

Anarchism and Ireland

Workers Solidarity Movement

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Introduction to the second edition (1989)

In the intervening four years since the Workers Solidarity Movement first published *Anarchism and Ireland* the reasons for doing so again have been more than demonstrated. Despite the great technological advances, the huge wealth and resources that now exist throughout the world, millions continue to die from starvation and from four major preventable diseases.

Ireland is no exception to the injustice and inequality that prevails. The standard of living has dropped for most working class people in the last three years, while unemployment has gone higher and emigration increased. The government has used the climate of despondency to push through its own cuts in the health service and in education — putting the squeeze, more and more, on those less well off. But meanwhile huge profits are being made, not just by multinationals but also by some of Ireland's own capitalists like Tony O'Reilly and Michael Smurfit.

That this situation must be changed is beyond doubt. Capitalism survives not just by physical force but also by making people feel and believe that they are powerless to do anything about it. It convinces us that "this is the way things will always be". Our real power to resist the inequality and injustice around us, and ultimately to radically change the way things are run, is obscured from us. But it is none the less there.

Anarchism and Ireland aims to make this clearer, to show the long tradition of ideas and action — our history — that has sought radical change by abolishing capitalism and replacing it with a better society based on socialism and freedom.

Anarchist ideas are not new, though in Ireland they have only a short history. The WSM aims to further popularise these ideas, to convince as many as possible that the solution to the problems around us will not be found in electing a "socialist" government to the Dail or any other parliament. Rather it lies in our own industrial and social power as workers. It lies in our ability to organise in unions, to stop production to further our aims. Ultimately it lies in the fact that it is we and not the bosses who create the wealth of the world.

Kevin Doyle

Anarchism and Ireland

The Workers Solidarity Movement is anarchist organisation. We believe in a revolution by the working class which will overthrow the bosses and their governments, and create a society run and controlled by those who actually produce the wealth of the world. We believe that it is possible to live without government and to put in its place councils and assemblies where the “ordinary people” can decide what happens to this wealth. We believe in the equality of all and that maximum solidarity is needed between workers and other oppressed groups if we are to defeat those who live off our sweat.

Anarchists are against chaos

When you hear about anarchists you are led to believe that we are mad bombers. Every other group that lets off a bomb is immediately labelled ‘anarchist’ whether they are nationalists, socialists or even fascists. The myth is created that we believe in violence for the sake of it. The other myth is that anarchism is chaos. It is claimed by politicians, bosses and their hacks in the media that if there was no government there would be chaos. But did you ever wonder about society today and come to the conclusion that perhaps we are already living in chaos? At the moment thousands of builders are on the dole yet homeless people need housing to live in {In the 1980’s unemployment was in double figure, now the builders are working but homelessness is higher then ever}. The price of butter is scandalously dear yet every year the EU has to deal with a butter mountain. Thousands of people are dying of starvation around the world yet millions of pounds are spent every day on nuclear arms with the potential for wiping us and the world out.

You might ask why is this so? We say that there is one big reason — PROFIT! At the moment we live in a society in which there are two major classes — the bosses and the workers. The bosses own the factories, banks, shops, etc. Workers don’t. All they have is their labour, which they use to make a living. Workers are compelled to sell their Labour to the boss for a wage. The boss is interested in squeezing as much work out of the worker for as little wages as possible so that he/she can maintain high profits. Thus the more wages workers get the less profits the bosses make. Their interests are in total opposition to each other.

Production is not based on the needs of ordinary people. Production is for profit. Therefore although there is enough food in the world to feed everyone, people starve because profits come first. This is capitalism.

What is the State?

There are other classes in society such as the self-employed and small farmers but fundamentally there are workers and bosses whose interests are in opposition to each other. For workers needs to be fully met we must get rid of the bosses. But this is no easy task. The bosses are organised.

They have the media on their side. They also have the State and the force of the army and police that go with it. We only have to look at the miner's strike in Britain to see how the forces of the state can be used against the working class {in 1984/5 the miners were on strike for a year and the police literally occupied the mining communities}. We only have to look at the North to see to what extent the ruling class are prepared to go to protect their interests.

The state (i.e. governments, armies, courts, police, etc.) is a direct result of the fact that we live in a class society. A society where only 7% of the people own 84% of the wealth.

The state is there to protect the interests of this minority, if not by persuasion then by force. Laws are made not to protect us but to protect those who own the property. Look at how the Ranks workers were flung into jail when they decided to fight for their jobs {Ranks saw a bitter strike in the 1980's where the workers occupied their workplace}.

Compare this with the treatment handed out to the multi-nationals who were able to take 500m in profits out of the country tax free without the government even knowing about it. If you think that the state is there to protect you, think about the fact that PAYE workers pay 88% of all income taxes while the rest – farmers, self-employed, and multi-nationals pay only 12% between them. {all 1980's figures for ones compiled in 1999 see Social partnership – Let it die with the Millennium}.

Elections: Putting numbers on a piece of paper

We are led to believe that the state is run in our interests. Don't we have elections to ensure that any government not behaving itself can be brought to task? Their democracy is about putting numbers on a piece of paper every four years. We are given a choice all right but between parties who all agree with the system of a tiny minority ruling the country.

People often say that if we really want to change things we should run in elections. Take a good look at this idea and it becomes clear that it cannot be done if we are to remain true to our anarchism.

Electioneering inevitably leads to revolutionaries forsaking their revolutionary principles. Look at the so-called Labour Party. First of all they do not go to the people with a clear socialist message. They go for whatever is popular and will ensure that they get elected. This becomes more important to them than educating people about the meaning of socialism. It also means that they look on the mass of voters as mere spectators. People are seen as voters, not as people who can be actually involved in politics and bringing socialism about. We do not accept that we should hand over the running of our lives to 160 odd people who are not accountable and can basically do whatever they like.

Can socialism come through the Daíl

There is another reason why we do not stand for election. Socialism cannot come through the Daíl. If we look at a country like Chile we can see why. In 1973 the people elected a moderate socialist government led by President Allende. This democratically elected government was toppled by a CIA backed military coup. Repression followed in which the workers movement was smashed and thousands of militants lost their lives.

This happened for two reasons. The Chilean socialists did not understand that real power is not in the parliament but in the boardrooms of the multinationals. It is those who have the money who hold real power. Socialism does not come through electing socialists to the Dail but through the direct action of workers taking control of the factories and land. For us socialism can only come from below, not from the top.

This point is not understood by the so-called socialist parties of Europe, which are in government at the moment. In France, Spain and Greece 'socialist' governments are pushing working class peoples living standards down because international banks want loans repaid and multinationals want to maintain profits.

The second reason is that the Chileans did not smash the state but tried to capture it peacefully. We must understand that the army and police are against us. They are there to protect the wealth of the ruling class. To make a revolution it will be necessary to use violence, not because we believe in violence for the sake of it, but because we recognise that the ruling class will not give up its wealth without a fight. Allende refused to arm the workers and so made the job of the military much easier.

How ideas change

From the moment we are born we are taught that we must give up control of our lives to those more capable of running things — that we must put our faith and loyalty in government to organise our lives. In school, in the papers and on television the working class are portrayed as sheep who need to be led and governed over. Even in the unions, the organisation of the working class, workers are discouraged from taking any initiative by themselves. Instead they are {managed} by the union bureaucracy supposedly on the workers' behalf.

However, capitalists in their mad rush for profits are forced to keep workers' pay and conditions at the lowest possible level. In times of recession, competition between capitalists increases, and if profits are to be maintained, capitalists argue that workers must accept cuts in their pay and conditions. It is when workers are forced into conflict with their bosses, when they go on strike, that they realise their own strength.

Without labour all production grinds to a halt. The bosses simply cannot run the factories by themselves. Workers who go on strike begin to rely on their own collective strength, they realise that if they are going to win they must stick together. They become more aware of what they can achieve and they become open to new ideas. This was seen in the 1984/5 British miner's strike. Before the strike most miners believed that a women's role was in the home minding the children. But as the strike began, women took the initiative and set up support groups to aid the strike. Women actively took part in picketing as well as fund-raising. Faced with this many miners changed their sexist ideas. Their ideas about the police and the courts also changed. In conflict, they realised that the main purpose of the police and courts was to protect the bosses and smash the strike.

This is not to say that workers going on strike set out with socialist goals in mind. However when workers win on 'bread and butter' issues, their confidence increases and so does their faith in their own ability to organise themselves. That is one of the reasons for the WSM being involved in supporting strikes — to build the links between workers' day-to-day struggles and our aim of a truly equal society.

Socialism from Below

Central to our politics is the belief that ordinary people must make the revolution. Every member of the working class (workers, unemployed, housewives, etc.) has a role to play. Only by this participation can we ensure that anarchism is made real. We believe in a revolution that comes from the bottom up and is based on factory and community councils. Freedom cannot be given, it has to be taken.

This is where we disagree with what is called the “revolutionary left”. While they say that they agree with all that we’ve said so far, they still hold to a belief that a party is necessary to make the revolution for the people. Most of them base their ideas on Lenin who believed that workers were only capable of achieving what he called “trade union consciousness”. According to him they needed a party of professional revolutionaries to make the revolution for them. The result of this thinking is to be clearly seen in the Eastern Europe of today. {No longer of course as these regimes were overthrown in 1989. North Korea, China and Cuba are the surviving examples}. What we saw in Russia was nothing to do with socialism. Power rested in the hands of a tiny party elite. The state was the boss and the workers were still exploited and told what to do. This was state capitalism. Workers did not control their workplaces. All power was held by the bureaucracy. A workers revolution remained necessary to overthrow this bureaucratic elite and bring in true freedom.

Of course the likes of the so-called Workers Party have no problem supporting the Soviet system because that is what they aspire to. They were very quiet when Solidarnosc {trade union} was suppressed in Poland. They support the Russian system up to the hilt so they decided for the sake of electoral advantage to stay quiet and not say anything. The reason for their attitude is that their vision of socialism is one where the state controls all. Socialism will come through nationalising everything. They would have no problem turning Ireland into a satellite of the state capitalists in Moscow.

So we say it is up to ordinary people. Some ask: “Is this possible? Would it not be chaotic?” Of course not. At the moment capitalism would collapse without the support of the working class. We make everything, we produce all the wealth. It is possible to organise production so that the needs of all are met. It is also possible to create structures that allow everyone to participate in making the decisions that affect them.

Democracy and Freedom

As already stated society would be based on factory and community councils. These would federate with each other so that decisions could be made covering large areas. Delegates could be sent from each area and workplace. They would be recallable, i.e. if those who voted them in are not happy with their behaviour they can immediately replace them with someone else. With the new technology it will be much easier to involve lots of people in making quick decisions.

Within this society there would be genuine individual freedom. Individuals would have to contribute to society but would be free to the extent that they do not interfere with the freedom of others. Fundamentally we believe that people are good and if they won freedom would not easily give it up or destroy it.

So where does the Workers Solidarity Movement fit into all this? We are a new organisation – small in numbers but rich in ideas. We don't set ourselves up as “the leaders who know it all”. We believe that our ideas are good and are worth trying out. We believe it is necessary for those agreeing with them to organise together so that our ideas will spread and be understood by a lot more people. To us it is important that those revolutionaries active in different areas are brought together so that experiences can be shared and learned from. We believe that in day-to-day struggles or in campaigns it is important that the message is driven home that only a revolution made by the working class can give us the freedom to run society so that all our needs are met. We see our role as encouraging the initiative of working people and arguing for structures that will allow people to take part in local or workplace activities.

We do not believe that the revolution is around the corner. We believe that making it is a slow process during which there may be huge jumps forward. Overall though it is a slow process of spreading ideas and building peoples confidence to bring about change. We accept that winning reforms and short-term demands are all part of this process. Below we set out some of our ideas in relation to the Irish society of today.

The Trade Unions are defence organs of the working class. They are not revolutionary organisations. Today the majority of unions have become conservative institutions with a lot of emphasis being placed on the role of the full time officials as problem solvers and negotiators. Whole sections of the trade union bureaucracy have become outright defenders of the status quo. This is typified by the use of the two-tier picket (where groups of workers from another union in the same job are encouraged to pass pickets). Within the unions decision making has shifted from the shopfloor to the bureaucrats. With this the rank and file have become more isolated from control of their unions and thus more apathetic.

For us the unions have to be made into real fighting organisations that are run and controlled by workers on the shop floor. We do not think you can change the unions by capturing the full-time jobs at the top. Our role is to encourage the self-activity of as many workers as possible. The bureaucracy itself has to be torn down.

We believe in building a rank and file movement that will embrace workers from different workplaces and areas of work. Its main function would be to encourage solidarity between all workers. It would support all strikes, fight for the election of all full-time officials so that they are responsible to the workers, fight for equal rights for women and ultimately resist any attempts by the bosses to make us pay for their crisis.

We see the organised labour movement as an essential area of activity for revolutionaries. Politics has to be brought into the workplaces and unions as it is here that we have strength and can inflict real damage on the bosses.

Unemployment

Unemployment is always a direct effect of living under capitalism, it is used by the bosses to depress wages “there are plenty of people out there who work for less money than you” is a common threat as is “behave yourselves or I'll close down”. The chaotic nature of capitalism also leads to regular crisis's which cause massive unemployment.

Unemployment will not be stopped while the capitalist system exists but there are immediate demands that can be put forward. Any workplace threatened with closure should be occupied

as the workers in Ranks and Clondalkin Paper Mills did. The workers should demand continued employment whether it is to be under a new owner or by nationalisation. We believe it makes little difference because, for us, nationalisation is not a cure-all. It is no guarantee of better wages or job security and it does not bring us any nearer to socialism. There is no essential difference between a boss who is a civil servant and one who is a private employer. We also call for a shorter working week, an end to systematic overtime and double jobbing and an end to all productivity deals. Basic wages should be high enough to ensure that workers do not need to work excess hours.

We believe that the unemployed should accept no responsibility for the situation. Dole payments should be increased substantially. Where possible, the unemployed should organise themselves to defend their rights and link up with the broader trade union movement.

Women's Freedom

We believe that women are oppressed as a sex. They are denied equal rights, such as the right to control their own fertility and the right to work, and thus cannot fully participate in society. They have been assigned the role of cooks and child minders, their place is in the home. This kind of thinking is reinforced in Ireland by the Roman Catholic Church that controls the educational system. The church can flex its muscle when it pleases and clearly showed its strength during the campaign to change the constitution in relation to abortion.

We believe that the root of women's oppression lies in the division of society into classes, and the economic and social relationships that this created. We thus believe that for women to be really free we have to smash capitalism and build a society based on anarchism. We disagree with those feminists who think that all you have to do is for women to become bosses and politicians to achieve equality. We want to destroy the existing power structures. We also disagree with those who think that men are the cause of women's oppression. We do not deny that men gain from this but we identify the source of this oppression as the class system, not individual men.

Women's oppression is not purely a struggle for women as it is a class issue but we hold that women have the right to organise separately because it is they who suffer the oppression. Though, we do believe, that the priorities of the woman's movement have reflected the fact that it largely consists of middle class women. We believe that it must become more relevant to working class women. Our priorities are those issues that immediately effect thousands of working class women e.g. work, childcare, housing, etc.

We believe in the right of women to control their own fertility. Women must be free to decide to have children or not, how many and when. Thus we believe in the right to free contraception and to abortion on demand.

For these demands to be won, as many working class women as possible must be brought together to build confidence and defeat the isolation that comes from being in the home. Thus in campaigns to win these demands our emphasis is on building in workplaces and on the estates where women are directly affected.

The National Question

[This section is very dated, see the Irish 'Peace Process' for our analysis of the last decade]

This country was partitioned to suit the interests of the ruling classes of Britain and Ireland. It divided the working class in this country – a division that has yet to be overcome.

The Northern state was artificially created with an in-built Protestant majority. It is a sectarian state where marginal privileges are offered to Protestant workers in return for loyalty. Unionist workers see their interests as tied up with those of the ruling class in the North.

The British army was not sent into the North to keep the Catholics and Protestants from tearing into each other but to protect the interests of the establishment. They have stayed because it is not possible for the British (and Irish) governments to come up with a solution which will ensure stability in the North. The British do not want an area of instability so close to their own front door.

We believe that the British troops must get out and that the Orange state must be destroyed. We believe that it is only possible to do this on the basis of anarchism. It is no longer possible to unite the country on a capitalist basis. We must go forward on the basis of anarchism and the class interest of the working class.

We reject Sinn Féin's notion that we must unite the country before we can have socialism. Their basic belief is in "National Liberation". They put the "nation" before the working class. They organise around the slogan of "One Nation – One People". In this country there is not one people – there is a ruling class and there is a working class. Their interests are not the same, in fact they are in total opposition to each other. What the Provo's want is state capitalism of the sort found in Cuba or some of the third world countries.

We believe that to defeat British imperialism the maximum working class unity is needed. We accept that most Protestant workers are tied to loyalism which is reactionary and has nothing to offer them as workers. We also believe that the objective conditions are there to act as a basis for building workers unity in the North. Protestants are suffering from the crisis as well. This is not to say that we are so naive as to think that Protestant workers will automatically take up their common cause with their Catholic counterparts. It will be a hard struggle.

The spread of multinationals though out the 32 counties has undermined to some extent the traditional patterns of employment in the country as a whole and in the North in particular. There is a need to build on the basis of "bread and butter" issues. This does not mean hiding the fact that we are against the British army, U. D.R. and R.U.C. or that we forsake our anti-imperialism as the Workers Party have done.

We do not accept that minorities of any sort can bring about socialism. That includes armed ones. We recognise the need for self-defence but as an offensive strategy, the armed struggle cannot win. The movement to get the British out must be based on the organised working class, North and South.

This is but a very basic outline of our ideas on these main issues. We do not see them as separate from each other. They are obviously related. One role for our organisation is to make the links between the struggles. That is why we say that real liberation for workers, women, gays or any grouping oppressed by the present system can only come through social revolution.

Anarchism in Action

You probably agree that what you have read so far are mostly good ideas. You probably accept that the wealth of society should be distributed equally and also that ordinary people should have more say in the running of their lives.

Like most people who hear about Anarchism you probably believe that *“it is a good set of ideas but unfortunately it would never work. People are naturally greedy and selfish, if there was no government to look after our interests there would be complete chaos”*.

It has already been stated that we believe capitalism is chaos. It does not and never can meet the needs of ordinary people. On the other hand, a society run by those who actually produce can. This kind of society is not myth we have dreamed up. At various stages of our history it has become a reality. Working people have taken their destinies into their own hands and made a success of it. Far from being naturally greedy and selfish these experiences actually show that given the right conditions people can co-operate and act in a spirit of mutual aid.

In the Beginning

As Anarchists we trace our tradition back to the first International Working Mens [sic] Association where the Anarchists formed a distinct tendency influenced mainly by the ideas of Michael Bakunin. Since then Anarchism has always been deeply rooted in the working class. Contrary to popular belief Anarchists do not spend their time plotting in back rooms. For most, their activity means bringing their politics into the daily struggles of the factories, the offices, and the communities. Anarchists have been involved in all major modern revolutions. They have been there arguing and fighting for the right and necessity of working people running society as opposed to any so-called “socialist party” or bureaucratic elite.

Russia

“We say to the Russian workers, peasants, soldiers, revolutionists: above all continue the revolution. Continue to organise yourselves solidly and unite your new organisations: your communes, your committees, your soviets. Continue, with firmness and perseverance, always and everywhere to participate more extensively and more and more effectively in the economic life of the country, continue to take into your hands, that is into the hands of your organisations, all the raw materials and all the instruments indispensable to your labour. Continue the revolution. Do not hesitate to face the solution of the burning questions of the present. Create everywhere the necessary organisations to achieve these solutions. Peasants, take the land and put it at the disposal of your committees. Workers, proceed to put in the hands of and at the disposal of your own social organisations — everywhere on the spot — the mines and the subsoil, the enterprises

and the establishments of all sorts, the works and the factories, the workshops and the machines”.

Golos Truda Russian Anarchist-Syndicalist paper August 25th 1917.

The Russian Revolution was truly a turning point in modern history. For the first time, workers took control and asserted their right to run society. At the time of the revolution there were about 10,000 active Anarchists in Russia, not including the movement in the Ukraine led by Nestor Makhno. There were at least four Anarchists on the Bolshevik dominated Military Revolutionary Committee that engineered the seizure of power in October. More importantly, Anarchists were involved in the Factory Committees which had sprung up after the February Revolution. These were based in workplaces, elected by mass assemblies of the workers and given the role of overseeing the running of the factory and co-ordinating with other workplaces in the same industry or region.

Anarchists were particularly influential among the miners, dockers, postal workers, bakers and played an important part in the All-Russian Conference of Factory Committees which met in Petrograd on the eve of the October Revolution. It was to these factory committees that the Anarchists looked as the basis for a new self-management that would be ushered in after the revolution. They resisted all efforts to undermine the Committees and take away their power.

The Anarchists had co-operated with the Bolsheviks in seizing power from the ruling class, believing that once captured power could be diffused. It was not long before they saw that the real intention of the Bolsheviks was to take power and keep it. Their concept of socialism did not allow them to trust in the ability of ordinary people to run society in their own interests. Power was wrested away from the Factory Committees and placed in the hands of bodies controlled by the Bolsheviks. Firstly they were subjected to control by Bolshevik dominated trade unions. These unions were then put under the thumb of the state, which was totally dominated by the Bolsheviks. Once the Anarchists' usefulness to them had ended the Bolsheviks ensured they were suppressed. Their papers were closed down and many of the activists arrested.

Ukraine

Anarchist influence here was dominant right up to 1921. An insurgent army led by Nestor Makhno played a central role in defeating the local counter-revolutionary forces and the numerous armies of foreign intervention. The Red Army led by Trotsky signed a treaty of co-operation and Lenin talked of giving the Ukraine over as an experiment in building an anarchist society. The Makhnovists were hailed as heroes of the revolution by the Bolshevik press.

However as soon as the threat of invasion had been overcome the Bolshevik leadership tore up the treaty and declared war on the Anarchists as if they were an army of reaction. This stab in the back led to the destruction of the Makhnovist forces at the hands of the same Red Army which attacked the naval base at Kronstadt and murdered the revolutionaries who had been in the forefront of the struggle against the Tsar and the Provisional Government. Their “crime” was to resist the new elite and demand workers power and freedom for all revolutionary organisations.

Collectivisation

The achievements of the Makhnovists were not only military. As their army moved through the Ukraine they encouraged and helped the setting up of collectives among the peasantry and farm labourers. Often this had to take second place to the need to fight and defeat the varied foreign armies of occupation. What was important was that it was proved, even in the conditions of war and invasion, that production could be organised to benefit all rather than to line the pockets of a few.

The Russian experience also shows that the fake socialists and their parties cannot be trusted. If socialism is to triumph, power must stay with those who produce society's wealth. No party, no matter how well intentioned, can deliver socialism on a plate. Workers must take power and build the new order themselves.

Spain

Of all the western countries Spain is where the Anarchist influence predominated. Introduced in the last century it rapidly spread throughout the country. This led to the formation of the Anarchist Union C.N.T. (National Confederation of Labour) in 1911. In the years up to the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 the CNT had over two million members. It was the major union in the most industrialised areas, especially Catalonia and its capital Barcelona. It also had a large base among day labourers and small peasants in most provinces.

The CNT was a revolutionary union of workers (usually described as Syndicalist or anarcho-syndicalist). Its role was twofold. Firstly to fight to improve conditions for workers and secondly to organise for the overthrow of capitalism. Its beliefs were translated into action at every opportunity and this militant tradition attracted workers in their hundreds of thousands.

The CNT organised itself from the place of work. Each workplace joined in a federation with other workplaces in their region to form a regional committee. These regional committees were then federated on a national basis and formed a national committee. Within each particular industry there was also a regional and national federation.

Assemblies of workers were the core of the CNT. These made the decisions and elected delegates to regional and national level. All delegates could be recalled and replaced by the assembly if the members were not satisfied with their conduct. Thus no decisions could be made without consulting the rank and file membership. There were no full-time union bureaucrats beyond the control of the workers.

The number of full-time officials was minimal. They were elected for specified periods after which they had to stand down and return to their previous job. At all times they were subject to control by the rank and file. The experience and organisation of the CNT shows that contrary to popular belief Anarchists are not anti-organisation. In reality Anarchism is highly organised and allows for the participation of all. Nor are we against centralisation. What is important is that those at the centre are recallable and directly responsible to those they are elected to represent.

The Civil War

The Civil War started with an attempted fascist coup following the victory of the Popular Front (an alliance of liberal, republic, socialist, and Stalinist parties) in the 1936 elections. In response to the coup the workers mobilised to defeat fascism. Popular militias were formed by the unions and workers seized factories. Peasants took over land that had been abandoned by the landlords. This marked the beginning of the revolution for the Anarchists. They believed that the Civil War had to be not just a fight against fascism but also against the capitalist system that had spawned fascism in the first place. Thus they set about seizing factories and ranches and turning them over to workers control.

In the zones controlled by the Anarchists, workers self-management became a reality. In Catalonia there were at least 2,000 industrial and commercial collectives. At least 60% of “republican” Spain’s agriculture (that part controlled by anti-fascist forces including the Anarchists) was collectivised.

In the workplaces councils or “comite” elected by assemblies of workers and representing all sectors of the enterprise, were given the task of administering the collectivised factory. Collectivised enterprises in each sector of industry were represented in an Economic Federation. This in turn was topped by a General Industrial Council that would closely control the whole industry.

Here is a description of the organisation of gas, electricity and water in Barcelona.

“Each type of job (e.g. fitters) set up a section consisting of at least fifteen workers. Where there were not the numbers to do this workers from different trades got together to constitute a general section. Each section nominates two delegates that are chosen by assemblies of the workers. One of the delegates will be of a technical calibre and will participate in the ‘comite’ of the workplace. The other will be entrusted with the management of work in the section.

The ‘comite’ of the building or plant comes next. It is nominated by the delegates of the sections and consists of a technician, a manual worker and an administrator. The manual worker has to solve difficulties that might arise between different sections. He or she receives suggestions from workers in the different trades and the sections give him or her daily reports on the progress of work. Periodically the delegate calls the sections to general meetings. At these proposals and initiatives which are likely to improve production and productivity are studied as well as ones to improve the workers’ situation. A copy of the deliberation is sent to the Council for Industry.

The delegates with administrative functions supervises the arrival and warehousing of materials, records requirements details with book-keeping for supplies and reserves, and keeps an eye on the state of income and expenditure. S/He also deals with correspondence and it is his/her responsibility to see that balance sheets and reports addressed to the Council for Industry are prepared.

The delegate with technical functions supervises the activities of his section, and uses every endeavour to increase productivity. To lighten the workers’ burden by introducing new methods. S/He checks on production at the power stations, the state of the network, prepares statistics and charts indicating how production is developing. At the summit there are the Councils of Industry. One each for gas, electricity and water, Each is

composed of eight delegates, four from the U. G. T. (the socialist trade union) and four from the C.N.T. These are capped by the General Council of the three industries, which is also made up by eight delegates drawn equally from the two unions.

This Council co-ordinates activities of the three industries; attunes the production and distribution of raw materials from a regional, national and international point of view; modifies prices; organises general administration; indeed takes and uses all initiatives useful to production and the workers' needs. Meanwhile it is obliged at all times to submit its' activities to the scrutiny of local and regional union assemblies"

This account is taken from "Collectives in the Spanish Revolution" by Gaston Leval.

On the Trams

The achievements of collectivisation in Barcelona were many. Take for example the tramways. Out of the 7,000 workers 6,500 were members of the CNT. Because of the street battles, all transport had been brought to a halt. The transport syndicate (as unions of the CNT were known) appointed a commission of seven to occupy the administrative offices while others inspected the tracks and drew up a plan of repair work that needed to be done. Five days after the fighting stopped 700 tramcars, instead of the usual 600, all painted in the black and red colours of the CNT, were operating on the streets of Barcelona.

With the profit motive gone, the trams had belonged to a Belgian company before the workers took over, safety became more important and the number of accidents was reduced. Fares were lowered and services improved. In 1936, 183,543,516 passengers were carried. In 1937 this had gone up by 50 million. The trams were running so efficiently that the workers were able to give money to other sections of urban transport. Wages were equalised for all workers and increased over the previous rates. For the first time, free medical care was provided for the workforce.

As well as giving a more efficient service the workers found time to produce rockets and howitzers for the war effort. They worked overtime and Sundays to do their share for the anti-fascist struggle. To further under-line the fact that getting rid of the bosses and rulers would not lead to a breakdown of order, it can be pointed out that, in the three years of collectivisation there were only six cases of workers stealing from the workshops.

On the Land

The countryside also saw collectivisation. In Aragon, near the front-line during the war, collectivisation took root and spread like wildfire. In February 1937 there were 275 collectives totalling 80,000 members. Three months later there were 450 collectives with 180,000 members. Often the peasants and farm labourers went further than their counterparts in the towns and cities. Not only was production collectivised but in rural areas consumption too. In many of these areas money was abolished.

Large estates were taken over by landless labourers, small holders put their land together so that it could be worked more efficiently by the use of machinery. Collectives were based around the villages and federated on a regional basis.

Usually the decision to collectivise was made at an assembly (a meeting of the entire village). It meant handing over land, livestock, tools, seed, stocks of wheat and other produce. The land was then divided into sectors, each of which was assigned to a work group of about a dozen who elected their own delegate. Produce went into the “pile” for communal consumption. Each would produce according to their ability, each would consume according to their needs.

Collectivisation did not only apply to the land. In the villages, workshops were set up where all the local trades people would produce tools, furniture, etc. for the village and also carry out repairs to the collectivists houses. Bakers, butchers, barbers and so on were also collectivised.

The lot of rural workers and peasants was improved by the introduction of machinery. Living standards rose, in the words of one collectivist “those who had less now ate more and better — no one went short”. Education became a central concern and young children who had never been to school were given the education denied to them by the landlords and their system.

Women’s Action

Gains were also made by women. In relation to their role during the Civil War observers have pointed out that they played a full part in the anti-fascist resistance. They were present everywhere — on committees, in the militias, in the front line. In the early battles of the war, women fought alongside men as a matter of course. It was not merely a case of women filling in for men who were away at the front. (Which is usually the case in wartime. When the war is over and women are no longer needed in the labour force, they are pushed back into the home).

They were in the militias and fought alongside the men as equals. They were organising the collectives and taking up the fight against the sexist attitudes of the past, which have no place in any real revolution.

The Anarchist women’s organisation, Mujeres Libres (Free Women), had 30,000 members. It had been active before the Civil War organising women workers and distributing information on contraception. During the war abortion was legalised in the “republican zone”. Centres were opened for women, including unmarried mothers and prostitutes.

From all accounts there truly were changes in attitudes towards women. One female participant in the Civil War has said: *“It was like being brothers and sisters. It had always annoyed me that men in this country didn’t consider women as beings with full human rights. But now there was this big change. I believe it arose spontaneously out of the revolutionary movement”* Margorita Balaguer quoted in “Blood of Spain” ed. Ronald Fraser. page 287

This sort of thing is common to most revolutionary situations. When people begin to throw off the old ideas and start creating a new society, their views on many things change. This is not inevitable though and does not negate the need for propaganda and activity against sexism, not only in society as a whole but also within the revolutionary movement itself.

Not all Roses ...

This account of the collectivisation is, of necessity, brief. The main point is that given the right conditions mutual aid and co-operation will flourish — Problems did arise in Spain as is inevitable. The Anarchists made mistakes. In our opinion they hesitated in carrying out their programme —

Instead of seizing power and making a direct appeal to the workers to take control of economic and social affairs, they collaborated with the Popular Front and ended up joining the government.

They were also attacked by the Communist Party, who preferred defeat by the fascists to the victory of anarchism. The Communists were tied to the needs of Stalin's foreign policy, which meant not upsetting the Western powers. To them, the restoration of the capitalist order was preferable to seeing the working class take power. And that should come as no surprise as the Stalinist system in Russia is no more than another form of capitalism.

The Lessons

History is not neutral. What we learn in school is the necessity for government, rulers and capitalism. What we do not learn is that many times it has been shown that this government is not necessary. People are not inherently bad. Given the right conditions a spirit of mutual aid and co-operation can grow. People are not naturally evil and greedy. We only have to look at the response from ordinary people to the appeal for aid to Ethiopia to see this.

Economic conditions determine peoples' behaviour. How we act is related to the structure of society and the dominant value system within it. When structures are changed and oppression and exploitation is done away with the "goodness" that is in most of us comes through and flourishes as it did when the workers held the reigns in Russia and Spain. The experience of self-management is not limited to these countries but is something that has been seen in most countries at some stage. In the early 1920's creameries, farms, Cork Harbour and Kilkenny gas-works were taken over and run as Soviets (the Russian word for workers councils).

What Anarchists are saying are not just nice ideas. History shows us that these ideas can work. A new society can be created with the workers in control. But it won't happen spontaneously — We must organise for it.

That is why we need revolutionary organisation. An organisation that draws together all those fighting for workers control. An organisation that gives us the chance to exchange ideas, experiences, and to learn from the lessons of history. An organisation that facilitates our struggle together for a new society.

We do not need a group of leaders and their passive followers. We do need an organisation working towards mobilising the masses of ordinary people in the process of making the revolution. The Workers Solidarity Movement is such an organisation. If you like what you have just read, you should join us.

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This text is now quite old and some of the examples that were once common knowledge are not likely to be familiar. We've added brief explanations in between {} The figures in the text are from the 1980's.

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