

Anarchism with a future

— the Czech Republic —

Kevin Doyle and Vadim Barák

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Kevin Doyle talks to Vadim Barák of the Solidarita organisation in the Czech Republic about the problems and possibilities facing anarchists in the process of rebuilding a revolutionary movement.

Q: What's your view of the old 'Communist' system that existed in the Czech Republic until 1989? Had it any positive features?

It should be remembered that unlike in Hungary, Poland and Eastern Germany where the Communist Party (CP) were installed into government by the Soviet military forces, here in Czechoslovakia they came to power by winning democratic elections with an overwhelming majority of votes. But what you call the 'old Communist system' had nothing in common with true socialism. The regime we had until 1989 had all the faults that the Czech Anarchists at the beginning of the century predicted it would have. The Communist Party bureaucracy took over the state power in the name of workers. They slaughtered left and right oppositions, destroyed basic civil and human rights to prevent ordinary people from organising themselves independent of the Party and from expressing opinions hostile to "the most perfect democracy in the world". Industries were not nationalised under workers' control but under central bureaucratic management. Agriculture was collectivised with brutal force. The centralised undemocratic planning that became the norm here, fulfilled the interests of the nomenklatura¹ and not that of the whole society. As time went on it became more and more inefficient.

Q: Was there anarchist activity in Czechoslovakia in the lead up to the Velvet Revolution(1989)?

A: Yes, there was an anarchist minority in an illegal party called the Left Alternative. This party was very small and composed mainly of intellectuals and students who belonged to various currents of democratic and revolutionary socialism. They opposed the Communist regime and pursued a programme of socialism based on workers' self-management and direct democracy. As freedom of speech and association did not exist, the LA remained confined to being a more or less discussional platform, not an organisation active among working class people.

¹ The extended hierarchy of the Communist Party. The name nomenklatura derives from the system adopted at the 9th Party Congress of the CPSU (Bolsheviks) which put in place a system where the party would keep a list of those whom it considered 'suitable' for office. In time, the nomenklatura system came to represent those who were in the Party and/or followed its orders.

During the Velvet Revolution the LA gained some credibility among ordinary people, and in Prague — the centre of the revolution — it made significant steps to becoming a real working-class alternative. In the first local elections, 10,000 people voted for the LA in Prague. But by then the revolution had been usurped by careerist dissident intellectuals and former Communist bureaucrats. They took over a movement of Citizens' Forums and the state apparatus, and by means of a massive propaganda campaign succeeded in persuading people that we could not have socialism with democracy — that the only way was the western 'market economy' idea.

This new situation saw the LA once more in a position of isolated discussion circles. This time it was fatal. Some of its leading figures were moving towards a pro-market position, sectarianism occurred and in the end its internal conflicts destroyed it.

Q: What sort of history do anarchist ideas have in the Czech Republic?

Anarchism started here in the 1880s as a youth section of a patriotic and liberal movement against the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. When the Social Democratic Party was established, its left wing was represented by Libertarian Socialists, but after several years they were forced to break away. Until WW1 the most powerful current of Libertarianism was Anarcho-Syndicalist. A stronghold of Czech Anarcho-Syndicalism was in the Northern Bohemian mining regions. Anarcho-Syndicalists were soon organising their own union federation, the Czech General Union Federation (the CGUF). Repression by the state strangled the CGUF in 1908, but could not destroy the Syndicalist spirit among workers and new Syndicalist unions like the Regional Miners Unity were formed.

By 1914 the Federation of Czech Anarcho-Communists (the FCAC) was also well established among Czech workers. Syndicalists and Anarchists published a lot of papers such as *The Proletarian*. Anarchists established some consumers' co-ops. During WW1 there was a general clampdown on the Czech Libertarian movement — a lot of militants were either jailed or marched to the front; many were killed. Unlike Syndicalism the FCAC survived the war.

In 1918, on 14th October, the FCAC's militants, together with left Social Democrats, organised a 24-hour general strike that in fact marked the end of the Austro-Hungarian empire's domination of our nation. This event made Czech nationalist politicians, who did not want to break away from the empire until that moment, start negotiations with the empire about our independence. Strikers were demanding our right to national independence and a creation of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. After a day the strike was called off by the Social Democratic leadership. On 28th October ordinary people — mainly in Prague — rose up again to finish off the decaying Austro-Hungarian authorities.

At that time the leading Anarchist-Communist intellectuals were already moving towards Leninism. One of them became an MP in the parliament of the new republic and another was a minister of the first government. On the other hand it tells a lot about Anarchist-Communist influence at the time. In 1918 the Anarchist-Communists became the left wing of the Czechoslovak Socialist Party (the CSSP). In 1923 Anarchist-Communists were expelled from the CSSP and their leaders manoeuvred them into a last step before an open unification with the CP, which had already been established in 1921 by left Social Democrats and left Anarchist-Communists, who openly converted to Bolshevism. (In fact they were the first here to translate Lenin's works.) This last step led to the formation of the Independent Socialist Party (the ISP). In 1925 the ISP, despite resistance from the last remnants of syndicalism — the Association of Czechoslovak Miners, which was tied to the Anarchist-Communists — abandoned federalism and other Anarchist principles and joined the CP.

Q: Tell us a little about your formation. Is Solidarita a completely new organisation or did you develop from another organisation?

Solidarita developed from the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation (the ASF), whose roots reach to the LA. After 1990, in a time of greatest illusions about the market economy and consequently the greatest isolation of the left (no matter whether pro-market or socialist), the ASF sank into a deep sectarianism and dogmatism — which it has not recovered from yet.

But after this interval, there was a change: The first union struggles occurred; students fought back against the introduction of fees for education at universities; there was more and more support among people for environmentalist campaigns; in general the discontent of the working population was growing. A minority in the ASF did its best to be involved in this ferment and tried to translate its experience from those struggles into an internal debate in the ASF. That debate should have changed the ASF into an active and effective libertarian organisation. However, the majority in the ASF refused to discuss our proposals and we had to leave. Since that time (1996) Solidarita has been working to build itself. Our theoretical and organisational development is not finished yet. Through continuous involvement in local as well as national struggles of workers and young people, and through discussions, we are accumulating experience and clarifying our ideas. We describe ourselves either as anarcho-syndicalists or Libertarian Socialists.

Q: What other Anarchist organisations are there?

In the last while there has been quite a bit of change. Until about a year ago, there were three main organisations — the newly formed Northern Bohemian Libertarian Federation (NBLF), the Czechoslovak Anarchist Federation (the CSAF) and the Czechoslovak Federation of Revolutionary Anarchists (the CSFRA).

The CSFRA derives from the ASF (who I mentioned above). As far as we are concerned it is an organisation riven with dogmatists and sectarianism. The CSFRA doesn't base its politics on reality, so we don't have much to do with it.

In contrast both the NBLF and the CSAF were federations that sought to unite various currents of anarchism. This is one important difference we in Solidarita had with these groups. Solidarita is an organisation united in its theory and practice. We are pulled together by a common programme and we are all equally responsible for implementation of our organisation's politics. But there was some overlap between Solidarita and both of these organisations — the NBLF and CSAF — joint membership for example.

Last year the CSAF split, giving rise to a new group called the FSA — the Federation of Social Anarchists. Since then the FSA has gone through a significant development. They've adopted the Platform² as an important part of their political attitudes. This puts them in a similar position to Solidarita. The FSA carries out intensive propaganda work and are currently involved in ongoing discussion with us and other Czech syndicalists with a view to uniting. Also involved in these discussions are a number of ex members of the NBLF (The NBLF ceased to exist because of a split between syndicalists and green anarchists).

The outcome of all this may well be a new anarcho-syndicalist organisation, which would be a major step forward for class-struggle anarchism.

'Free-Market' Madness in the Czech Republic

² The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists — a pamphlet written in the mid 20s by anarchists who had fought in the Russian Revolution. It argues for the unity of theory and practice in the anarchist organisation, and for collective responsibility around a definite programme. (See page 29)

- Increases in rents and the price of electricity, gas and heating, announced on July 1st 1998 has put two-thirds of the Czech population (2m households) on the poverty line.
- Unemployment has now climbed from zero to 7% (350,000), and is set to worsen further.
- New interest rates forced through by the Czech Republic's IMF 'managers' earlier in the year will cause the collapse of 40–60% of Czech enterprises over the next year.

Q: What sort of unions exist in the Czech Republic at the moment?

We have standard bureaucratic pro-market unions that believe in social partnership. They rely on endless and mostly fruitless negotiations with the government and employers. They organise about 40% of our workforce and are divided into several union federations that come from the old Communist Revolutionary Union Movement. The CP still has a small union federation, but it is absolutely passive and unimportant. Now the most powerful federation is the Czech and Moravian Chamber of Trade Unions (the CMCTU). A smaller federation worth mentioning is the Trade Union of Agricultural Workers. All the CMCTU's unions claim to be independent of all political parties, but the CMCTU's leadership admits that its politics are close to those of Social Democracy. A good number (of the leadership) also ran as candidates of Social Democracy in elections to both houses of parliament.

The remarkable exception to all this is Trade Union Association of Railway Workers (the TU-ARW), which is really independent of political parties and says "No!" to the introduction of market principles into public services and to privatisation of the railways. In February 1997 the TU-ARW led the most important strike in the post-1989 period and are surely the most advanced union in our country. The CMCTU's leadership has accused the TUARW of being Anarcho-Syndicalist! Other living unions in the CMCTU which are getting more and more able and ready to fight back, are the miners, steelworkers and teachers' unions.

The rest are dying unions, which still behave like the old Communist unions. Their only concern is to collect enough money to feed the bureaucracy and to buy Christmas presents and holiday trips for their rank and file. For example in Health Care. Right now the government wants to close 20% of hospitals and decrease wages, but the Health Care Workers Trade Union (HCWTU) will not do anything about it. They will just join the CMCTU's demonstration against the government's austerity politics, but no more. No wonder workers are deserting them! In fact there is no tradition of self-activity for decades in the CP unions — people wait on their leaders to do something for them and, as I said, the HCWTU leaders do nothing.

Q: What is Solidarita's position relative to the unions? Do you favour the formation of new syndicalist unions?

Despite all the problems with the present unions — some of which I've outlined above — we believe in working inside them. We believe they are real working class organisations. Within them we argue for a syndicalist alternative of combative and democratic unions run 'by workers for workers', where all delegates would be immediately recallable so that workers would control their own struggles. Unions should be active not only in a workplace, but also in communities. They should take part in struggle against racism and fascism, in environmental campaigns. Their final goal should be transformation of this society of market dictatorship into a Libertarian Socialist society of social justice, workers' self-management and grassroots democracy.

That kind of union can come into existence only through our active participation in present day unions and through a rank and file movement in these unions for control over their organisations and fights.

It is also interesting to note that the organisation I mentioned above, the FSA, has also moved towards a position where it sees the necessity of working within the 'here and now' unions. This is an important development.

Q: How has the change to a 'market-style economy' affected Czech workers?

The market economy has not fulfilled any of people's hopes for a decent and free life. Sure we can buy more products and now there are no shortages of essential goods like bread or toilet paper, but everything is very expensive. Generally our living standard is worse than it was under the Communist dictatorship. Our wages and pensions are lower than in 1990 – when economic transformation started – and we have to pay high taxes. Besides, now we also have to pay for many services that used to be paid for from taxes e.g. a lot of medicines, textbooks for children, dentist treatment etc. Till [shop] prices are growing faster than incomes. An average wage is about £200 a month, but 62% of workers get wages lower than the average and only 5% get wages higher than £400 per month – these are the managers and the directors of companies.

Q: There has also been a massive round of privatisation. What has happened here?

Working class people were persuaded by pro-market political forces that privatisation would solve all the problems and would bring about a society where everybody is a rich share-holder. Everyone was going to become prosperous and production would be ecologically harmless! Nothing of that sort has happened. Privatised companies either ended up in hands of state-owned banks or in the hands of foreign investors, who bought only the best enterprises (i.e. those which were highly profitable even under the Communist state management; e.g. Volkswagen bought Skoda). But many companies also ended up in the hands of 'a new aggressive class of owners'. These people gained enormous wealth from, basically, stealing. The government has been turning a blind eye on this. I am talking about the people who were charged with managing banks, industries and privatisation funds. The amount of stolen property arising from privatisation is estimated to be in the region of hundreds of billions of Czech Crowns. Just to give you an idea of how large an amounts of capital this is, it should be enough to say that the Czech GMP is CC1600 billion.

It also needs to be said that the government is following the advice of the IMF to restrict spending on public services, on doles, pensions and all social benefits. The IMF/Government has also cancelled subsidies towards heating, electricity and gas for households. They have pushed for a decrease in wages and for structural adjustments of industry. This means that tens of thousands of public sector workers will lose their jobs; hospitals, schools and railways are being closed down; unemployment is growing. No wonder that more than 50% of the population believe that the Stalinist economy was bad, but that the free market one is not much better!

Q: In what way have people resisted the attack on living standards

The CMLIU organised a big demonstration against the government's austerity policy in Nov. 1997. But the attack on living standards was also one of the principal reasons why this right-wing government of Klaus got kicked out of office earlier in the year. But while people might be looking for some solution electorally – it won't come. The Social Democrats have abandoned all of its radical promises, and in fact only just won in the most recent parliamentary elections despite the huge dissatisfaction with Klaus. In the aftermath of that election the SDs entered into an 'alliance' with Klaus and his free-market cronies – which was a huge stab in the back for those people who had voted for the SDs in good faith.

There is a long way to go but we see our role as one of getting involved. We've been involved in the initiative for a General Strike (the IGS) launched by a number of socialist groups. We've also been doing work on the matter of rent increases. Solidarita has distributed leaflets calling for the non-payment of higher rents against government and local councils that are increasing rents. As we get more of a base in the larger towns and cities, more opportunities will arise for us to be effective in this regard. It is important to recognise that people in communities here are atomised and without any tradition of self-activity — from the years of Stalinism. There is much work to be done, but we are hopeful while being realistic.

Q: How is anarchism seen in the Czech Republic? Are you ever confused with the old Communists!

Yes, quite often, but people soon realise that we are different. But also, now it isn't so much the big problem it used to be [being confused with the CP]. Pro-market illusions are heavily shattered here now, and anti-Communist hysteria is gone. People are willing to consider your ideas and activities with respect even if they presume you are a Communist. A lot of people seem to believe that the only positive thing about capitalism is its relative freedom, but from an economic point of view it does not matter whether you live under Communism or Capitalism. Solidarita believes libertarian socialism is a clear alternative: freedom + socialism We fight hard to get its ideas of social justice, workers' self-management and grassroots democracy over to ordinary people.

Our colleagues, classmates and neighbours see the difference: "You are active among us, you really try to do something; the CP is just sitting in the parliament!" We stand a good chance to gain a leading position for anarchist ideas if we can be even more active, doing clear and reasonable libertarian politics.

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