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Authoritarians, vanguards and “anti-capitalist” movements

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October 13, 2008

Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

A critique of an SWP attack on libertarian anti-capitalist protesters. Exposes the hypocrisy of Leninists attacking others as undemocratic as well as the impractical nature of their alternative.

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October 13, 2008

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civil war Russia experienced. After all, Lenin himself stated that every “*revolution ..., in its development, would give rise to exceptionally complicated circumstances*” and “[*r*]evolution is the sharpest, most furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war. No one who does not live in a shell could imagine that civil war is conceivable without exceptionally complicated circumstances.” [Will the Bolsheviks Maintain Power?, p. 80 and p. 81] Lenin’s comment raises an important question with regards Bolshevism. If the Bolshevik political and organisational form cannot survive during a period of disruption and complicated circumstances then it is clearly a theory to be avoided at all costs.

The **Socialist Workers Party** obviously thinks the “anti-capitalist” demonstrators are the next big thing and ideal recruiting fodder. Chris Bamberry, a leading member, puts their aim clearly enough: “*The test for the SWP will be how it shapes and directs the anti-capitalist movement.*” Another, Julie Waterson, knows precisely what they want out of it: “*A cadre of Bolsheviks.*”

As usual, working class and radical movements are seen **purely** in instrumental terms, as means of increasing the size and influence of the party. Rather than seeing their politics as being informed by the class struggle they see the class struggle simply as means gaining members. Those considered as possible new members of the Party will be urged to ignore their own experiences within their own movements and instead asked to follow a set of politics based on the “lessons” of experiences gained in a near pre-capitalist, absolutist state at the start of the last century. The stupidity of such an approach is clear. Little wonder Lenin argued it in **Left-Wing Communism**.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Leninists are non-existent in the groups that have taken part and organised the anti-capitalist demonstrations — not willing to learn from those involved in the class struggle, all they can do is act as petty sectarians. Sectarians 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. The important issues facing the working class — and how to fight — are to be determined not by the working class people ourselves, but by the leadership of the party, who are the “vanguard of the working class”.

Unfortunately, as the recent anti-capitalist demonstrations show, the vanguard is busy trying to catch up with those in struggle. Not that this is an isolated case — the Russian Revolution is full of examples of the backward nature of the “vanguard party.” For example, throughout 1917, it was the workers themselves, not the Bol-

shevik Party, which raised the issue of workers' self-management and control. As historian S.A. Smith correctly summarises, the "*factory committees launched the slogan of workers' control of production quite independently of the Bolshevik party. It was not until May that the party began to take it up.*" [Red Petrograd, p. 154] Given that the defining aspect of capitalism is wage labour, the Russian workers' raised a clearly socialist demand that entailed its abolition. It was the Bolshevik party, we must note, who failed to raise above a "*trade union conscious*" in this and so many other cases. Smith also correctly comments that Lenin's "*proposals ... [were] thoroughly statist and centralist in character*" and that he used "*the term ['workers' control'] in a very different sense from that of the factory committees.*" [Op. Cit., p. 154] The members of the "anti-capitalist" movements should bear that in mind when the SWP uses the same rhetoric as they do. Appearances are always deceptive when it comes to Leninists.

Authoritarian or democratic?

The SWP are obviously aware that the libertarian aspects of such groups as Reclaim the Streets will make it hard for the vanguard to "direct" the anti-capitalist movement. A leading cadre, Alex Callinicos, tried to combat libertarian influence in that movement in the May 13th issue of **Socialist Worker**. He states:

"Reclaim the Streets proclaims its hostility to organised structures and denounces the Socialist Workers Party as 'authoritarian.'

"Our crime is to believe that effective action depends on democratically-taken majority decisions binding on all involved. In the absence of this minimal level of democratic organisation and discipline you get what has been called 'the tyranny of structurelessness.'

affairs directly in associations created in the class struggle. The side that expressed itself in the sections of the French Revolution, the soldier and factory committees of the Russian revolution, the self-managed unions and collectives of Spanish anarchism, strikers assemblies and so on all through history. Precisely those kinds of functional democracy that the Bolsheviks eliminated in the name of formal democracy.

Epilogue

Of course Trotskyists like Callinicos try to blame the destruction of democracy in Russia on the Civil War and not the politics of the Bolsheviks. However, as indicated, the undermining of democracy started **before** the civil war started and continued after it had finished. The claim that the "working class" had been destroyed by the war cannot justify the fact that attempts by working class people to express themselves were systematically undermined by the Bolshevik party. Nor does the notion of an "*exhausted*" or "*disappeared*" working class make much sense when "*in the early part of 1921, a spontaneous strike movement ... took place in the industrial centres of European Russia*" and strikes involving around 43 000 per year took place between 1921 and 1925. [Samuel Farber, **Op. Cit.**, p. 88] While it is undeniable that the working class was reduced in numbers because of the civil war, it cannot be said to have been totally "exhausted" and, obviously, did survive the war and was more than capable of collective action and decision making. Strikes, as Bakunin argued, "*indicate a certain collective strength*" and so rather than there being objective reasons for the lack of democracy under Lenin we can suggest **political** reasons — the awareness that, given the choice, the Russian working class would have preferred someone else in power!

Also, we must point out a certain ingenuity in the usual Trotskyist argument that Stalinism can be explained purely by the terrible

Only within direct democracy can individuals express themselves, practice critical thought and self-government, so developing their intellectual and ethical capacities to the full. In short, to be free. In terms of increasing an individual's freedom and their intellectual, ethical and social faculties, it is far better to be sometimes in a minority than be subject to the will of a boss all the time. In other words, self-management gains its rationale from individual freedom — it is the means by which individuals can express themselves within groups and make collective decisions while maintaining their liberty.

The Trotskyist vision of “democracy” is, as can be seen, different. It is seen purely as a means of placing the party into power. Thus power in society shifts to the top, to the leaders of the centralised party in charge of the centralised state. The workers' become mere electors rather than actual controllers of the revolution and are expected to carry out the orders of the party without comment (as they are “*binding on all involved*” as the party was democratically elected). In other words, a decidedly bourgeois vision of “democracy.” Anarchists, in contrast, seek to dissolve power back into the hands of society and empower the individual by giving them a direct say in the revolution through their workplace and community assemblies and their councils and conferences.

Hence, anarchism rather than Trotskyism bases itself on the “*effective action*” that results from “*democratically-taken majority decisions*.” This is because only anarchism recognises the relationships between individual liberty and self-managed groups, local action and co-ordination and the necessity of working from the bottom-up in federations rather than from the top-down in centralised bodies.

Leninism represents one side of democracy, the formal, Lockean, elitist side based on the notion that electing a government equals “democracy.” Anarchists, on the other hand, represent the other side of democracy, the functional, directly democratic side, the side expressed when oppressed people take management of their own

“*Small groups are free to do their own thing without being held accountable to everyone else. Now that's real 'authoritarianism.'*” [Socialist Worker, p. 4]

Needless to say, Callinicos does not mention the fact that the term “the tyranny of structurelessness” was invented by anarcho-feminist Jo Freeman. Nor does he mention the fact that RTS *does* have an organised structure (namely a weekly open meeting and various functional working groups springing from it). What RTS, anarchists and libertarians in general object to is *not* “*organised structures*” but rather *hierarchical* structures. Callinicos is peddling the usual Leninist nonsense that anarchists reject organisation. In reality, for anarchists, it is not a question of organisation versus non-organisation but rather authoritarian versus libertarian organisation and hierarchy versus self-management (direct democracy).

Thus it is not a question of the SWP's “*crime is to believe that effective action depends on democratically-taken majority decisions binding on all involved*.” Anarchists are firm believers in direct democracy in free associations. Self-managed, federal organisation from the bottom up is a key aspect of anarchist ideas. We see such libertarian organisation as reflecting the importance of individual liberty. Rather than being in favour of “democracy”, the SWP's crime is to envision a form of “democracy” which is little more than a justification for top-down party rule.

Democracy and “effective action”

If we take Callinicos' comments seriously then we doubt that any revolution would succeed when organised in the SWP's manner. After all, during a struggle or revolution unexpected events occur, new developments arise and new information appears. These require decisions to be made and as quickly as possible. The question

arises, who makes those decisions? Either it is those directly involved (i.e. the “small groups” Callinicos mentions) or it is by some one else. Callinicos states that these decisions must be made by “the majority.” Which “majority”? The majority of those involved with the event? The majority of all in a given organisation or demonstration? The majority of the working class? Callinicos remains silent (for good reason, as we shall see).

In some cases, it is practical and possible for the majority of all involved in a movement to make a decision on policy. For example, the congresses of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT were based on mandated delegates co-ordinating the policy decisions of all the membership. However, often it is impossible to do this. Workers on strike cannot continually submit every decision to the whole union membership. Rather the striking workers in each area make decisions appropriate to their needs and co-ordinate their activities later.

In a riot or revolution, small groups have to act without being bound by “democratically-taken majority decisions” which are, in practice, impossible to organise in the heat of a confrontation with the forces of the state or the bosses. Workers’ act *spontaneously* to show solidarity, to occupy their workplaces, to create new forms of organisation and so on without waiting for a “majority” within society or their own union. Any struggle or revolution is dependent on people making decisions spontaneously, at the appropriate time and level otherwise it will fail. Co-ordination of struggle, wide-scale collectively agreed action and organisation *is* essential but it *complements* local actions and decisions and can never replace it or subordinate it. This can be seen from looking at the logical conclusion of the SWP’s argument. That is why anarchists stress the importance of decentralisation and federalism.

If we take Callinicos’ argument at face value, no one could make a decision without first getting it agreed by the majority of society. In a strike the workers’ involved could not, say, organise a picket line without first balloting the rest of their union. In a socialist soci-

be held back by the inertia of the mass. Indeed, that inertia can only be overcome by the example of minorities taking the initiative and showing the rest what is possible. Without the actions of minorities, a revolution is impossible as mass action is always initiated by them. Minority action is, therefore, justified in so far as it encourages the majority to copy its example. It is not justified if it is purely a substitution for such mass action without hope of encouraging others to revolt. That is the real basis to criticise minority actions, not Callinicos’ fallacious one.

Anarchism and Democracy

Anarchism favours freedom and that implies two things – individual liberty and self-management (direct democracy) in free associations. Any form of “democracy” not based on individual freedom, as Callinicos proves, would be so contradictory as to be useless as a means to human freedom. And vice versa, we must stress, any form of “individual freedom” – such a liberalism – which denies self-management would be little more than a justification for minority rule and a denial of human freedom.

Anarchism, we stress, does not reject democratic decision making, organised structures, collective action and so on. It is obvious that individuals must work together in order to lead a fully human life and struggle against capitalism, the state and hierarchy. And so, “[h]aving to join with others humans ... [the individual has three options] he [or she] must submit to the will of others (be enslaved) or subject others to his will (be in authority) or live with others in fraternal agreement in the interests of the greatest good of all (be an associate). Nobody can escape from this necessity.” [Errico Malatesta, **The Anarchist Revolution**, p. 85]

Anarchists obviously pick the last option, association, as the only means by which individuals can work together as free and equal human beings, respecting the uniqueness and liberty of one another.

meant ignoring the democratic decision of a collective group!), accepted the “*democratically-taken majority decision*” and supported the Imperialist slaughter in the name of democracy (indeed, many of the anti-war minority went along with the majority of party in the name of “discipline” and “democratic” principles).

Of course, Callinicos would reject such positions — in **these** cases the rights of minorities take precedence over the “*democratically-taken majority decisions binding on all involved.*” This is because the majority is not always right and it is only through the dissent of individuals and minorities that the opinion of the majority can be moved towards the right one. Thus his comments are fallacious.

The Two Souls of Democracy

The problem is that Callinicos fails to understand the rationale for democratic decision making — it is not based on the idea that the majority is always right. Rather, it is based on the idea that individual freedom requires democracy to express and defend itself. By placing a vaguely defined collective above the individual, Callinicos undermines democracy and replaces it with little more than tyranny by the majority (or, more likely, those who claim to represent the majority).

Simply put, Marxism (as Callinicos presents it here) flies in the face of how societies change and develop. New ideas start with individuals and minorities and spread by argument and by force of example. Progress is determined by those who dissent and rebel against the status quo and the decisions of the majority. That is why anarchists support the right of dissent in self-managed groups — in fact, dissent, refusal, revolt by individuals and minorities is a key aspect of self-management (and of the class struggle and of revolution, both expressions of self-management). That is also why anarchists stress federalism and direct action. Advanced groups cannot

ety, workers in a factory could not decide to re-organise production in more libertarian ways without getting a majority of the workers across the globe to agree to the change. To criticise “small groups” acting on their own initiative, without getting permission from an undefined “majority” means to condemn society to bureaucratic inertia. No decision could be made unless the majority had discussed it before hand and had agreed to it. This would be the exact opposite of the “effective action” Callinicos thinks binding democratic decisions would create.

A Taxing Time for the SWP?

Ironically enough, Callinicos’ own example of the 1990 poll-tax riot refutes his own argument. He states that “[t]he real force for change is mass action. The Trafalgar Square riot ... got rid of Thatcher and her poll tax. This is the real basis on which to criticise the very small number of protestors who used violent tactics. Street fighting isn’t a substitute for mass mobilisation.” Things have certainly changed since the week after the riot, when the SWP claimed “no socialist believes rioting will beat the poll tax.” [Socialist Worker, April 7th, 1990] Also forgotten is the community based mass non-payment campaign which the SWP initially dismissed in favour of calling upon the trade union bureaucracy to organise industrial action. But, then again, perhaps that explains why it goes unmentioned?

This, however, is beside the point. Callinicos’ argument, as it stands, can be faulted for three reasons. Firstly, a riot *is* “street fighting” so Callinicos’ argument is logically flawed. Secondly, RTS and the other libertarians who organised the May Day demonstration had tried to mobilise as many people as possible to it and so are already aware of the importance of “mass mobilisation” and “mass action.” If they did not, and did not succeed in organising mass events, the SWP would not be interested in them. Thirdly, and more

importantly, the people involved in the 1990 riot were a **minority** of those who took part in the Anti-Poll Tax demonstration and the movement as a whole. The riot itself was a spontaneous event, unplanned beforehand and not in any way agreed to democratically by “*all involved*” or by the leadership of the anti-poll tax federation. The fact it even occurred in the first place and was successful is due to a **minority** of the people at the demonstration acting for themselves, without waiting for the majority or the decisions of the Anti-Poll Tax leadership. Indeed, if the rioters had waited for the majority to agree or for the Anti-Poll Tax federation’s leadership to act then they would have been defeated – it was impossible to consult the majority and the so-called leadership had no idea what to do and were horrified by the whole event.

If we take Callinicos’ argument seriously we must conclude that the rioters should have followed the leadership of the Anti-Poll Tax Federation and stopped fighting the police. Instead of this, the **minority** willing and able to resist the police acted for themselves, independently of any leaders and gave a lead to the majority on the demonstration without waiting for them. And a good job they did. Their street fighting is now praised by Callinicos while he ignores the obvious fact that they acted in a manner totally at odds with his political recommendations. Hardly a good example to use as a polemical point against RTS, regardless of the pros and cons of certain actions that occurred on May Day itself.

Follow the leader?

Of course, in practice, Trotskyists recognise that to involve the majority in every decision would be impossible. That is why they argue for “democratic centralism.” In this the party membership elect a leadership who make the day to day decisions which the party membership has to implement. Rather than “*effective action*” being the result of “*democratically-taken majority decisions binding*”

that the leaders enjoy under such circumstances can be usurped without difficulty – the centralised nature of the state ensures accountability is limited and Bolshevik politics provide the rationale to eliminate democracy and ignore any “democratically-taken majority decisions” that conflict with the party’s wishes.

Thus Callinicos’ comments are strange in the extreme. Both anarchists and Leninists share a belief that individuals can and should have the right to ignore decisions made by groups. However, Leninists seem to think only the government and leadership of the Party should have that right while anarchists think **all** should. Unlike the egalitarian support for freedom and dissent for all anarchists favour, Leninists have an elitist support for the right of those in power to ignore the wishes of those they govern. The history of Marxist parties in power expose Callinicos as a hypocrite.

Democracy and Freedom

That is not all. Callinicos’ argument, again taken to its logical conclusion, implies the end of the free expression of individuality. For example, who would seriously defend a society that “democratically” decided that, say, homosexuals should not be allowed to associate freely? Or that inter-racial marriage was against “Natural Law”? Or that socialists were dangerous subversives and should be banned? He would, we hope (like all sane people), recognise the rights of individuals to rebel against the majority when the majority violate the spirit of association, the spirit of freedom and equality which should give democracy its rationale.

If we take his comments seriously then we must conclude that those members of the German (and other) Social Democratic Party who opposed their party’s role in supporting the First World War were acting in inappropriately. Rather than express their opposition to the war and act to stop it, according to this “logic” they should have remained in their party (after all, **leaving** the party

obtain their freedom. Without the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power.

“In this sense the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard.” [“Stalinism and Bolshevism”, **Socialist Review**, no. 146, p. 16]

Thus, rather than the working class as a whole seizing power, it is the “vanguard” (the leadership of the party, a minority, the ultimate “small group”) which takes power — “a revolutionary party, even after seizing power ... is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.” That is, of course, true — they are still organs of working class self-management (such as factory committees, workers councils, trade unions, soldier committees) through which working people can still exercise their sovereignty. Little wonder Trotsky abolished independent unions, decreed the end of soldier committees and urged one-man management and the militarisation of labour when in power. Such working class organs do conflict with the sovereign rule of the party and so have to be abolished.

This position follows naturally from Trotsky’s comments that the party “crystallises” the “aspirations” of the masses. If the masses reject the party or its decisions, then, obviously, their “cultural level” has fallen and so the party has the right, neigh the duty, to impose its dictatorship over them. Similarly, the destruction of organs of working class self-management can be justified because the vanguard has taken power — which is **exactly** what Trotsky argued.

In other words, the leaders of the Bolshevik party became the “small group” “free to do their own thing without being held accountable to everyone else.” This was due to a combination of their politics and the nature of the state. As a centralised, top-down, hierarchical structure a state (or a Bolshevik-style party) cannot help giving power to the small group of leaders at the top. The powers

on all involved” they in fact mean “decisions made by a few leaders at the top of the party, binding on all under them.” In other words, a **representative** government whose decisions are binding on all subject to it — a radically different concept and one which is “democratic” only in the bourgeois sense we all know and hate.

Ultimately, Callinicos’ argument amounts to little more than a call for domination by the SWP’s leadership over the anti-capitalist movement — a call hidden behind the rhetoric of “democracy.”

It was this vision of centralised, top-down “democratic” decision making which provided the Bolsheviks with the justification to eliminate the functional democracy associated with the factory committees and soldiers committees. In place of workers’ and soldiers’ direct democracy and self-management, the Bolsheviks appointed managers and officers and justified because a workers’ party was in power. The “*democratically-taken majority decisions binding on all involved*” which elected the Bolsheviks into power became the means by which democracy was eliminated in area after area of Russian working class life. Needless to say, a state which eliminates functional democracy in the grassroots will not stay democratic for long

Bolshevism in power

In fact, the Bolshevik tradition has no problem with small groups and individuals ignoring the democratic decisions of collective groups. The Bolsheviks were very happy to let small groups ignore and revoke the democratic decisions of collective groups — **as long as the small group in question was the leadership of the Bolshevik Party.** The leading lights of the Leninist tradition happily placed the rights of the party before the rights of working people to decide their own fate. Thus Callinicos’ attack on RTS can be turned back on his own politics, with much more justification and evidence.

For example, in response to the “great Bolshevik losses in the soviet elections” during the spring and summer of 1918 “Bolshevik armed force usually overthrew the results of these provincial elections ... [In] the city of Izhevsk [for example] ... in the May election [to the soviet] the Mensheviks and SRs won a majority ... In June, these two parties also won a majority of the executive committee of the soviet. At this point, the local Bolshevik leadership refused to give up power ... [and by use of the military] abrogated the results of the May and June elections and arrested the SR and Menshevik members of the soviet and its executive committee.” In addition, “the government continually postponed the new general elections to the Petrograd Soviet, the term of which had ended in March 1918. Apparently, the government feared that the opposition parties would show gains.” [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, pp. 23–4 and p. 22]

In the workplace, the Bolsheviks replaced workers’ economic democracy with “one-man management” selected from above, by the state (“The elective principle must now be replaced by the principle of selection” — Lenin). Trotsky did not consider this a result of the Civil War — “I consider if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully.” [quoted by M. Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**, p. 63 and pp. 66–7] He pushed the ideas of “militarisation of labour” as well as abolishing democratic forms of organisation in the military (this later policy occurred **before** the start of the Civil War — as Trotsky put it, the “elective basis is politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree” [quoted by Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, pp.37–8]).

Moreover, in spite of Callinicos’ claim that it is the Leninist tradition which is democratic we find Lenin arguing in April 1918 that the “irrefutable experience of history has shown that ... the dictatorship of individual persons was often the vehicle, the channel of the dic-

tatorship of the revolutionary classes.” [quoted by Maurice Brintin, **The Bolsheviks and Workers Control**, p. 40] Such a comment is not an isolated one.

The elimination of democracy continued after the end of the Civil War. In May 1921, the All-Russian Congress of the Metalworkers’ Union met. The “Central Committee of the [Communist] Party handed down to the Party faction in the union a list of recommended candidates for **union** (sic!) leadership. The metalworkers’ delegates voted down the list, as did the Party faction in the union ... The Central Committee of the Party disregarded every one of the votes and appointed a Metalworkers’ Committee of its own. So much for ‘elected and revocable delegates.’ Elected by the union rank and file and revocable by the Party leadership!” [M. Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 83]

These are a few examples of Trotsky’s 1921 argument that you cannot place “the workers’ right to elect representatives above the party. As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!” He continued by stating the “Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship ... regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class ... The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers’ democracy.” [quoted by Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 78]

So much for the SWP’s politics just being “democratic.” Rather, RTS is correct. The Bolshevik tradition is deeply authoritarian — it is based on centralised party power riding rough-shot over the functional democracy of the working class. To quote Trotsky (this time from 1937):

“the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. In itself the necessity for state power arises from an insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity. In the revolutionary vanguard, organised in a party, is crystallised the aspirations of the masses to