance to fulfil themselves. Everything in anarchist ways of thinking follows from this basic principle.

For anarchists, taking back control over our own lives is the revolution. We see two ways of working as being key to being able to do this: direct action and self-organisation. Direct action is when those directly affected by something take action to fix it themselves, rather than asking someone else to do it for them. A strike that forces management to make concessions or face losing money is direct action where lobbying an MP or going through union negotiations is not. Squatting derelict land and turning into a community garden is direct action, whereas pressuring the council to clean up vacant lots is not. When we act by ourselves to achieve

tance builds structures and ideas of cooperation and solidarity that prefigure the world to come. A culture of resistance is the school in which we learn how to be free, how we become through the fight against capitalism everything that we will be after it.

It is impossible to tell in advance what forms this culture of resistance will take. The needs and the imaginations of those involved will dictate what happens and how. However, it is possible to lay out the very broadest outline of how we can organise ourselves and fight back. We can look at what has worked in the past and what others are doing now, and point out how direct action and self organisation can be applied to a number of areas of everyday life.

Workplace Struggles

At work the confrontation between workers and bosses is at its most obvious. Workers want to work as little as possible for as much money as they can get, whereas bosses want as much work for as little pay. This is the nature of capitalism. The amount of effort management makes to control people at work points to the fact that at work we are incredibly powerful. When we work we create the profits that the ruling class needs to exist.

When we disrupt the smooth running of a workplace through strike action or sabotage, we directly disrupt the ability of the ruling class to make the profits it depends on. For this reason, resistance at the points of work always has revolutionary potential, however small-scale it is. When we refuse to make profits for our bosses we threaten their very existence.

Social Wage Struggles

When we talk about a social wage we're talking about all the different ways that we can receive services from the state and the

A culture of resistance is in some way the sum of all the things that we do to survive and resist under capitalism. It is the big things like strikes and riots, occupations of factories and public buildings and huge organisations that fight for something in particular. Just as importantly, it is the small things as well. The little scams at work and the residents' groups that make life a little bit more bearable at home. It's hatred of the police and the bosses and pride in who you are and the community you live in.

What all of these things have in common is that they create connections between us. These connections of trust and common purpose work against the everyday logic of capitalism. Capitalism splits us off from one another. We are given orders instead of taking part in decisions. When we buy something, whatever it is, all we know is its price, not who made it and why. The media tells us to fear immigrants and outsiders who they claim are trying to take what little we have. We are forced at every turn to cut ourselves off from the world, to be blind to the connections that we have with others.

A culture of resistance restores those connections, making visible what capitalism tries to hide from us. Every object we use in our lives is made by other human beings. Every piece of food we eat, every bit of power we use, every cup of water we drink is there because the work of others made it possible. Capitalism hides this behind prices and company names. It takes the credit for making life possible by hiding the very things that connect us to everyone else in the world. A culture of resistance shows us how connected we are to other working class people. It rolls back the deceptions of capitalism and shows us how powerful we really are. It is not some abstract ideal, but instead it reveals the concrete reality that connects us all and blows away the abstractions and lies that capitalism uses to isolate us.

A culture of resistance grows in the belly of capitalism and uses the connections between workers that capitalism in some cases creates to build the beginnings of an alternative. A culture of resis-

something that we need then we are taking direct action – whether that's sharing food with others or fighting the police in a riot.

For direct action to be possible then there also needs to be self organisation. This is organising without leaders or phoney 'representatives', and it allows us to take back the power to make our own decisions. Self organisation allows us to break down and overcome the hierarchies that separate us. In self-organised groups everyone has an equal say and no one is given the right to represent anyone else. This kind of group is capable of deciding its own needs and taking direct action to meet them in a way that any hierarchical group based on representatives – like a political party or a trade union – cannot.

Because of this we reject the use of the state – that is government, parliament, the courts, the police and so on – to bring about revolution. No one can free anyone else. We all have to free ourselves by acting together. No government, even a 'socialist' or 'revolutionary' government, can do this. Any group or party taking over the state simply becomes a new set of leaders, exploiting us in the name of 'socialism' rather than 'capitalism'. This is what happened in so-called 'communist' Russia. Only by destroying the state, not taking it over, can we free ourselves.

For anarchists, direct action and self organisation are essential tools for freeing ourselves. They are the way that we as a working class can confront the problems in our own lives collectively, working together against the whole system of capitalism and the ways it tries to divide us.

These ideas have not just been plucked out of thin air. Anarchist communism is a living working class tradition that has worked in ways large and small throughout the history of capitalism. It does not come out of the abstract ideas of a few intellectuals but from the concrete actions of millions of people.

For many, the word communism is associated only with the brutality of Soviet Russia, or with Cuba, China, and North Korea. These societies are amongst some of the worst tyrannies the world

has ever seen, killing millions through famine, war and execution. As anarchists we don't forget the prison camps, the slave labour, or the unjust trials and executions – indeed anarchists were often the first to suffer these attacks.

However, unlike the press who use the example of 'communist' governments to claim that revolutionary change is impossible, anarchists also refuse to forget the example of the millions of people who have fought against this in the name of true communism. These people organised themselves, without leaders, into groups that used direct democracy, meaning that everyone had an equal say in how things were run. They used direct action, first against the state and capitalism, and later against the new Soviet rulers.

The true communism that they fought for is the extension of these ways of working into every aspect of life. The communist slogan 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their need' sums up the idea. Nobody should be short of anything that they need. Individuals receive goods and services because of how much they need them, not because of how much they can pay or how much they deserve them. People give back to society, through the work they do, according to what they want and are able to do. Everyone will have the chance to do interesting and creative work, instead of just a minority while everyone else is stuck with boring drudge work.

This society would be organised through local collectives and councils, organising themselves to make the decisions that need making and to do the work that needs doing. Everyone gets a say in decisions that concern them. We believe that in fighting for this kind of future we are fighting for the full freedom and equality of all. Only this will give everyone the chance to be whatever they can be.

It is the many examples of people organising and resisting in this way that we call the communist tradition. The workers councils of revolutionary Spain, Germany, Russia, Hungary, France, and Mexico all give a small glimpse that we can look to when thinking

Building a Culture of Resistance

We believe that the only people capable of destroying capitalism and creating a world in which everyone has control over their own life are those directly exploited by capital today: the working class. As we've pointed out, the ruling class know this and they work very hard to keep us divided and lacking in the skills that we need to make this change. This is something that has to be overcome before revolution is possible. We have to 'build the new society in the shell of the old'. However, history shows that organisations built by the working class for our own benefit are often co-opted and turned against us. Trade unions, credit unions, cooperative traders and manufacturers – all of these and more have been used to defend rather than destroy capitalism.

Authoritarian revolutionaries use this problem as an excuse to take over. According to them, the working class is only capable of a 'trade union consciousness', of haggling over wages and perks instead of toppling capitalism and building something new. What is needed, they claim, is their leadership. They will be the cause of the revolution, leading us – the poor stupid masses – into the light using any means necessary. History shows us that this leads only into new tyrannies.

The alternative is for us to build a culture of resistance, a set of bonds of solidarity and understanding between many different people in many different places. These new relationships give us the confidence and the resources that we need to fight back wherever we are. This culture becomes a mass of tinder which is able to turn the spark from one struggle into a flame which can spread.

This culture is not a particular organisation or set of principles or anything like that. It is composed of many different organisations and more than this of ideas, practices and attitudes that reveal to us our power as exploited but necessary parts of the capitalist system. This culture is as much about the self image and self belief in ourselves as it is about any particular set of ideas or organisations.

It is not, however, direct attacks by the state that are the biggest problem with dual power strategies. The biggest problem is the risk of co-option. What this means is that movements and organisations which start out trying to provide an alternative are often 'captured' by capitalism, and end up helping to manage people's exploitation rather than challenging it.

For example, cooperatives often become employers in their own right, with full cooperative members becoming managers and their new employees exploited workers like any others. Community groups are approached by local councils, given funding and access to some power and end up administering the council policies they set out to oppose. Housing co-ops become landlords. Credit unions become banks (building societies in the UK started out as community schemes). Syndicalist unions can crack down on wild-cat strikes. Those who start out trying to build alternatives end up supporting the thing they hate.

Any potential alternative to capitalism in the here and now will have to interact with the things that it is trying to replace. A cooperative store will have to buy stock from capitalist suppliers. A community assembly will have to negotiate with the local council if it is to secure resources. Even syndicalist unions, a highly confrontational way of working, find themselves having to negotiate with managers.

This does not mean that we should reject completely all these ways of doing things. What it does mean, however, is that none of these are a road to revolution on their own. Instead of seeing these ways of working as a way of creating replacements for capitalism, we should see them as one way amongst others of creating a culture of resistance. It is this culture, and not any particular organisation, that it is important for us to build.

about how we can fight capitalism and free ourselves. Time and time again the world has seen ordinary people using direct action, self organisation and direct democracy to build new societies and lives for themselves. It is these ideas and successes that we try to build on in today's fight against exploitation.

Anarchist communism is more than an abstract vision of the future and it is more than a nostalgia for the revolutionary movements of the past. It is a living working class tradition that lays the foundations for the future society in the here and now. Everything we will be after capitalism we must learn under it and through the fight against it. The revolution is not and never can be a blank slate – that way lies the corpses piled up by 'revolutionary' terror (such as happened in France, Russia, and China). Instead, revolution must be built out of the materials to hand by those of us alive today.

Revolution and Revolutionaries

Revolutionaries believe that the societies we live in are basically unjust and unfair. It is not just a matter of this injustice or that unfairness – it is the whole way that society works that is unjust and unfair. Poverty, war, racism, sexism and all the rest of the problems we face are not exceptions to the rule – they are the rule. Capitalism cannot exist without creating poverty, without fighting wars, without oppressing us based upon arbitrary traits.

We believe that capitalism must be destroyed and a new society – an anarchist communist society – must be built. This is the revolution. Both the destruction of what exists now and the construction of something new are part of the revolution. As revolutionaries we work to encourage both – supporting opposition to those in power as well as aiding those who try to build alternatives.

Because capitalism is basically unfair and unjust, revolutionaries do not believe in change through gradual reform. This is called

reformism. This is not to say that a minimum wage, a shorter working day, or the right to abortion on demand are not important. These reforms and many others have made life better for us. Revolutionaries are not trying to say that life has not improved since Victorian times – that would be silly. What we do say are two things.

Firstly, no reform is permanent. Any reform can and will be undone by politicians and bosses whenever they get the chance. The attacks on civil liberties, on working conditions, and on public services that we see time and time again should be enough to prove this.

Secondly, reforms are only granted by governments when they are scared of something worse – a mass movement of the working class. Time and time again it has taken the actions of millions of people organising together to get even the most basic reforms. The ten hour day, rights for women and children, and the welfare state were all forced concessions from governments challenged by mass movements. There is nothing governments are more scared of than us ignoring them and simply doing things for ourselves. Governments will make almost any concession to stop us feeling that we can act for ourselves without waiting for permission from their higher authority.

Because of this, revolutionaries are often attacked as utopian, as imagining unrealistic perfect worlds that can never be. “You should be practical,” we are told. “Focus on getting results here and now, not on some imaginary cloud cuckoo land in the future.” When people say things like this, when we are told to be ‘practical’ or ‘realistic’, we are usually being told to abandon our principles. Successive governments attack public services in the name of ‘pragmatism’, the unions sell out to management because it’s ‘practical’, authoritarian revolutionaries lie to their members and the public because they’re ‘realistic’.

If this is what being practical means then that would already be enough to reject it. But there’s more to it than this. Being ‘prac-

omy. Those in this tradition often, but not always, describe themselves as mutualists.

Some focus on building community or people’s assemblies to take local decisions and sometimes seek to take over local town halls and council chambers through elections. These groups often, but again not always, describe themselves as municipalist. Others focus on building revolutionary unions which will confront management in the workplace to get immediate gains. They will also just as importantly be run by direct democracy, giving workers experience of taking decisions and organising. These unions are then seen as able to take over industry in its entirety replacing capitalism as they do so. This is usually described as syndicalism.

All these approaches, and they often work in combination, see themselves as building a political and economic alternative to capitalism right under its nose. They argue that these alternatives are able to grow to the point where either capitalism withers away or there is a confrontation between the two systems which leads to revolution and the destruction of capitalism.

There are many positive things about these approaches. They encourage self organisation and direct action, while providing important lessons in collective working and experience of direct democracy for those involved. The AF does not reject any of these approaches out of hand and members often involve themselves in this kind of project.

However, there are important weaknesses in these approaches that limit their usefulness. These kinds of projects are highly vulnerable to attacks by the state. Laws can be passed that make most cooperatives illegal or at least very difficult to set up. Community assemblies can be denied resources, or even attacked directly by the police and the army.

Those who pursue dual power strategies are often very optimistic about their ability to avoid repression. Capitalism and the state tend to attack any threat sooner rather than later.

impact. You get an 'ethical' job, buy 'ethical' products and reduce your contribution to exploitation that way. From here it's only a short step to despising the those who aren't as 'enlightened' as you, who keep capitalism going by 'refusing' to abstain.

However, if you respond to capitalism as member of a broader exploited class, then the logical response is collective. You can show solidarity with those in the same situation as you, fighting where you are for better conditions, and for more control over the conditions of your life. A collective response like this is always oppositional. It always has to fight capitalism rather than trying to go round it. It is, in potential, the beginning of a mass movement and the basis of a new society based on the recognition of our common interests.

In the end it is this collective direct action that the ruling class are afraid of, not people dropping out, and it is a self-organised mass movement ready to take collective direct action that we should be helping to build.

Dual Power

The other typical approach to prefigurative politics is trying to build dual power. This means trying to build organisations in the here and now that will eventually replace capitalism. There are a number of different approaches to dual power strategies.

Some see themselves as providing examples that can be taken up by others and perhaps eventually become state policy. They are rarely very confrontational about their ideas and see themselves as reformist rather than revolutionary (although often do seek the end of capitalism). Others hope to build entire alternative economies through cooperatives, credit unions, local trading systems, and the like. These structures, it is argued, could eventually reach the point where many people are in effect living outside the capitalist econ-

tical' in this way, making compromises and deals with bosses and politicians, is a sure-fire way of making sure that you don't get what you want. Any deals done with capitalism are bound back-fire, as we've seen time and time again. You don't make progress by negotiating with the bosses. You make progress by terrifying them. Anarchist communists believe that it is better to fight for what we want, even if we don't get it straight away, rather than fighting for something we don't want, and getting it.

Mass movements making demands based on their own needs are much more scary to the ruling class than any number of snivelling bureaucrats being 'realistic' and asking nicely for a few scraps from the boss's table. We don't want the scraps – we want the whole meal, and the kitchen that cooked it, and the house it was served in, and the fields it was grown in, and the factories that made the plates – we want the whole world and nothing less. Everything the ruling class has, it has because the working class made it and they stole it. We refuse to ask nicely for things that are already ours. This is not just a matter of principle, it is practical. Those that beg for scraps get nothing else, and often not even that. If we work to take what is already ours the ruling class will be forced to concede far more than just scraps.

Ends & Means

The most important part of the working class tradition that we call anarchist communism is the refusal to make a distinction between ends and means. The organisations that we build while fighting capitalism will be the basis of anything that comes after the revolution. If those organisations do not embody the principles of the society that we want to see then that society will not come about. If we want a future where everyone contributes to the decisions that affect them, then we have to build organisations now in which this happens. The Anarchist Federation is one such organisation.

This is known as prefiguration and is one of the central ideas of anarchism. The idea is summed up by one important slogan: 'Building the new society in the shell of the old'. What this means is that our struggle is not simply against capitalism. We also fight, as far as is possible, to live as we wish to right now, to build alternatives to capitalism right under its nose.

However, prefiguration has its limits. For many, building alternatives to capitalism in the here and now means one of two things: either a lifestyle or individualist response, or an attempt to create a dual power situation. Whilst the AF is often sympathetic to these approaches and doesn't reject them completely, we do not believe that they can lead to revolution on their own. We also have some serious criticisms of both of them. But what are they?

Lifestylism

The labels 'lifestylist' and 'individualist' are often used, frequently unfairly, as insults and so we have to be very careful when we use them. When we talk about 'lifestyle' politics we're talking about a kind of politics that focuses in some way on 'dropping out' of capitalism, on getting 'off the grid' and living without relying on capitalist exploitation. This can mean many things. It can be something small-scale like living in squats and surviving by stealing from supermarkets or taking the perfectly good food that they throw out ('skipping' or 'dumpster diving'). Or it can be something much larger like a project to communally farm a piece of land or establish a new community.

The reasons that people have for doing this kind of thing are very good ones. They see the harm that capitalism does every day and want no part of it. By stealing or taking what is thrown away they try to stop giving support back to the bosses that exploit us and others all over the world. More than this, often these kind of political lifestyle choices involve building and living in communi-

ties based on solidarity and mutual respect. Many involved in this kind of activity would argue that this is 'building the new society in the shell of the old'.

Whilst we respect many of those who make these personal lifestyle choices, we reject this as a useful form of political action. The main reason for this is that it is not something that the majority of us can easily involve ourselves in. Significant debts, dependants, health problems or any number of other things that limit our freedom of action make it very difficult, if not impossible, to 'drop out'. There is no possibility for building a lifestylist mass movement. Indeed, despite some claims to the contrary, lifestylism does not attempt to overthrow or destroy capitalism; it only attempts to wash its own hands clean of the blood.

This is, in fact, a huge political problem with lifestyle responses to capitalism. Often this form of politics leads to a kind of elitism and snobbery on the part of those living 'political' lifestyles. Ordinary people become 'sheeple', hopelessly brainwashed by their jobs and the media and as much part of the problem as those that own and run the economy. In its most extreme forms, such as primitivism, this leads to open calls for solutions that would lead to the extermination of the majority of the human race.

This kind of attitude is not an inevitable consequence of dropping out, but it is very common, and it is the result of an individualist way of looking at capitalism. Capitalism does not exploit us as individuals: it exploits us as classes or groups. We are exploited as workers, as professionals with some perks or temporary workers with none, as 'consumers' in the West or as disposable labourers in the global South. We are oppressed by institutional racism, misogyny, ableism, and in different ways based upon intersecting combinations of different oppressive forces.

If we respond to the damage that capitalism does to us as individuals then the only logical answer is to abstain. You live without a job, without shopping, without relying on the systems of exploitation that surround us. If this is impossible, then you minimise your