

Argentina and the left

Anarcho

2003

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Anarchists have long argued that the working class, in its struggle against oppression, organises itself and creates combative bodies which can not only fight hierarchy but can become the framework of a free society. In “From Riot to Revolution” I discussed this in regards to the current social conflict in Argentina.

Unsurprisingly enough, the developments in Argentina have been analysed by the various shades of the left. The results are illuminating, shedding a light on the way Leninism views working class struggle and the role of the vanguard party. Simply put, their attempts to analyse the events in Argentina exposes the substitutionist nature of vanguardism. Facing a working class which is applying direct self-management, they do not know where to turn. Moreover, there is a tendency for the analysis to concentrate on the roots of the crisis as a result of impersonal economic forces (i.e., from the perspective of capital to use Harry Cleaver’s useful term) and to discuss the struggle of working class people as almost a side issues, something which gets in the way of hard economic statistics.

This can be best seen from the SWP’s **International Socialism** Journal (no. 94) in which Chris Harman covers the new organs of working class power in just over pages, of which one is analysis (namely page 25). His comments are insightful, but purely in terms of the mentality of Leninism. Basically, his discussion on the working class revolt is disapproving. While recognising that the popular assemblies in the neighbourhood were developed by the people due to the “*need to organise themselves*,” he complains that the Argentine working class is organising in the wrong way! There are, Harman informs us, “*important differences*” between the way Argentinians are actually organising and the way they should be, namely in “*workers’ councils*” or soviets. The popular assemblies are not “*anchored*” in the workplace, not an “*organic expression*” of the Argentinean working class and its militant history!¹

Need it be said that such an SWP approved organisation will automatically exclude the unemployed, housewives, the elderly, children and other working class people who are currently taking part in the struggle? In addition, any capitalist crisis is marked by rising unemployment, firms closing and so on. While workplaces must and have been seized by their workers, it is a law of revolutions that the economic disruption they cause results in increased unemployment simply because supply lines are disrupted (in this Kropotkin’s arguments in **Conquest of Bread** have been confirmed time and time again). That the Argentine working class is forming organs of power which are not totally dependent on the workplace is, therefore, a good sign. As discussed in “*From Riot to Revolution*”, factory assemblies and federations must be formed but as a complement to, rather than as a replacement of, the community assemblies.

Harman argues that these bodies are cross class organisations, with assemblies being formed in well off neighbourhoods as well as working class ones. It seems strange that a socialist, who claims to believe that the working class can transform society, is so concerned about the influence of a few assemblies which include a minority of the population. It also seems strange that a supporter of the ultimate “*cross class*” organisation, a political party, should condemn the Argentinians so!

¹ At least he mentions that anarchism played an important role in the labour movement there, although, typically, he gets details of the “*Semana Tragica*” of 1919 wrong. While he correctly notes that it was started by a police attack on a 200,000 strong march led by anarchist unions, he implies that it was the rival syndicalist unions which proclaimed the General Strike. In fact, the anarchist FORA had proclaimed a general strike the day before. The other unions repeated this call the day after the attack so as not to be outflanked by the anarchists. Equally significantly, the strike was undermined by negotiations between the government and the syndicalist unions.

Self-Management or Representation?

Even worse, these popular assemblies are “*not yet bodies of delegates*” and do not have “*an organic connection with some people whom they represent*.” Their members “*represent themselves*”! Which, of course, is the whole point — they are popular **assemblies**! A Popular Assembly does not “*represent*” anyone because its members govern themselves, i.e. are directly democratic. As Harman explicitly states that they are “*closer to the sections*” of the French Revolution, it is clear he **is** talking about the elemental neighbourhood assemblies and is simply showing that he does not know what he is talking about.

What **is** significant from Harman’s disapproval is his need for “representative” structures. This is understandable as without “representatives” it would be impossible for the vanguard party to seize power! After all, did Lenin not argue that “*the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts ... that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot direct exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard*”? (Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 21) As we can see, the fate of the revolution depends on the masses creating a organisation in which someone “represents” them. Without this delegation of power away from the working class into the hands of a few, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would be impossible!

Equally, the logic of his argument defeats Harman. While he argues that any “delegate” should be subject to recall, he insists on stating they must “represent” some body. Yet, for recall to work the “some people” must be in a position to judge the actions of their delegate. This means that without self-management, recall is impossible. Thus, if we have recall (and that also implies mandates), we implicitly have the structure for self-management and so **not** representation. Simply put, whoever is competent enough to pick their masters is competent to govern themselves and whoever is able to recall their “representative” is able to mandate them. With mandates, representatives are replaced with delegates.

To confuse representation with direct democracy makes sense for an ideology which also confuses party power with working class power. For anarchists, Harman’s confused terminology simply shows that Leninism aims for the former, not the latter (as Lenin made clear). Perhaps Harman’s confusion and bewilderment at the activities of the Argentine working class simply reflects an awareness, however dim, that if they continue to organise in this manner, the “vanguard” party will not be able to seize power?

Completing the Revolution?

Workers Power contributed their analysis via a “*Statement of the International Secretariat of the LRCI*” entitled **The Argentine Revolution has begun — how can it be completed?**

Unsurprisingly enough, like Harman this statement calls for “*Soviet-type bodies*” to be created. Indeed, the “*slogan for workers councils is crucial one in the current situation*” and is counterpoised to “*the slogan of popular assemblies or similar multi-class bodies*” and the latter “*actually runs the danger of leaving the workers open to other class forces and populist demagogues*.” Thus the focus of the struggle is turned away from direct democracy onto leaders, away from what is actually happening in Argentina and on to what Trotskyists think should be happening.

Needless to say, this is all done in order to “*root fighting organs strongly in the working class, in the factories and shops.*” However, as unemployment is high and not all working class people are wage slaves, it does not mean increasing the “*social weight of the working class in the movement*” but rather disempowers vast numbers of our class. That is not all. The statement is much more generous and aims at disempowering **all** working class people. This can be seen from the comment that workers’ councils are seen as “*a means to help the workers test their current leaderships at all levels, to reject and replace the inadequate ones and chose new ones.*” Thus the “*slogan for workers councils*” is simply a means of ensuring the “right” (i.e. Trotskyist) leaders have power and not as a means of ensuring workers’ power at all (I’m sure that, like Lenin, **Workers Power** will equate the two).

Thus the whole rationale of the statement is to replace popular power with party power. As they put it, while “*many bodies may arise which have rather the character of popular assemblies or mass meetings*” this is not enough. “*Revolutionaries,*” they state, “*have to work in these bodies and help them to develop a recallable and responsible executive or leadership body.*” Thus the working class do not govern society directly, the “*leadership body*” does.²

Obviously, it is “*essential that delegates which are responsible and recallable to the rank and file are elected in the workplaces, the departments, but also in the districts and by the unemployed associations.*” Equally, for the need to co-operate and co-ordinate struggles and activity. However, these developments should be rooted in the popular assemblies, not raised as an alternative to them!

Constituent or Popular Assembly?

After attacking the popular assemblies for being “*multi-class bodies*” the statement argues without irony that the call for a “*sovereign, revolutionary, constituent assembly*” remains “*an important slogan in the present situation.*” In other words, “multi-class” direct democracy is bad but “multi-class” representative democracy is good! Thus representative democracy is seen as the form of proletarian power while direct democracy is associated with the “middle classes” — a reversal of the events of every bourgeois and proletarian revolution and the utter betrayal of the latter.³

It warns us that “*the middle classes*” have “*disproportionate*” influence in the assemblies (“*at least in Buenos Aires*”). They claim that the “*blue-collar worker are largely absent from these bodies.*” While the “*popular assemblies ... represent the growing political involvement of the masses*” they

² Their argument has the same fallacies as Harman’s. They lambaste the “*uselessness of the centrists,*” arguing that this, in part, “*can be seen in their confusion of mass meetings with soviet-type bodies, composed of delegates.*” Needless to say, the fallacy of their position is clear. The difference between a delegate and a representative is that the former is mandated by their electors and subject to recall by them, the latter is given carte blanche during the period they are elected. In order for a delegate to exist, there must be an assembly of electors who can create and issue a mandate and be in a position to evaluate the performance of the delegate with regard to that mandate. Thus a true delegate body has to be based on mass meetings. This means that real “*confusion*” can be seen if a group contrasts mass meetings and delegate bodies!

³ The statement argues that the “*popular masses*” (“*despite their disillusion with all parties and politicians*”) still have “*major democratic illusions.*” How is it proposed to counteract these illusions? Obviously not by raising the possibility of expanding and building upon the concrete practice of direct democracy. No, that would strengthen the influence of the “middle classes.” No, to combat illusions in bourgeois representative democracy, the statement argues that “*the call for elections for a sovereign constituent assembly in the manner outlined above retains its validity*”! As per Lenin in 1920, we must fight illusions by illusionary means.

“must not be confused with workers councils — soviets.” That only a part of “the masses” can take part in “workers’ councils” is simply ignored. They then compound this error by actually arguing that the *“agitation for the constituent assembly alone will not solve the question of the present preponderance of the middle classes, the unemployed and the urban poor in the struggle”!* Thus the “working class” is identified with industrial workers, a minority within our class.

As I warned in the last issue of *“From Riot to revolution”*, the left would do the bourgeoisie’s work for them and support attempts to side track the revolt into legal and representative forms. The statement does not disappoint, arguing for the assembly as *“the organised working class ... have not entered the political scene in an organised fashion.”* Moreover, they even imply that the lack of this constituent assembly has resulted in the popular assemblies being formed! Thus “politics” becomes equated with electing politicians — preferably “revolutionary” ones to a “revolutionary” assembly. As if sticking “revolutionary” in front of something changes its nature!

Needless to say, the call for a “constituent assembly” is not an end in itself. This is just the *“first task in this period”* in order *“to overcome the absence of the working class from the centre of the struggle against Duhalde.”* It would be churlish to ask the authors how many of “the masses” who have fought and struggled in this near revolution are, in fact, “working class” and how many are “middle class.” Simply put, if it was predominately the “middle class” which was taking part in the struggle, Trotskyists would not be remotely interested in it...

Party Power, not workers’ power...

But hope does exist! The statement argues that the *“positions of the Partido de los Trabajadores por el Socialismo (PTS), advanced in the present crisis are qualitatively superior to those of the other organisations claiming to be Trotskyist in Argentina and entitle them to the active support of revolutionaries world wide.”* They praise the PTS for *“correctly rais[ing] the slogan of a sovereign constituent assembly over which the working people should exercise the maximum control through democratic mass organisations.”* Forgetting their attacks on the popular assemblies, they point to the PTS and its attempts *“to promote the building and extension of workplace and popular assemblies and committees of elected and recallable delegates. They have also argued for a workers government based on such bodies — in particular upon a national workers and popular assembly.”* This, it is claimed, contains the *“fundamental elements of a revolutionary strategy for the Argentine revolution.”*

But why a “workers government” above the popular assemblies and their federations? After all, if the working class is managing society directly in mass assemblies then what role would the government play? The statement is clear:

“If revolutionaries are striving with the utmost seriousness and determination for working class power — i.e. for the dictatorship of the proletariat — then BOTH soviets and a revolutionary party are absolutely essential. SOVIETS ARE NOT ENOUGH because without a revolutionary party they will be incorporated and/or dissolved. The party is the essential means for achieving power.”

Thus, in order for “working class power” to exist, the party must be given power! Needless to say, the soviets in Bolshevik Russia quickly became “incorporated” — into mere fig-leaves for party rule. Moreover, a few months after power the “revolutionary party” had “dissolved” any soviet which had been elected with a non-Bolshevik majority. The logic for all this is simple. If the party *“is the essential means for achieving power”* and the party is rejected by the working class

in soviet elections then, logically, the working class is no longer in power and so the party has the right, nay the duty, to dissolve any soviet to maintain “soviet” power. After all, by definition all other sections of the working class are “backward” in relation to the vanguard, so providing the perfect rationale for turning the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” into the “*dictatorship over the proletariat*.”

They state that the “*central focus of agitation and propaganda*” has to reach the “*conclusion*” that “*our struggles have to be combined and co-ordinated on a national level, we need centralised councils of the workers, the unemployed etc.; we need a workers government based on these organs of struggle. Such a government must carry through to completion a proletarian revolution.*” Thus the need to federate together to co-ordinate struggle is confused with centralisation and the usurpation of popular power by the leaders of a party. Ironically, the “*completion*” of a “*proletarian revolution*” means that the proletariat no longer make the decisions. Instead, the role of proletarian organisations are to be the base upon which a handful of party leaders take power. Truly “*workers’ power*” in practice!

It’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to!

Given the legacy of “revolutionary parties” substituting themselves for the working class, you would expect that the healthy distrust expressed in Argentina for politicians has also been applied to would-be “revolutionary” ones. The statement asserts that “*social dominance of the middle classes meant that their ideological impetus was quite strong*” and their “*political prejudices*” has “*led to them resisting the carrying of banners by political organisations (left parties). It has also led to opposition to open participation by left parties in the popular assemblies.*”⁴

Being good Trotskyists, they predict that “*Anarchist confusionists will doubtless celebrate this ‘anti-political’ stance.*” They explain why “*revolutionaries [sic!] must consciously and openly fight against it*” by presenting the super-market version of revolutionary politics: “*A de facto ‘ban on parties’ denies the masses the opportunity to compare them and their programmes, to accept or reject them.*” Thus “*the masses*” get to choose between pre-existing “*programmes*” rather than determine their own needs and desires (with the input of revolutionaries in open assembly). Rather than manage their own affairs directly, the masses get to put their “weight” behind one party or the other, just as in bourgeois democracy. As the Bolshevik revolution shows, such forms of “*popular democracy*” simply replace popular power with party power.

Ultimately, the statement confuses “*freedom and duty of parties to organise*” (which they claim “*is the bedrock of workers and popular democracy*”) with the freedom of parties to dominate and control the popular movement, a confusion which we must be aware of. Simply put, all individuals and groups must have freedom to organise and influence popular organisations but they must not be allowed to substitute their will for that of the assemblies.⁵

⁴ Rather than wonder **why** such hostility could exist, it is dismissed as “*anti-party sentiments*” which “*reflects not simply disillusionment with the corrupt bourgeois political caste, but also petty bourgeois distrust of the workers movement and revolutionary organisations.*” Thus leftist parties are equated with “*the workers movement*” and all “*revolutionary organisations.*” The arrogance is astounding! And, of course, the middle-classes do not form political parties and working class people are never, ever, anti-political! But why let reality get in the way of a nice rant?

⁵ And this seems to be the source of some of the hostility directed towards left parties: “*These groups have attempted to use the assemblies for their own reformist and statist demands. Typically, they will start to get onto executive committees and then push for a motion proposing nationalisation of various industries ... or other measures that divert the*

Shades of 1905?

Perhaps we should not be too surprised by the unresponsiveness of Leninism to new developments in the class struggle. After all, while anarchists had been supporting the idea of workers' councils as a means fighting the class struggle and as the framework of a free society since the 1860s, Bolshevism only came to pay lip service to this idea in 1917! Given that anarchists have been discussing the possibilities of community assemblies in a similar light for decades now⁶, perhaps a similar process is now at work?

Let us not forget that while, almost uniquely on the left, the anarchists in 1905 had supported the soviets as organs of struggle and as the framework of the new society⁷, neither Marxist groupings (Mensheviks or Bolsheviks) viewed them as anything but the former. Indeed, the Bolsheviks were so hostile to the soviets they actually presented the soviets with an ultimatum: accept our political platform or disband! Luckily, they were ignored.

Ultimately, the Leninist dismissal of the popular assemblies suggests more than merely confusion or unconscious awareness they imply no means for the party to seize power. It suggests that the sectarian core of Leninism is being exposed. Sectarious expect working class people to relate to their predetermined political positions, whereas revolutionaries apply our politics to the conditions we face as members of the working class. For Leninists revolutionary consciousness is not generated by working class self-activity, but is embodied in the party. As such, when working class people organise in new ways, the response is not to integrate and learn from these new experiences but rather to complain they are organising in the wrong way. As Marx defined it: *"The sect seeks its point of honour not in what it has in common with the class movement, but in the particular shibboleth distinguishing it from that movement."* Hence the fetish for "workers' councils," the harking back to 1917 Russia and the expectation that working class people's role in the revolution is to select the correct "leadership" and "programme" from a competing set of would-be bosses.

In conclusion

Our look at the approach of two left parties to the revolt in Argentina indicates well the sectarian and elitist nature of Bolshevism. Rather than embrace the popular assemblies and seek their growth, argue for their extension into the workplace, clarify their aims and urge that they and their federations alone become the future structure of a socialist society, we are subjected to repeated complaints that the Argentinean working class is just not doing what they should

struggle into legalistic and therefore easily-recuperable avenues. This has not gone unnoticed by the assembly members, who have acted to remove these parasites." (Argentina: What Next?, **Organise!** no. 58)

⁶ Although to be picky, Kropotkin had already raised this idea in his account of the Great French Revolution in 1909 and it had been applied by anarchists in both the Ukrainian and Spanish revolutions!

⁷ The only exception were the Socialist Revolutionary Maximalists, who were close to anarchism anyway. The syndicalists *"regarded the soviets ... as admirable versions of the **bourses du travail**, but with a revolutionary function added to suit Russian conditions. Open to all leftist workers regardless of specific political affiliation, the soviets were to act as nonpartisan labour councils improvised 'from below' ... with the aim of bringing down the old regime."* The anarchists of Khleb i Volia *"also likened the 1905 Petersburg Soviet — as a nonparty mass organisation — to the central committee of the Paris Commune of 1871."* (Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, pp. 80–1) Kropotkin argued that anarchists should take part in the soviets as long as they *"are organs of the struggle against the bourgeoisie and the state, and not organs of authority."* (quoted by Graham Purchase, **Evolution and Revolution**, p. 30)

be doing. Rather than look at the concrete dynamics of the struggle in Argentina, we are urged to apply “soviets” as if it was still 1917 Russia. We are told to base the revolution on industrial workers, so marginalising the rest of our class from the revolutionary struggle (moreover, such a position fails to appreciate the disruptive effects of any revolution which has a tendency to increase unemployment).

The reason for this is simple. Like Lenin, they want party power, which they equate with working class power. When the working class acts in ways that hinder this possibility, the class is denounced. Thus the call for representative organs, for a “workers’ government” and so on. Only by undermining the popular assemblies can this be achieved. As the *International Secretariat of the LRCI* note, the crisis will be resolved “*either by the defeat of the masses and victorious counter-revolution (irrespective of the form it takes) or by the seizure of power by the working class, by a socialist revolution.*” The politics of Leninism will simply see the defeat of the masses and victorious counter-revolution draped in a red flag — as has happened so many times before.

The struggle for “*seizure of power by the working class*” cannot be achieved through a party. It can only be achieved by self-management, by free federations of community and workplace popular assemblies. The role of anarchists is to encourage this process, to combat any attempt to disempower the working class no matter where it comes from. As Bakunin argued, anarchists do “*not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.*” Rather, the revolution “*everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations ... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.*” (**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 237 and p. 172). History has proved him right.

The social revolution of the 21st century must draw its poetry from the present, not the past. The left is trying to squeeze current struggles into a model created by events over 100 years ago in Tsarist Russia. It is as if the revolution had been televised and we are being subjected to repeats! Rather than using the past as a foundation to build upon, they consider a home in which to inhabit (and a haunted house at that!). The task of all serious revolutionaries must be to learn from current events, build upon the autonomous struggles which are happening and ensure that Argentina will not repeat the mistakes of the past. And that means arguing for “***all power to the popular and workplace assemblies***”!

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