

The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation

Anarchist Federation (of Britain)

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The Class Struggle

‘There’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.’

– Warren Buffett, capitalist and the world’s wealthiest person in 2008

Before we start to look at the revolutionary organisation itself, we first need to explain what we mean when talking about class.

The term class is commonly used to describe a cultural identity that comes from a mixture of elements including family background, education, workplace history and access to/denial of different opportunities throughout life. This complex web of factors gives rise to different social labels (e.g. working class, lower middle class, etc.), each associated with different cultural markers – from the supermarket where someone shops through to the types of entertainment they enjoy. This is a sociological definition of class.

On the other hand, economic class defines a person based on their relationship to capital. The ruling class is made up of those who have their needs met through controlling the places where people work. They exploit us, the working class (including the unemployed and retired) who, in contrast, are forced to sell our labour in order to have our needs met. The money earned from working is always less than the amount of value we create. This system of exploitation is the basis of capitalist society. It is this definition of class that we will use in this pamphlet.

Our exploitation as the working class leads us to question the established order and struggle for a better life. Our experience of this class struggle develops into a class consciousness, but different sections of the working class may reach different degrees of consciousness at different times. On the other hand, the solidarity gained through common experience is undermined by the ruling class through the media, our education, and different forms of oppression. At the moment the working class is neither fully divided nor fully united, nor conscious of itself and its power.

Class Spontaneity

‘The emancipation of the workers must be brought about by the workers themselves.’

– Declaration of the First International.

‘The working class by itself can only attain trade-union consciousness.’

– Lenin, ‘What Is To Be Done’ (in stark contrast to the Declaration of the First International).

Would-be leaders often proudly proclaim that they will be the ones to provide the solution to problems in workers’ lives. This is true of business fat-cats, the heads of the trade unions, and politicians of every type (from social democrats through to the so-called revolutionary parties). However, these claims are undermined time and time again by the often distorted and misunderstood concept of working class spontaneity.

We in the working class are fully able to take direct action for ourselves. We can develop new forms of struggle and organisation to meet our needs. In every great revolutionary upsurge we have developed new tactics, from workers councils and road blockades through to flying pickets and sit-in strikes, regardless of our would-be leaders.

Many leftist organisations attempt to channel or suppress this activity for their own ends. Trade unions, in particular, act to prevent or divert class spontaneity both in the workplace and the community as it is their ability to control militant action that preserves the union bureaucracy (and their place at the bosses’ table). Others think that as the working class are able to take action spontaneously, there is no need for anarchists to form a revolutionary organisation.

However, it does not follow from either of these positions that we should not form organisations. Agitation by a revolutionary minority can provide skills and knowledge that greatly help to spark the revolutionary process. Without this preparation the chances are far greater of our struggles being defeated or diverted against our interests.

The Revolutionary Organisation: One Current Within the Class

‘Anarchism is not a beautiful utopia, nor an abstract philosophical idea, it is a social movement of the labouring masses.’

– The Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists

‘Anarchism is organisation, organisation and more organisation.’

– Errico Malatesta

As anarchists, we are members of the working class who are conscious of the class struggle. We believe that in order to get from our current society to anarchist communism, there is a need for a revolutionary organisation. This is the basis of the Anarchist Federation.

As an anarchist communist organisation we see ourselves not as outside or beyond the working class but as part of it. We work to increase the influence of our ideas not as a leadership or ‘vanguard of the revolution’, but simply as agitators within the working class who are trying to show the strength of anarchist methods and bring about anarchist communism.

While we hope to increase our membership, this is done when other class conscious anarchists see the worth of organisation and choose to get involved. Membership is not as important as the consciousness of the working class. We never divert, disrupt or take over working class struggles in order to increase our own membership.

As it is part of the working class and at the same time a distinct tendency within it, the anarchist organisation sees the need for revolution at a time where the majority of the working class does not. We must remember that this does not make us something other than a part of the working class. To go down that road leads to elitism and separation from class reality.

At the same time, the anarchist organisation has ideas that are further developed than those more often found within the working class. This development of ideas should not be confused with the development of successful tactics; workers everywhere learn new forms of struggle and organisation so we must always be ready to learn from the activity of others. We must constantly revise our tactics as situations unfold. Just because we are members of a revolutionary organisation does not mean we are infallible. We will not always have the answer. Indeed, during revolutionary periods, anarchist organisations have often been surprised by the audacity and imagination of other revolutionaries.

The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation

‘Meaningful action, for revolutionaries, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others – even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.’

– Solidarity, ‘As We See It’

In understanding that the revolution must be made by the whole of the working class, the revolutionary organisation has a number of tasks to perform.

As members of the organisation we must embody a set of shared aims and principles in the task of building towards revolution. We must work to actively dismantle structures of oppression that have been carried over from society. We must organise federally as opposed to centrally and have decision-making processes that are directly democratic. This encourages the active participation of all members and prevents the formation of unnecessary bureaucracy.

We put forward the message that the working class must destroy capitalism and establish an anarchist communist society. We do this by giving practical examples of working class self-organisation. We are internationalist and make links with other groups in order to build solidarity and increase class effectiveness. Working class history is deliberately obscured and excluded from mainstream media by the structures of the ruling class. We work towards the rediscovery of past struggles, their successes and mistakes, sharing the lessons that develop our class consciousness.

However, we cannot see ourselves solely as a propaganda group. We work to achieve local victories in our communities, building solidarity between those who rent, those who own, those on housing benefits and those who are squatting or homeless. We are involved in workplace disputes, attempting to make links between unionised, non-unionised and unemployed workers, as well as demonstrating common purpose between different workplace struggles against our shared class enemies. We join groups formed around fighting at particular intersections of oppression within the working class (such as women’s groups, queer collectives, disability campaigns, etc.).

We point out the anti-capitalist and libertarian tendencies in these struggles. We agitate for a break with reformism, hierarchical forms of organisation, and the idea that we share an interest with members of the ruling class on the basis of a common identity. We work towards the fullest mass participation inside groups and throughout the working class as a whole.

Ultimately, we aim to show the way in which all these struggles are interconnected and help build a sense of understanding, respect and practical solidarity between working class struggles so that different groups can work in mutual aid against common enemies.

While seeking to openly spread our ideas as part of these movements, we do not try to make them appendages of the revolutionary organisation. Liberation is achieved by building autonomous groups that work together in class solidarity.

Finally, we must continue to develop anarchist communist theory and practice during a time when many hold relatively conservative ideas and values. To this end we must be sure that these are not merely abstract theoretical concepts but are in fact real strategies developed through struggle. It is not the case that ideas must necessarily come before action; we learn through struggle and this in turn influences developments in our theory. It is vitally important that we are constantly assessing and revising our ideas to reflect changing material conditions.

What follows is a brief introduction to some of the practices we in the Anarchist Federation currently put forward as part of the role of a revolutionary organisation:

The Leadership of Ideas

We do not fight for state power or appoint ourselves as leaders of the working class, we instead aim to develop a 'leadership of ideas' within the working class. We can't simply hand someone a leaflet and hope that the writing will inspire them; we also need to prove the value of our methods through debate and execution. Our methods need to incorporate and explain the ideas we have. It is when faced with the class struggle first-hand that we develop our consciousness of it. We must also provide practical experience in the methods needed to realise an anarchist communist society (such as mass participation in decision making, collective action, and building solidarity between different struggles).

At the same time, in recognising the leadership of ideas, the revolutionary organisation must acknowledge that it is one of many groups participating in the mass movement, alongside those without affiliation. In doing so it must meet the challenge of incorporating new theory and practice from other tendencies that may take a leading role in the struggle for a free society.

The leadership of ideas stands in stark opposition to a party leadership or a revolutionary vanguard, who see their own ideas and own interests as being more important than those of the wider class and will use authoritarian methods to enforce their will, ultimately just leading to one ruling class being replaced by another.

A Culture of Resistance

The current political system is a rigged game; no matter what we do within it, we end up at the same dead ends of state control and a capitalist economy. In opposition to this, we have to develop our own culture, not one foisted upon us by the state, capitalism and its agents – a culture based on a class in the process of resisting. The revolutionary organisation works to build bonds of solidarity that will unite us in a culture of resistance against the ruling class.

This does not rest solely on a particular organisation or set of principles. It is composed of ideas, practices and attitudes that reveal to us our power as an exploited but necessary part of the capitalist system. It is collectively being aware and acting within our class interest. This culture is built upon our self-image and our self-belief.

Prefiguration

Many brutal and bloody acts have been undertaken by those who try to claim that the ends justify the means. Nothing could be further from the truth. The ends will always be reflected in the means. Thus those using hierarchical methods in their struggles today will never lead us to a free society. Putting in place the principles of anarchist communism in our struggles today will be the seed from which anarchist communism will grow in the future.

Mutual Aid and Solidarity

Mutual aid is the concept of providing resources and support in the spirit of communal benefit. Mutual aid is practiced amongst the most successful species (including predatory ones and humankind ourselves). By enacting this principle in material ways we show our solidarity. This changes cooperation and sharing into a force that governments fear. It is the means by which we acquire the strength to change society.

Autonomy

It is essential that we form up groups based upon a shared experience of oppression so as to better understand our own situations and come to a decision on how any shared struggles should be fought. The reason for this is that any victory made by an outside force would end up reliant upon the goodwill of these allies. On the other hand, any victory won by those affected directly will have involved learning the tools required to maintain any gains for themselves.

Autonomous groups would still look to form bonds of mutual aid with one another, ultimately sharing an interest as members of the working class, and should aim to act in solidarity with one another's struggles. The difference here is that those with a shared experience of oppression would lead their own struggles, not an outside force. This offers the only chance of winning a lasting freedom.

Collective Action

An individual anarchist can only do so much on their own. The feeling of isolation which capitalism imposes can often lead to disillusionment and despair. The lasting change that is essential to anarchism is brought about by taking action together as a collective. Collective action in the shape of an anarchist group can accomplish far more than the individual members can achieve in isolation. A federated network constantly keeping us informed, sharing best practice and supporting each other when needed can punch well above the weight of any single group.

By the same token, the working class is more easily dominated and exploited when we are divided. When we organise ourselves collectively we have the potential to act in a concerted manner against the bosses. Individual actions may alter conditions temporarily, but do not alter the condition between classes on a wide scale or with any lasting effect. Collective action also creates a spirit of combativeness as people realise that, far from being powerless, they do have the power to bring about change.

Direct Action

Direct action involves tackling the root cause of a problem without appealing to a third party to act on your behalf. When we take action on our own behalf rather than lobbying an external authority, this provides us with opportunities to raise class consciousness from the situation and improve our effectiveness in taking action.

Conversely, political action is when the proposed solution relies on someone else taking action to resolve the conflict. This often requires a high level of activity with a high chance of failure. Political action reduces or controls the opportunities to form lasting change through collective action. Rather than foster a culture of resistance, it isolates different segments of the working class and fosters a culture of reliance on authority figures and specialist groups.

Direct action is not simply a loud or militant protest, with some of the loudest protests (such as demonstrations outside of shops or marches from one point to another) being forms of political action. We should only advocate political action when direct action would not be possible or would not have a positive outcome. We should always make clear to those involved which kind of action is being undertaken and be realistic about our thoughts on the outcome, aiming to always take part in actions that will win concrete victories.

Direct Democracy & Mass Participation

For working class organisations to remain focused on achieving the goals of the whole group, we need to ensure that access to decision-making is provided in a fair fashion and that participation is open to all involved. Each person should have equal input into any decision that will affect them.

This stands in contrast to the usual scheme of things, in which a hierarchical elite take positions and make decisions for the whole group. Even in the small scale a self-important committee can end up taking decisions that further its own interests rather than the interests of all involved.

When Revolution Comes

‘The inherent tendency of the State is to concentrate, to narrow, and monopolize all social activities; the nature of revolution is, on the contrary, to grow, to broaden, and disseminate itself in ever-wider circles. In other words, the State is institutional and static; revolution is fluent, dynamic. These two tendencies are incompatible and mutually destructive. The State idea killed the Russian Revolution and it must have the same result in all other revolutions, unless the libertarian idea prevail.’

– Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia*

Traditionally, left groups have called for the general strike – a mass economic strike of all workers – to overcome capitalism during one of its periods of crisis. History has shown that travelling this path without the wider working class having first gained the ideas and experience needed to defend our victories leads to the disasters of authoritarianism or counter-revolution. Even with these skills, the act of revolution has the danger of leading to splits as some groups baulk at certain actions or are happy to settle for partial outcomes.

To prevent this from happening a revolutionary consciousness will be required throughout the working class in order to ensure we do not settle for partial outcomes and instead remain focused upon achieving social revolution. Groups sharing this revolutionary consciousness may federate into relatively few organisations, bringing together all those who see the need for the victory of the working class. It is then that a general political strike – using both mass industrial action and mass social protest – has the best chance of victory.

In this revolutionary period the anarchist organisation must call for and assist in the formation of armed workers’ militias to defend themselves and their gains. The revolutionary organisation must help fight against any party or organisation that aims to take power in the name of the working class. If force is used to destroy the gains of the working class then anarchist organisations must be fully prepared to combat this on a physical level.

Revolutionary organisations would not dissolve immediately after the initial insurrectionary phase of the revolution, but will continue to struggle until the class system is abolished and anarchist communism is achieved. When this ideal is realised, the organisation becomes irrelevant and effectively disbands as members participate in the free society.

Endnote

This short pamphlet has set out some of our ideas about the part a revolutionary organisation plays in helping to bring about a revolution against capitalism. It is one of the few pamphlets produced by the Anarchist Federation that intends to be authoritative and prescriptive. Here more than anywhere we try to mean what we say.

We find it of vital importance that class struggle anarchists federate with revolutionary organisations in order to realise a free communist society. It is our hope that these words contribute to a general understanding of the need for organisation and of the importance of building mass revolutionary movements throughout the world. These movements must share the aim of abolishing capitalism and the state by taking over the productive forces of society and putting them to our own use, on our own terms.

On that road lies freedom.

Further Reading

Introduction to Anarchist Communism

The Anarchist Federation, revised 2013

A Practical Guide to Anarchist Organisation

Andrew Flood, 2002

As We See It / As We Don't See It

Solidarity, 1967

Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists (Draft)

The Dielo Trouda (Workers' Cause) group, 1926

Anarchism and Organisation

Errico Malatesta, 1897

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