

Introduction to Anarchist Communism

Anarchist Federation

Introduction to Anarchist Communism

.....
Anarchist

Federation



April 2013

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. What We're Fighting: Capitalism and Hierarchy	4
Capitalism	4
Class Struggle	5
The State	6
Hierarchy	8
3. Who We Are and What We Believe: Revolution and Anarchist Communism	10
Revolution and Revolutionaries	10
Anarchism and Anarchists	11
Anarchist Communism	12
End and Means	14
The Limits of Prefiguration: Lifestylism	14
The Limits of Prefiguration: Dual Power	15
A Culture of Resistance	17
4. How We Fight: Building a Culture of Resistance	20
Resistance in the Workplace	20
Resistance in the Community	23
Social Wage Struggles	24
'Identity' Struggles	25
The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation	27
5. There is no Conclusion	29

1. Introduction

There's a lot to be angry about. The massacre of thousands every year in wars around the world. The starvation of yet more thousands every day while food rots in warehouses across the globe. The extinction of species after species as our environment is slowly wrecked. The millions of people abused in sweatshops until their bodies and spirits are broken and they're thrown on the scrapheap. The countless women subjected to emotional, physical and sexual violence as a result of their gender. The vast numbers facing discrimination and oppression based purely on the colour of their skin.

And these are just the shocking headlines. The main story is what happens to each and every one of us day after day. If we work we give up our time and our energy to the whims of some company and its managers. We have no stake in what we produce, no control over what we do day in, day out. If we don't work, we rely on inadequate benefits doled out by people trained to hate us as work-shy and lazy. Our lives are controlled by what we can and can't afford and by whatever pointless schemes the government insists we go on to prove that we're not 'scrounging'. As housewives we get no credit for the hours of work we do. As unemployed people we're punished for something that is not our fault. As workers we are ordered around, watched every second we're on the job and left too tired at the end of the day to really enjoy any time we have for ourselves.

On the one hand, death and destruction on a grand scale. On the other, the crushing boredom and alienation of everyday life. All of these various horrors are tied together, different faces of a single system. It's a system designed from the ground up to set us at each others' throats. It exploits and exaggerates every tiny little difference between us, making us compete for scraps and hate each other as we fight while a tiny minority enjoy all the benefits. This system is global capitalism, a pattern of economic and political exploitation that reaches into every aspect of our lives. It uses sexism, racism, homophobia and many other hatreds and prejudices around us to protect itself. It creates hierarchies of power and wealth to divide all the people it exploits and turn us on ourselves.

Capitalism is the problem. All of us that it exploits and degrades are the solution. As we unite through our common exploitation we can become a force that capitalism cannot control, cannot crush. We can create a whole new society that serves the needs of all of us, not a minority.

In the Anarchist Federation we believe that we can be one part of this fight. We see ourselves as part of a tradition that stretches back throughout the history of resistance to capitalism, a tradition that can be called anarchist communist although not everyone involved in it would have seen themselves that way. We believe that this set of ideas and ways of organising is our best hope of destroying capitalism and creating something better.

As the first of our aims and principles says, we are 'an organisation of revolutionary class struggle anarchists. We aim for the abolition of all hierarchy, and work for the creation of a world-wide classless society: anarchist communism.' This pamphlet sets out to explain what all this means and how we think we can do it.

2. What We're Fighting: Capitalism and Hierarchy

Capitalism

Many influential people, from newspaper editors to economics professors, will tell you that capitalism is 'natural'. Human beings are greedy, selfish and competitive and so any economic system must be based on greed, selfishness and competition. According to them, capitalism is a system that uses our natural urge to compete and dominate to benefit everyone, even the 'losers' in the competition. The economy grows because ruthless competition between firms forces them to innovate and expand, creating wealth out of nothing which then 'trickles down' through society.

These propagandists, because that's what they are, disagree with each other over whether this can happen completely 'naturally' or whether governments should intervene to smooth the process. Some argue that everything should be open to competition – hospitals, schools, the lot – so that the benefits of growth can spread everywhere. Others, sometimes even calling themselves socialists, argue that some things like health care and education should be run by the government. This creates a healthier and better educated workforce for the capitalist firms and so makes them more competitive.

These arguments are sometimes fierce, but in the end the two sides agree about everything that is important. Some people should own and control the factories, services and land that are the basis of the economy. These people should make all the decisions and should get most of the wealth that these businesses create. Other people should work in these places under the control of the managers. They should take orders, not make decisions and should get a wage for what they do.

This is the essence of capitalism. One small group of people controls the places that we work in, the land that produces our food, the factories that make our clothes and everything that makes life possible. These people are the ruling class and their power comes from their control over the means of production, the resources and equipment that are needed to produce the things we need to live. Everyone else must work in the fields and the factories, the call centres and the office blocks. We are the working class and in this system we operate the means of production. We provide the labour that allows these fields and factories, call centres and offices to produce goods and services, commodities, for the ruling class to sell at a profit.

Capitalism, then, is a system of exploitation. It is a class system where a majority, the working class, is exploited by a minority, the ruling class. The ruling class are the people who own or control the places where we work. They make the decisions about what kinds of products the factories make or what kinds of services are provided, and they make the decisions about how this work is organised. The working class are all the people who are forced to work in these places in order to get the money that they need to live. We, the working class, build and provide

everything society needs to function. They, the ruling class, suck profit out of our work. We are the body of society; they are parasites sucking us dry.

Class Struggle

In the capitalist system the interests of the ruling class and the working class are always opposed. The ruling class seek to tighten their grip on us, to gain more control, to get more profit. The working class seek to get out from under our bosses and our governments, to gain control over our own lives. There will always be conflict between these groups, whether on a small or a mass scale.

This conflict takes many forms. Most obviously it happens in the places where we work. Strikes over wages and working practices clearly pit the interests of a group of bosses against a group of workers. However, class struggle is much more than this. Capitalism seeks to control and profit from all aspects of life. Our homes are bought, sold and rented for profit. The food we eat and the water we drink is privately owned and controlled. Our environment becomes a vast dumping ground for industry, valued only for profit not for the way it enables and enriches our lives. Whenever we struggle for control over some aspect of our lives, we are engaging in class struggle. When we fight for our communities or our environment we are fighting the class struggle.

It follows from this that we don't use the idea of class in the same way as many people, particularly in the press. Class is not about the fact that some people earn more money than others or that some people go to different kinds of schools. These basically sociological definitions of class, definitions loved by advertisers, managers and other assorted scum, are used to hide the real nature of class. We don't just see the working class as being people with traditional manual or industrial jobs – if someone is not currently working, but dependent on meagre state benefits (and so under continual pressure to find work), in education (training for work) or living on their pension (deferred wages), then their situation is obviously very different from that of the 'idle rich' who are able to live a comfortable life off the backs of others, such as landlords. Equally, many people in jobs that are traditionally seen as 'middle class,' such as teachers, have no real control over their lives or the work they do and are forced to struggle against their employers just like the rest of the working class.

This confusion about the idea of class is part of a wider set of tactics that the ruling class use to disguise the reality of class from the people that it exploits. Capitalism needs workers in a way workers simply do not need capitalism. If the working class unites around its common interests then it can do away with the ruling class and run society itself. We don't need them, but they need us. Because of this, the ruling class works hard to divide us against each other. It does this in two ways – partly through trying to control ideas and the way we think about ourselves, and partly through creating small differences in power and wealth that set working class people against each other.

Things like nationalism, the idea that we should be loyal to the state in one country simply because we were born there, or a 'work ethic', the idea that we owe a 'fair day's work' to the boss that's exploiting us, are used by the ruling class to divide the working class and make some of us feel more loyal to the bosses than to the people around us. Nationalism splits workers in one country off from workers in another and lies at the root of racism that splits workers along

lines of skin colour. The work ethic ties us to the boss instead of each other and makes people despise the 'lazy' unemployed rather than putting the blame where it really belongs.

The use of these ideas to split the working class is reinforced by creating differences in power and wealth to back them up. On a large scale, workers in the West are made to compete with workers in the global South for jobs as factories move in search of the cheapest labour costs. On smaller scales, individual workers are given a little bit more pay to become supervisors and end up screwing over those around them just to keep that little bit extra. This kind of thing happens in many different ways but the end result is always the same. Working class people compete for scraps while the ruling class skims vast profits off the top and throws us a few leftovers to keep us fighting each other rather than them.

To fight the class struggle, then, is to try and overcome the false differences that the ruling class creates and unite as one class against the people that exploit us. This is a process that goes on all the time. Sometimes we become strong and united as a class and are able to get concessions like shorter working days, healthcare and so on. The ruling class fights back and exploits our divisions to break this unity, weakening the class and undoing what gains we have made, or even worse, turning them against us. This push and pull between the ruling class and the working class will go on until capitalism is overcome.

The State

One of the things that makes exploitation possible, and one of the major tools in keeping the working class divided, is the state. The state is made up of all the institutions of government. Parliament, the civil service, the courts, tax collectors and so on are all parts of the state. These are institutions that regulate and control the lives of 'citizens' – that is you and me – for the benefit of capitalism. The state is the organised face of capitalism. It is the political representation of the economic power of the capitalist ruling class. When the so-called free market can't achieve something that capital needs to grow, the state steps in and makes it happen.

There are many ways it can do this. Parliament passes laws that protect the property of the rich whilst restricting the ability of the poor to fight back. It acts as umpire in disputes between different capitalist firms, setting rules for trade so that different companies can trust each other. Tax money is used to create the services that business relies upon but can't build for itself – road and transport systems, schools to train workers, electricity grids and sewage systems (which can be sold off later for private profit) – all the things that make business possible. It can destroy the economies of developing countries using the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank so that firms have a ready pool of new resources and workers to exploit. From building the legal and physical infrastructure that capitalism needs to directly attacking workers seeking to improve their position, the state is an essential tool of the capitalist class.

Importantly, the state controls organisations that directly control and coerce working class people. The army and the police most obviously use direct force to keep people in line, with the police breaking strikes and heads at home and the army enforcing capitalism abroad. Schools, whilst providing an important service, also indoctrinate children and prepare them for a life as workers rather than as human beings. Prisons, immigration authorities, dole offices and on and on and on, all intrude into our lives and control our actions. Some of these things, like schools, hospitals and welfare benefits, we sometimes depend on for our lives. It is often this

very dependence that these organisations use to control us. Benefits come with conditions that dictate what you can and can't do. Schools give us the knowledge we need to understand the world but also train us to accept discipline and being bored all day because some authority figure tells us we have to be.

Some people argue that the state behaves in this way because it is under the control of capitalists. They argue that if the state were under the control of a group that represented the working class, usually a revolutionary party of some kind, then it would behave differently. This ignores one important aspect of the state that can be seen in all of the organisations that it controls. The state is designed to govern from above – it is, by its very nature, hierarchical. This means that it always concentrates power in the hands of a minority. A small number of people give orders and a large number obey. We can see this in the army and in the police with the huge differences in power between ranks and orders that must be obeyed absolutely and without question. But this is also true in all the other arms of the state.

For this reason any group taking over the state will automatically find itself ruling instead of freeing the people they claim to represent. That is what states do. A state is a machine for controlling people and can never be anything else. This is not just because of the repressive and manipulative organisations it controls, although these are far more important to the state than some would have us believe. It is because the state is always hierarchical and as a result will end up furthering rather than destroying all the other hierarchies in society.

Governing Ourselves: The Spanish Revolution

The revolution in Spain between 1936 and 1939 was contradictory, under constant attack, and ultimately defeated, not just by the fascists but also by the 'anti-fascists' within its own ranks. Despite all of this, however, for a short space of time the Spanish working class, under the influence of anarchist communist ideas, was able to achieve the most far-reaching revolution of the 20th century.

In the face of an attempted fascist military coup the workers and peasants of Spain went on strike and took up arms. In many working class urban areas, such as Barcelona and Madrid, and in rural areas with an anarchist-influenced peasantry, such as Aragon, Castille and the Levant, the attempted coup was put down. The people controlled the streets and the fields.

In the republican zone, the influence of anarchism through the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, the largest Spanish union federation, led the workers' movement to spontaneously collectivise industry under workers' control, in many cases making it more efficient. The woodworking and carpentry industry was completely socialised, as was the baking industry in Barcelona. The same was true of the railways, while workers' control was won in telecommunications, utilities, cinemas, the buses and trams and factories and workshops of all kinds. In the countryside the revolution was even more wide-ranging, with rural collectives doing away with private property and in many cases declaring libertarian communism. Up to 7 million peasants were involved in the social upheaval. In both the towns and cities a wide range of forms of collectivisation existed – in some instances money was abolished, in others it was kept, in others still labour tokens were introduced in exchange for work.

All this was too much for the more conservative elements in the Republican government and certainly too much for their Soviet backers. Laws were passed attacking collectivisation and the centralised republican army was used against anarchist militias and more radical sections of the working class. Many in the anarchist movement, seeing no alternative, supported joining the government. This mistake was to no avail, and many fine militants died in Stalinist prison cells. The revolution in Spain was defeated before the fascists managed to militarily defeat the republicans.

Hierarchy

Hierarchy is one of the key tools that the state and capitalism use to control people. It is implicated in both the repressive and the manipulative arms of the state, but it is most destructive when it is used to manipulate people. A hierarchy is any system where power over others is concentrated in the hands of a minority. All capitalist workplaces, for example, are hierarchies, with bosses at the top and everyone else below. Often there are tiny differences in responsibility that give some people just a tiny bit of power over others. Board members control managers, who control more managers, who control supervisors, who control more supervisors, who eventually end up 'managing' six people for an extra 10p an hour.

This is one important way that capitalism creates and uses hierarchy to divide working class people. We are given a small amount of power over each other so that we end up fighting each other rather than fighting the bosses.

However, there are hierarchies in society that were not created by capitalism and which have their own separate existence and history. The oppression of women is thousands of years old and has shown up in different ways in hundreds of different societies. This is known as patriarchy, a system of oppression and exploitation that sees women placed under the control of men in a variety of different ways. The oppression of LGBTQ people, indeed of anyone who doesn't fit a straight, monogamous, gendered norm, is age old. It's often even more brutal than patriarchy, seeking not just to control but to exterminate people who don't fit. Racism and ideas of white supremacy are younger but no less vicious, with a legacy of slavery and exploitation that has destroyed the lives of millions.

All of these systems of oppression and exploitation, and the many others that hang off them, must be fought on their own terms by the people that suffer them. Just as only the working class can fight capitalism because we are the ones being directly exploited, so only women, LGBTQ people and those attacked by racism (which can change from place to place and period to period) can destroy patriarchy, heterosexism and white supremacy. We can all support each other in these different fights, but it is vital that those directly attacked chose the form and structure of their own response. Organisations of women, gay people and of black and ethnic minority people (who are often, in reality, majorities) are absolutely vital in resisting and destroying various systems of hierarchy.

However, we should also remember that all of these systems of oppression work together to create the world as we know it. Capitalism is propped up by patriarchy which divides the working class (men against women), gives some workers power over others (men are more likely to get higher paid and supervisory jobs), and forces people to do untold hours of unpaid but essential work (housework and the raising of children are essential to the economy but mostly done for free by women). Patriarchy is propped up by capitalism as the media pump out stereotypes of women to sell cosmetics and perfumes and businesses create the role of the housewife to force unwanted women out of the workplace and create a new market for consumer goods. Racism allows capitalist states to justify invading and pillaging different countries for raw materials and new markets and divides the working class at home between black and white, immigrant and native. All these forms of exploitation and oppression, all these hierarchies, reinforce and amplify each other, until they are impossible to untangle from each other.

For this reason it is impossible to just fight capitalism or racism or sexism and so on and so on. Gains made against one system will be eaten up by another. For example, women's fight for

equal rights at work has often ended up with women working a 'double day', with housework at home and long hours at work. The rebellion of black people in the 1960s won political equality, but also created a new black leadership who became part of the ruling class while everyone else was left to rot.

Capitalism, then, is more than just a class system. The power of the ruling class comes from their control of the means of production, but they keep that control by manipulating a whole series of different systems of oppression and exploitation, different hierarchies. These systems give some of the working class more power than others, they make us complicit in our own exploitation. Back in the 19th century there was a slogan: 'workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains.' The way that capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and other systems of hierarchy work together means that this is not true. These systems give large sections of the working class just a little bit of privilege. This is enough to turn them against the people they should be uniting with, enough to make them defend the ruling class against the claims of women, LGBTQ people, black and ethnic minority/majority people and on and on and on.

To get past this we need a revolutionary movement made up of many different organisations. We need many different ways in which people can take control of their own lives and fight the different oppressions that push them down. We need to completely transform society and ourselves. In the Anarchist Federation we believe that the ideas of anarchist communism offer the best chance of doing this. The next section lays out what these ideas are.

3. Who We Are and What We Believe: Revolution and Anarchist Communism

Revolution and Revolutionaries

Revolutionaries believe that the societies we live in are basically unjust and unfair. It is not just a matter of this injustice or that unfairness – it is the whole way that society works that is unjust and unfair. Poverty, war, racism, sexism and all the rest of the problems we face are not exceptions to the rule – they are the rule. Capitalism cannot exist without creating poverty, without fighting wars, without oppressing people because of their race or gender.

We believe that capitalism must be destroyed and a new society – an anarchist communist society – must be built. This is the revolution. Both the destruction of what exists now and the construction of something new are part of the revolution. As revolutionaries we work to encourage both – supporting people who are opposing those in power as well as supporting people who are trying to build alternatives.

Because capitalism is basically unfair and unjust, revolutionaries do not believe in change through gradual reform. This is called reformism. This is not to say that a minimum wage or a shorter working day or the right to abortion on demand are not important. These reforms and many others have made life better for ordinary people. Revolutionaries are not trying to say that life has not improved since Victorian times – that would be silly. What we do say are two things.

Firstly, no reform is permanent. Any reform can and will be undone by politicians and bosses whenever they get the chance. The attacks on civil liberties, on working conditions and on public services that we see time and time again should be enough to prove this.

Secondly, reforms are only granted by governments when they are scared of something worse – a mass movement of ordinary, working class people. Time and time again it has taken the actions of millions of people organising together to get even the most basic reforms. The ten hour day, rights for women and children, even the welfare state were all forced concessions from governments challenged by mass movements. There is nothing governments are more scared of than people ignoring them and simply doing things for themselves. This is direct action, when people act for themselves without waiting for permission from any higher authority. Governments will make almost any concession to stop such movements.

Because of this, revolutionaries are often attacked as utopian, as imagining unrealistic perfect worlds that can never be. ‘You should be practical,’ these people tell us. ‘Focus on getting results here and now, not on some imaginary cloud cuckoo land in the future.’ When people say things like this, when we are told to be ‘practical’ or ‘realistic’, we are usually being told to abandon our principles. Successive governments attack public services in the name of ‘pragmatism’, the unions sell out to management because it’s ‘practical’, authoritarian revolutionaries lie to their members and the public because they’re ‘realistic’.

If this is what being practical means then that would already be enough to reject it. But there's more to it than this. Being 'practical' in this way, making compromises and deals with bosses and politicians, is a sure-fire way of making sure that you don't get what you want. Any deals done with capitalism are bound backfire, as we've seen time and time again. You don't make progress by negotiating with the bosses. You make progress by terrifying them. Anarchist communists believe that it is better to fight for what we want, even if we don't get it straight away, rather than fighting for something we don't want, and getting it.

Mass movements making demands based on their own needs are much more scary to the ruling class than any number of snivelling bureaucrats being 'realistic' and asking nicely for a few scraps from the boss's table. We don't want the scraps – we want the whole meal, and the kitchen that cooked it, and the house it was served in, and the fields it was grown in, and the factories that made the plates and so on and so on. Everything the ruling class has, it has because the working class made it and they stole it. We refuse to ask nicely for things that are already ours. This is not just a matter of principle, it is practical. People that beg for scraps get nothing else, and often not even that. If we work to take what is already ours, the ruling class will be forced to concede far more than just scraps.

Anarchism and Anarchists

Anarchism is a set of revolutionary ideas that have been around in one form or another for centuries. They are, at root, very simple. Anarchists believe that people are quite capable of looking after themselves. No leader can know what you need better than you do. No government can represent the interests of a community better than the community itself. We believe that everyone should take part in decisions that affect them, whether at work, in the community or at home. Only in this way can we have a fair and just society, in which everyone has the chance to fulfil themselves. Everything in anarchist ways of thinking follows from this basic principle.

Obviously, this is not how society works now. At work we do what we're told or we get the sack. At home, the police, the tax man and other arms of the state snoop into our business and tell us what we can and can't do. We do not take decisions about how we work, about how our taxes are spent, what laws are passed and on and on and on.

For anarchists, taking back control over our own lives is the revolution. We see two ways of working as being key to being able to do this: direct action and self-organisation. Direct action is when those directly affected by something take action to fix it themselves, rather than asking someone else to do it for them. A strike that forces management to make concessions or face losing money is direct action where lobbying an MP or going through union negotiations is not. Squatting derelict land and turning into a community garden is direct action, whereas pressuring the council to clean up vacant lots is not. When people act by themselves to achieve something that they need then they are taking direct action – whether that's sharing food with others or fighting the police in a riot.

For direct action to be possible then there also needs to be self organisation. This is organising without leaders or phoney 'representatives', and it allows ordinary people to take back the power to make their own decisions. Self organisation allows us to break down and overcome the hierarchies that separate us. In self-organised groups everyone has an equal say and no one is given the right to represent anyone else. This kind of group is capable of deciding its own needs and

taking direct action to meet them in a way that any hierarchical group based on representatives – like a political party or a trade union – cannot.

Because of this we reject the use of the state – that is government, parliament, the courts, the police and so on – to bring about revolution. No one can free anyone else. We all have to free ourselves by acting together. No government, even a ‘socialist’ or ‘revolutionary’ government, can do this. Any group or party taking over the state simply becomes a new set of leaders, exploiting us in the name of ‘socialism’ rather than ‘capitalism’. This is what happened in so-called ‘communist’ Russia. Only by destroying the state, not taking it over, can we free ourselves.

For anarchists, direct action and self organisation are essential tools for freeing ourselves. They are the way that working class people can confront the problems in their own lives in a collective way, the way in which it is possible for us to work together against the whole system of capitalism and the ways it tries to divide us.

Anarchist Communism

These ideas have not just been plucked out of thin air. They have been developed by millions of people throughout the last few hundred years as they have fought back against the exploitation they have faced. This tradition of resistance often, but not always, described itself as communist. Anarchist communism is a living working class tradition that has worked in ways large and small throughout the history of capitalism. It does not come out of the abstract ideas of a few intellectuals but from the concrete actions of millions of people.

For many, the word communism is associated only with the tyranny of Soviet Russia or so-called Communist China. These societies were and are some of the worst tyrannies the world has ever seen, killing millions of people through famine, war and execution. As anarchists we don’t forget the prison camps, the slave labour, the unjust trials and executions – indeed anarchists were often the first people to suffer these attacks.

However, unlike the press who use the example of ‘communist’ Russia to claim that revolutionary change is impossible, anarchists also refuse to forget the example of the millions of ordinary people who fought against tyranny in Russia and all over the world in the name of true communism. These people organised themselves, without leaders, into groups that used direct democracy, meaning that everyone had an equal say in how things were run. They used direct action against first the state and capitalism, and then against the new Soviet tyranny.

The true communism that they fought for is the extension of these ways of working into every aspect of life. The communist slogan ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need’ sums up the idea. Nobody should be short of anything that they need. Individuals receive goods and services because of how much they need them, not because of how much they can pay or how much they deserve them. People give back to society, through the work they do, according to what they want and are able to do. Everyone will have the chance to do interesting and creative work, instead of just a minority while everyone else is stuck with boring drudge work.

This society would be organised through local collectives and councils, organising themselves to make the decisions that need making and to do the work that needs doing. Everyone gets a say in decisions that concern them. We believe that in fighting for this kind of future we are

fighting for the full freedom and equality of all. Only this will give everyone the chance to be whatever they can be.

It is the many examples of people organising and resisting in this way that we call the communist tradition. The workers councils of revolutionary Spain, Germany, Russia, Hungary, France, Mexico and on and on and on are the many examples that we look to when we think about how we can free ourselves and fight capitalism. Time and time again the world has seen ordinary people using direct action, self organisation and direct democracy to build new societies and lives for themselves. It is the ideas and successes of these people that we try to build on in today's fight against exploitation.

Anarchist communism is more than an abstract vision of the future and it is more than a nostalgia for the revolutionary movements of the past. It is a living working class tradition that lays the foundations for the future society in the here and now. Everything we will be after capitalism we must learn under it and through the fight against it. The revolution is not and never can be a blank slate – that way lies the corpses piled up by 'revolutionary' terror in France and Russia and China and on and on and on. Instead, revolution must be built out of the materials to hand by people alive today.

Workers' Councils: Organising the Revolution

One of the most important things we refer to when we talk about the communist tradition are workers' councils. Wherever there has been revolutionary struggle there have been workers' councils. Wherever revolutions have been beaten, the crushing of the councils has been a key defeat.

Workers' councils are mass assemblies of workers in revolt that take over the running of most aspects of daily life when the state and the bosses have been defeated or are in retreat. The major 20th century examples occurred in Russia, Germany, Hungary, Spain and many, many other more minor examples. However, the history of resistance to exploitation is full of similar examples. The Paris Commune of 1871, the Parisian sections during the revolution of 1789 and the years that followed, even the 'rings' of German peasants during the peasant wars of the 16th century, all have a lot in common with 20th century workers' councils.

These mass assemblies are the arenas in which revolutionary workers debate their actions, come up with plans and proposals and decide how to move forward. They involve everyone present in every stage of decision making and have proved capable of running complex societies perfectly well. They exist at many different levels which federate together in order to cooperate. For example, the Kronstadt soviet was made up of mandated delegates from each ship, crew and workplace who all help their own smaller meetings before contributing to larger decisions. These decisions were informed by less formal mass meetings held constantly in public squares which debated key issues facing the revolutionaries. Every single person could be involved in the decisions that affected them. The military defeat of the Kronstadt soviet by the Bolsheviks was one of the final nails in the coffin of any hope of a real revolution in Russia.

The practice of hundreds of workers' councils in dozens of struggles show us that not only is it possible for everyone affected by a decision to be involved in making it, but that millions of people will risk their lives to live like that. When it has the chance, the working class invents new social forms to meet its own needs and it is these forms that should inspire us today.

End and Means

The most important part of the working class tradition that we call communism is the refusal to make a distinction between ends and means. The organisations that we build while fighting capitalism will be the basis of anything that comes after the revolution. If those organisations do not embody the principles of the society that we want to see then that society will not come about. If we want a future where everyone contributes to the decisions that affect them, then we have to build organisations now in which this happens. The Anarchist Federation is one such organisation.

This is known as prefiguration and is one of the central ideas of anarchism. The idea is summed up by one important slogan: ‘building the new society in the shell of the old’. What this means is that our struggle is not simply against capitalism. We also fight, as far as is possible, to live as we wish to right now, to build alternatives to capitalism right under its nose.

In terms of organisation, this means that whatever we are involved in we try to push that group in the direction of direct democracy and full participation by all involved. Whether this is a residents’ group or a political campaign, a strike committee or a community allotment, we push for organisation without leaders or hierarchy.

We believe that not only will this make these groups more effective in achieving their immediate goals, but it will also increase the self confidence of the people involved and give them the tools they need to resist elsewhere in their lives. Over many different struggles and many different organisations this will build up a broad culture of resistance amongst ordinary people. It is from people steeped in this culture that revolutionary struggles will arise.

However, prefiguration has its limits. For many people building alternatives to capitalism in the here and now means one of two things: either a lifestyle or individualist response, or an attempt to create a dual power situation. Whilst the AF is often sympathetic to these approaches and doesn’t reject them completely, we do not believe that they can lead to revolution on their own. We also have some serious criticisms of both of them.

The Limits of Prefiguration: Lifestylism

The labels ‘lifestylist’ and ‘individualist’ are often used, frequently unfairly, as insults and so we have to be very careful when we use them. When we talk about ‘lifestyle’ politics we’re talking about a kind of politics that focuses in some way on ‘dropping out’ of capitalism, on getting ‘off the grid’ and living without relying on capitalist exploitation. This can mean many things. It can be something small-scale like living in squats and surviving by stealing from supermarkets or taking the perfectly good food that they throw out (‘skipping’ or ‘dumpster diving’). Or it can be something much larger like a project to communally farm a piece of land or establish a new community.

The reasons that people have for doing this kind of thing are very good ones. They see the harm that capitalism does every day and want no part of it. By stealing or taking what is thrown away they try to stop giving support back to the bosses that exploit us and people all over the world. By going back to the land and trying to be self sufficient in food and power they try to live with as few links to global capitalism as possible. More than this, often these kind of political lifestyle choices involve building and living in communities based on solidarity and mutual respect. Many

involved in this kind of activity would argue that this is ‘building the new society in the shell of the old’.

Whilst we respect many people who make these personal lifestyle choices, we reject this as a useful form of political action. The main reason for this is that it is not something that the majority of people can easily involve themselves in. Those with significant debts, dependants, health problems or any number of other things that limit their freedom of action find it very difficult, if not impossible, to ‘drop out’. There is no possibility for building a lifestylist mass movement. Indeed, lifestylism does not attempt to overthrow or destroy capitalism; it only attempts to wash its own hands clean of the blood.

This is, in fact, a huge political problem with lifestyle responses to capitalism. Often this form of politics leads to a kind of elitism and snobbery on the part of people living ‘political’ lifestyles. Ordinary people become ‘sheeple’, hopelessly brainwashed by their jobs and the media and as much part of the problem as the people that own and run the economy. In its most extreme forms, such as primitivism, this leads people to openly call for the extermination of the majority of the human race and a return to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

This kind of attitude is not an inevitable consequence of dropping out, but it is very common, and it is the result of an individualist way of looking at capitalism. Capitalism does not exploit us as individuals: it exploits us as classes or groups. We are exploited as workers, as women, as non-white minorities or even majorities. We are oppressed as queer or transgender, as professionals with some perks, or temporary workers with none, as ‘consumers’ in the West and as disposable labourers in the global South.

If we respond to the damage that capitalism does to us as individuals then the only logical answer is to abstain. You live without a job, without shopping, without relying on the systems of exploitation that surround us. If this is impossible, then you minimise your impact. You get an ‘ethical’ job, buy ‘ethical’ products and reduce your contribution to exploitation that way. From here it’s only a short step to despising the people who aren’t as ‘enlightened’ as you, who keep capitalism going by ‘refusing’ to abstain.

However, if you respond to capitalism as a member of a broader exploited class, then the logical response is collective. You show solidarity with people in the same situation as you, you fight where you are for better conditions, and for more control over the conditions of life. A collective response like this is always oppositional. It always has to fight capitalism rather than trying to go round it. It is, in potential, the beginning of a mass movement and the basis of a new society based on the recognition of our common interests.

In the end, it is this that the ruling class are afraid of, not people dropping out, and it is this that we should be looking to try and build.

The Limits of Prefiguration: Dual Power

The other typical approach to prefigurative politics is trying to build dual power. This means trying to build organisations in the here and now that will eventually replace capitalism. These can be anything from cooperatives of various kinds that organise to produce or to sell some product in a non-hierarchical way, to mass revolutionary unions that aim to take over the running of industry.

The idea is that by building organisations through which people run their own lives now, a point of 'dual power' can be reached. This is a situation where both capitalism and potential alternatives exist side by side, where there are two systems of economic, social and political organisation in direct competition with each other. For people who argue this way, this is how revolution happens. People build an alternative which increasing numbers of people join until it is strong enough to confront capitalism directly and replace it.

There are a number of different approaches to dual power strategies. Some see themselves as providing examples that can be taken up by other people and perhaps eventually become state policy. Things like the Transition Towns movement at the moment, or various alternative education movements work in this way. These are rarely very confrontational about their ideas and see themselves as reformist rather than revolutionary. They do, however, see the need to build an alternative base of power outside the state and capitalism.

Others seek to build entire alternative economies through cooperatives, credit unions, local trading systems (LETS schemes as they are often called) and the like. These, they argue, could eventually reach the point where many people are in effect living outside the capitalist economy. People in this tradition often, but not always, describe themselves as mutualist.

A variation on this idea sees building alternative centres of political rather than economic power as the key. There are two main traditions here. Some focus on building community assemblies to take local decisions and sometimes seek to take over local town halls and council chambers through elections. These people often, but again not always, describe themselves as municipalist. Others focus on building revolutionary trade unions which will confront management in the workplace to get immediate gains. They will also just as importantly be run by direct democracy, giving workers experience of taking decisions and organising. These unions are then seen as able to take over industry in its entirety replacing capitalism as they do so. This is usually described as syndicalism.

All these approaches, and they often work in combination, see themselves as building a political and economic alternative to capitalism right under its nose. They argue that these alternatives are able to grow to the point where either capitalism withers away or there is a confrontation between the two systems which leads to revolution and the destruction of capitalism.

There are many positive things about these approaches. They encourage self organisation and direct action by ordinary people. They provide important lessons in collective working and experience of direct democracy for those involved. The AF does not reject any of these approaches out of hand and members often involve themselves in this kind of project.

However, there are important weaknesses in these approaches that limit their usefulness. These kinds of projects are highly vulnerable to attacks by the state. Laws can be passed that make most cooperatives illegal or at least very difficult to set up. Community assemblies can be denied resources, or even attacked directly by the police and the army. People who pursue dual power strategies are often very over-optimistic about their ability to avoid repression. Capitalism and the state tend to attack any threat sooner rather than later.

It is not, however, direct attacks by the state that are the biggest problem with dual power strategies. The biggest problem is the risk of co-option. What this means is that movements and organisations which start out trying to provide an alternative are often 'captured' by capitalism. They become part of it rather than an alternative, helping capitalism to manage people's exploitation rather than challenging it. For example, cooperatives often become employers in their own right, with full cooperative members becoming managers and their new employees

exploited workers like any others. Community groups are approached by local councils, given funding and access to some power and end up administering the council policies they set out to oppose. Housing co-ops become landlords, credit unions become banks (building societies in the UK started out as community schemes), syndicalist unions negotiate with management and crack down on wildcat strikes. Ordinary people who start out trying to build alternatives end up becoming the thing they hate.

Any potential alternative to capitalism in the here and now will have to interact with the things that it is trying to replace. A co-operative store will have to buy stock from capitalist suppliers. A community assembly will have to negotiate with the local council if it is to secure resources. Even syndicalist unions, a highly confrontational way of working, find themselves having to negotiate with managers.

This does not mean that we should reject completely all these ways of doing things. What it does mean, however, is that none of these is a road to revolution on its own. Instead of seeing these ways of working as a way of creating replacements for capitalism, we should see them as one way amongst others of creating a culture of resistance. It is this culture and not any particular organisation that it is important for us to build.

A Culture of Resistance

Anarchist communists believe that people are perfectly capable of looking after themselves. We believe that everyone should be involved in the decisions that affect them, that everyone is capable of making the most complex choices that are needed to run a society. We believe that these decisions will be better than those made by elites as they will be decisions which take into account the needs of the whole community not just those of a small minority of exploiters.

More than this, we believe that the only people capable of destroying capitalism and creating a world in which everyone has control over their own life are those directly exploited by capital today. As we've pointed out, the ruling class know this and they work very hard to keep the working class divided and lacking in the skills that it needs to make this change. This is something that has to be overcome before revolution is possible. We have to 'build the new society in the shell of the old'. However, history shows that organisations built by working class people for their own benefit are often co-opted and turned against them. Trade unions, credit unions, cooperative traders and manufacturers – all of these and more have been used to defend rather than destroy capitalism.

Authoritarian revolutionaries use this problem as an excuse to take over. According to them, the working class is only capable of a 'trade union consciousness', of haggling over wages and perks instead of toppling capitalism and building something new. What is needed, they claim, is leadership. They will be the cause of the revolution, leading the poor stupid masses into the light kicking and screaming. History shows us that this leads only into new tyrannies.

The alternative is more difficult to imagine, because it is something that is deliberately discouraged and hidden in a capitalist world. The alternative is a culture of resistance, a set of bonds of solidarity and understanding between many different people in many different places. These new relationships give people the confidence and the resources that they need to fight back wherever they are. This culture becomes a mass of tinder which is able to turn the spark from one struggle or another into a flame which can spread. From this culture revolutionary situations will seem

to come from nowhere, surprising governments and professional revolutionaries alike. This culture is not a particular organisation or set of principles or anything like that. It is composed of many different organisations and more than this of ideas, practices and attitudes that reveal to us our power as exploited but necessary parts of the capitalist system. This culture is as much about the self image and self belief of ordinary people as it is about any particular set of ideas or organisations.

Defending the Revolution: The Kronstadt Uprising

The Kronstadt Soviet was one of the most radical organisations of the Russian revolution. A naval base connected to Petrograd, it very quickly kicked out its officers and became a hotbed of revolutionary action and debate. The Soviet, a council made up of delegates from all over the base, cheerfully participated militarily and politically in the early days of the revolution, both in February 1917 when the Tsar was overthrown and in October 1917 when a revolutionary rather than moderate government was installed.

As time went on, however, the Kronstadt Soviet became a problem for the ruling Bolsheviks. In the years immediately following the revolution the Bolsheviks deliberately set out to centralise power in their own hands. They arrested and killed opponents, unleashed the secret police on the population and suppressed many of the revolutionary organs that they had supported in order to get into power. The factory committees that ran workplaces on directly democratic lines were dissolved, the Soviets were reduced to rubber stamps and the peasantry were attacked and brutalised in order to secure grain. All of this provoked resistance and strikes and disorder became common, all of which were met with brutal force.

On March 21st 1921, while workers' unrest was threatening to turn to a general strike in Petrograd, the Kronstadt sailors issued a proclamation demanding an end to the political repression against workers and peasants, anarchists and member of other left parties, to return the control of the army and the press to the workers and the release of all political prisoners from the workers' movement. The Bolsheviks responded in the only way they knew how, sending hand-picked regiments of party loyalists (even the brutally disciplined Red Army could not be trusted to crush the popular Kronstadt sailors) to attack the base. After brutal fighting the Kronstadt Soviet was crushed.

To this day, Leninist parties spread lies about what happened. They know that the facts show how bankrupt their way of doing things is, how often parties and representatives, however revolutionary they may claim to be, betray the working class to seek their own power.

This all sounds very nice, and it can be the stuff of stirring speeches and articles, but it can also be vague and woolly. It is a fact that the revolutions of the past have surprised those that took part in them, often seeming to come from nowhere. Women rioting over the price of bread in Russia never expected to overthrow the Tsar a few months later. Students protesting over the way their universities were run in 1960s France never expected to be part of a movement of millions. And yet all this and much more in countless different examples is exactly what happened.

It is tempting to define a culture of resistance in a vague way in order to deal with this fact. We can see it as a kind of seed bed for revolutions, with the remains of smaller struggles falling as fertiliser on the soil until it is rich and black enough for the riotous shoots of an uprising to spring forth. This, however, is not enough. It makes us think in abstractions and metaphors and so hides the real activities of the real people who build a culture of resistance. We need to be more concrete to do real justice to the struggle of millions of ordinary people.

A culture of resistance is in some way the sum of all the things that people do to survive and resist under capitalism. It is the big things like strikes and riots, occupations of factories and

public buildings and huge organisations that fight for something in particular. Just as importantly, it is the small things as well. The little scams at work and the community and residents' groups that make life a little bit more bearable at home. It's hatred of the police and the bosses and pride in who you are and the community you live in.

What all of these things have in common is that they create connections between people. They make spaces where people can meet and talk together without being in competition with each other. They create bonds of trust. The scam at work relies on your workmates keeping quiet, the huge strike relies on each person sacrificing their pay for the benefit of everyone.

These connections of trust and common purpose between people work against the everyday logic of capitalism. Capitalism splits us off from one another. We are given orders instead of taking part in decisions. When we buy something, whatever it is, all we know is its price not who made it and why. The media tells us to fear immigrants and outsiders who they claim are trying to take what little we have. We are forced at every turn to cut ourselves off from the world, to be blind to the connections that we have with other people.

A culture of resistance restores those connections, making visible what capitalism tries to hide from us. Every object we use in our lives is made by other human beings. Every piece of food we eat, every bit of power we use, every cup of water we drink is there because other people made it possible. Capitalism hides this behind prices and company names. It takes the credit for making life possible by hiding the very things that connect us to everyone else in the world. A culture of resistance shows us how connected we are to other working class people. It rolls back the deceptions of capitalism and shows us how powerful we really are. It is not some abstract ideal, but instead it reveals the concrete reality that connects us all and blows away the abstractions and lies that capitalism uses to isolate us.

A culture of resistance grows in the belly of capitalism and uses the connections between workers that capitalism in some cases creates to build the beginnings of an alternative. A culture of resistance builds structures and ideas of cooperation and solidarity that prefigure the world to come. A culture of resistance is the school in which we learn how to be free, how we become through the fight against capitalism everything that we will be after it.

Through organising ourselves without leaders, through taking direct action against our enemies, through making decisions in which everyone involved gets a say we learn how to live as free human beings. An anarchist communist world in which we control our own lives and the things that make them possible can only be built by people who have taught themselves how to be free. A culture of resistance composed of many different kinds of organisation is how we do that.

A culture of resistance operates in many different ways and in many different areas of life. It is created by the actions of millions and will always be surprising and exciting in the new ideas and the new ways of fighting back that it creates. However, it is possible to give a broad outline of the kinds of things that are possible and of the sorts of struggle that can take place. The next section lays out some of these ideas and explains why we think the Anarchist Federation can be part of this.

4. How We Fight: Building a Culture of Resistance

As we've said, a culture of resistance is built of many different organisations working in many different ways. When people organise themselves without leaders or representatives to take direct action against the things that exploit and oppress them then they are taking part in creating a culture of resistance which in the end is what will overthrow capitalism and create a new, free society. It is impossible to tell in advance what forms this culture of resistance will take. The needs and the imaginations of the people involved will dictate what happens and how.

However, it is possible to lay out the very broadest outline of how people can organise themselves and fight back. We can look at what has worked in the past and what people are doing now and point out how direct action and self organisation can be applied to a number of areas of everyday life. There can be no complete list, but in this section we're going to look at how people can fight at work and, in different ways, in their communities. We will also look at what role minority revolutionary organisations like the AF can play in this.

Resistance in the Workplace

At work the confrontation between workers and bosses is at its most obvious. Workers want to work as little as possible for as much money as they can get, whereas bosses want as much work for as little pay. This is the nature of capitalism. Bosses exploit workers and workers resist exploitation. It is for this reason that when we are at work, we are watched and controlled more closely than anywhere else. The amount of work we do is measured, the kind of work we do is strictly defined. We are told when we can eat and when we can go to the toilet. We are watched every minute of every day by bosses and managers whose job it is to make sure that every minute we are being paid we are working for the company.

However, the amount of effort management makes to control people at work points to something else. At work we are incredibly powerful. When we work for a wage we create the profits that the ruling class needs to exist. They need us to do what we are told in order to exist at all. We don't need them. When workers disrupt the smooth running of a workplace through strike action or sabotage and so on, we directly disrupt the ability of the ruling class to make the profits it depends on. For this reason, resistance at work always has revolutionary potential, however small-scale it is. When we refuse to make profits for our bosses we threaten their very existence.

There is a constant conflict between the interests of management and the interests of workers which is shown in many different ways. On a small-scale, individual level are theft and slacking off where workers find ways round the control mechanisms that management uses. On a larger, more collective level are strikes and sabotage where workers seek to force concessions from management. In these kinds of struggles there are two things at stake. Firstly, workers seek to get a bigger slice of the profits management make by exploiting them, either through theft or

through wage claims. Secondly, workers seek to resist the control of management, to get more freedom on the job. Both sets of demands are important, but it is the second set that leads in directions that are very dangerous to the ruling class.

When management are faced with a militant workforce that is disrupting their ability to make profits, they will try and negotiate. However, they will always negotiate over wages, working hours or something similar. That is, they will negotiate the level of exploitation, never the fact of it. They will never negotiate away control of the workplace. Indeed, they will pay a great deal of money to retain and expand that control.

This is the difference between revolutionary and reformist struggle at work. Reformist struggles tackle the level of exploitation, seeking a 'fairer' deal between workers and management. Revolutionary struggles challenge exploitation altogether and seek to take control away from management. Whenever we fight at work, both kinds of struggle are there as potential. It is the way that we fight and the kinds of organisations that exist that determine whether a struggle will take a reformist or revolutionary direction.

The Ungovernable Factory: British Industrial Struggle in the 1970s

For a brief time in the 1970s the bosses were very close to losing control of the factories that made them their fortunes. Thatcher's 1980s rhetoric about the threat to 'management's right to manage' was not just the usual politician's guff. From the late 1960s right through to the defeat of the miners' strike in 1984, a mass movement of militant workers challenged management not just for better pay but over how the workplace would be run.

Workers in the car industry were particularly militant, but 'the English disease' – as widespread strike action was known – spread throughout the economy. At its peak in 1979, 29.4 million working days were 'lost' to strikes and disputes frequently escalated into occupations and open confrontation. To take just one example, workers at the Halewood Ford plant on Merseyside struck repeatedly throughout the 1970s. They fought for pay rises and against attacks on their working conditions. Speed up on the line and other attacks were repeatedly defeated. More than this, workers eventually started rejecting work altogether. Friday night was strike night as the late shift downed tools every week to go out drinking instead.

Importantly, much of this activity was run by the workers themselves, with militant shop stewards based on the factory floor rather than distant union bureaucrats taking on many tasks. At Halewood, the mass meetings held regularly throughout disputes are still remembered today and were often addressed by people from outside as well as inside the workplace. These struggles were antagonistic not just to management but to the unions as well.

Throughout Britain militant workers such as those at Halewood confronted management and the trade unions for greater control of their lives. It took a major assault by the state and a complete transformation in the global economy to defeat them.

The most common kind of working class organisation in the workplace is the trade union. As discussed above, this is one kind of organisation that is more often than not completely co-opted by the ruling class. As a result of past struggles which threatened management's power, the trade union is invited to the negotiating table. In return for ensuring that workers don't behave unpredictably – taking wildcat strike action or sabotaging equipment for example – the union is given a place in the management of capitalism, a little slice of the power that management has. The way that most unions are organised as hierarchies with leaders and so called 'representatives' means that this power is concentrated in the hands of a small number of people who become as much part of the ruling class as the managers that they supposedly oppose. It is the form of trade

union organisation – based on negotiation and representatives rather than direct action and full involvement by the membership, hierarchical rather than participatory – that leads to the various ‘sell outs’ and ‘betrayals’ that are such a common feature of modern workplace struggles. The problem is not any one particular leadership, but the fact that there is a leadership in the first place.

The alternative to the trade union is, ironically, the very thing that gives the trade unions what little power they have. Militant workers organising independently to take direct action on the job are the thing that management is most afraid of. It is trade unionism’s promise to control these militants that management demands as a condition of giving them a place at the negotiating table. When workers are militant and self organised – as they were in the 1970s, for example – the trade unions are more powerful because management needs their ability to control and channel struggles so much more. When workers are divided, disorganised and passive, then unions lose their power and management stops working with them, as has happened in recent years for example.

It follows from this that the priority for people fighting in the workplace should be not a strong union branch, but strong bonds of solidarity between workers on the job. These bonds mean that direct action to defend conditions and make gains is much more likely to succeed. Ultimately, we see these bonds of solidarity as forming an important part of a culture of resistance and as the basis for moving beyond reformist and defensive struggles – those to protect and improve pay and conditions – into revolutionary struggles.

These revolutionary struggles involve not just fighting management, but getting rid of them altogether. In periods of heightened struggle when a majority of the working class is mobilised against the ruling class, workers can move from fighting management to managing themselves. Workers take over the factories and the workshops, the fields and the haulage yards to start producing the goods and services that society needs for their own sake rather than for the profit of the bosses.

For many workers this will mean simply walking away from the unproductive and pointless jobs that they do. Most call centres and offices, insurance, advertising, banking and other pointless parasitic jobs that just move money around for the rich should just be abandoned. For those in more useful jobs, the way work is organised should be completely transformed. Workplaces should be run by meetings of all workers or, where this is impractical, by meetings of mandated delegates from different work groups and sections. The exchange of raw materials and finished products across the world would be worked out by federations of these self-managed workplaces and the communities they are part of rather than driven by the profit motive.

In the beginning, we would simply have to keep these places running to produce the things we needed, but as the revolution became more secure, the very nature of work itself would need to be completely transformed. Some work would be decentralised and carried out on a smaller scale so that communities had more control over the things they needed. Other jobs – transport, for example – would still have to be run on a large scale and so would be run by federations accountable in every way to the communities they served. The amount of work needed would be greatly reduced as the profit motive is removed and the alienation of each individual from the tasks they carry out would disappear. All of us would be involved in decisions about what kind of work needed to be done and all of us would have free choice about what kind of work we wanted to do. Relationships in the marketplace between depersonalised commodities would be replaced by relationships between people doing work that interested them. What happens now

only to a limited extent in small privileged sections of the professional elite – some scientists and academics, for example – would be the norm for everyone. We would work because we wanted to for the sake of all those around us.

Resistance in the Community

Unlike work, where it is more easy to see the lines of struggle, ‘community’ is much harder to define. In the past, many people lived in close knit working class communities centred on a particular workplace – mining villages or factory towns, for example – where work and home all served to bind a particular group of people together. These kinds of communities are much rarer now, but even when they were common not everyone who lived in the same area could feel part of them. These communities were often divided by race with ghettos for particular groups of immigrants and a great deal of hostility between what were effectively different communities. In the US in particular, the division between white and black workers could be every bit as violent and exploitative as the division between the working and the ruling classes. They were also divided by gender. Men and women could have vastly different experiences of life in these ‘united’ communities, with men enjoying such power over ‘their’ women that it was their violence that was the biggest problem in women’s lives, not exploitation by the ruling class.

While it can be argued that these divisions serve the interests of the ruling class, that does not mean that they automatically disappear if we assert a common ‘working class’ identity. We cannot assume that just because working class people live in a particular area that there is a ‘community’ there that is ready to fight back. We should also refuse to be nostalgic for working class communities of the past. The unity that they had was often marred by, and even sometimes based on, racism, sexism, homophobia and so on.

This does not mean, however, that we should reject the community as a site of working class struggle. There are many important battles to be fought outside of the workplace which are just as important in building a culture of resistance. What it means is that we have to think carefully about the kinds of struggles that take place and the different kinds of engagement that they require.

Fighting for the Social Wage: Poll Tax Rebellion

In 1989 the then Tory government tried to introduce a new local tax, the Community Charge or Poll Tax, first into Scotland and then, in 1990, into the rest of Britain. This new tax levelled a fixed charge on all tax payers meaning that poorer people paid a much higher percentage of their income than the better off. For the very poorest the new tax would be a real burden whereas the rich would see their taxes fall.

Through much debate and disagreement a movement grew to resist the new tax by refusing to pay it. This movement organised itself into local Anti Poll Tax Unions, or APTUs, which organised to spread the idea of non-payment and to help people resist any attempts to force them to pay. The APTUs organised mass meetings, physical resistance to bailiffs trying to collect the tax and protests at and occupations of town halls and council buildings. These tactics were so successful that bailiff companies went bust, unable to operate when confronted with entire communities determined to stop them. Council revenues collapsed as up to 17 million people refused to pay and the cost of chasing non-payers through the courts rocketed.

Protests at town halls often turned into confrontations with the police, with small scale riots and disorder all over the country. A national demonstration went the same way when police attacked in Trafalgar Square and fighting went on for hours. The grass roots of the movement rallied round to defend those arrested, but some of the left political parties involved disowned the rioters (although they soon soon denied having done this when the riot proved to be popular) and even cooperated with the police, proving that in the end they're more concerned with their own power than the needs of working class people.

In the end, the Poll Tax was defeated by widespread self organisation and direct action. The APTUs allowed people to meet and make their own decisions and the non-payment campaign created a direct confrontation with the state, a confrontation that we won.

There are broadly speaking two kinds of struggle that working class people face in the places that they live. The first is the social wage struggle, that is struggles against cuts in essential services and against attacks on living standards through increases in the cost of living. The second is what might be called the 'identity' struggle, although it is about far more than this. In this category are struggles by women against patriarchy, ethnic minority/majority people against racism and white supremacy, LGBTQ people against homophobia and transphobia and so on. These kinds of struggles take place at home, in the workplace, inside and outside of working class organisations. They are, however, community struggles in the sense that the people who fight them often find themselves bound together through that fight. These two forms of struggle are ideal types and often get mixed up – in the struggles of asylum seekers, for example, who must confront racism as well as attacks on their living standards – but keeping in mind the different ways they work can often help us understand what is going on.

Social Wage Struggles

When we talk about a social wage we're talking about all the different ways that working class people receive services from the state and the ruling class that are in effect part of their share of the profits of industry. Healthcare, subsidised and social housing, transport and utilities like water and electricity, libraries and social services, benefits and many other things can be seen as part of the social wage. Like wage increases and shorter working days these services are often the result of previous rounds of struggle, victories won by the working class in the past. They are also, just like the benefits we receive at work, often used to control us.

Community struggles over the social wage take many forms but they usually involve a fairly straightforward confrontation between some arm of the state – the local council, for example – and a relatively clearly defined group of people who depend on a particular service. Cuts in local medical services are resisted by those who use them – patients of a particular clinic or those living in an area served by a particular hospital. Rent increases are resisted by the tenants of a particular landlord or housing authority. School closures are resisted by the parents and children directly affected. There are many different tactics available to people fighting these kind of struggles. Petitions and appeals to representatives are often used, and more often than not fail, but there are also forms of direct action that people can use. Occupations of threatened buildings and services, mass protests outside, and inside, government buildings, blockades and disruptions to the normal running of services, street riots and disorder. Social wage struggles

are often the most imaginative of all struggles in terms of the tactics they use, and this is in part because of the difficulties they face.

The difference between social wage struggles and struggles in the workplace is that it is not always possible for people fighting over the social wage to hurt the profits of the people they oppose. Rent strikes and the refusal to pay taxes can work in this way, but protests and occupations don't always have this effect. This is one of the biggest difficulties that social wage struggles face – it is much harder for them to hurt the people in charge. Many of the tactics communities use are aimed at disrupting the smooth running of local government in the same way that industrial disputes disrupt the smooth running of the workplace. However, another set of tactics is also aimed at the legitimacy of the institutions of government, at questioning whether the council or the NHS trust and so on even have the right to run the services that are being attacked.

It is here that social wage struggles often move in the direction of self organisation and self management – running occupied buildings and services themselves, squatting land and simply building the things that are needed without waiting for permission. It is also here, however, that social wage struggles are often co-opted. Sometimes, political parties move in and claim to speak for the people involved in resistance to cuts and so on. They claim that the problem is the result of who is in charge, not because of the system as a whole. They use the discontent and resistance of ordinary people as a basis for their own power, as a way of governing rather than freeing people. These parties come from across the political spectrum, whether from the mainstream, from the left or even the far right – this is a tactic the BNP used, for example. At other times, the organisations that the community has set up for itself to defend the services it relies on are invited to negotiate with the state, even invited to run some things themselves. Very quickly they find themselves managing people's dissatisfaction on the state's behalf, just like a trade union in the workplace.

If this co-option can be avoided and resisted by self-organised groups working without representatives and taking direct action to fulfil their own needs, then these kind of social wage struggles can move in amazing directions. Millions of people can be organised to resist the degradation of their own lives, as happened during the struggle against the Poll Tax for example. They can also take over the running of important aspects of their day to day lives which at the moment are in the hands of the state.

At times of heightened struggle – for example during long lasting general strikes – this dynamic leads to people taking over the running of their own communities, providing for themselves the services they rely on. During and after the revolution this will expand to break down the division between work and the community so that people decide amongst themselves what services they need and how they will provide them for themselves. Neighbourhood assemblies will work in cooperation with councils in the factories and workshops to provide everything needed for life, with everyone affected by a decision involved in making it.

'Identity' Struggles

The word 'identity' is really not up to the job of describing the kind of struggles we're talking about here, but it is better than any of the other terms that we have. Most liberal, and even most radical, ways of talking about the struggles of women, of LGBTQ people, ethnic minority/majority people and so on do not recognise the relationship between these kinds of struggle and

working class struggle. Sometimes they are seen as distractions and sometimes as ‘separate but equal’, but rarely as an integral part of the struggle against capitalism as a whole. For anarchist communists capitalism is more than just a class system, it is a system that uses a whole range of hierarchies to maintain the power of a minority. Resistance to all of these hierarchies should be seen as resistance to capitalism.

This does not mean, however, that separate organisations are not needed by people fighting patriarchy, white supremacy and so on. Just because the struggles of women or LGBTQ people are important in the struggle against capitalism does not mean that those struggles can simply be folded into some ‘wider’ fight against capitalism. The nature of these forms of exploitation and oppression mean that not only do ethnic minority/majority people or LGBTQ people and so on face attacks from the state in the form of discriminatory laws or police harassment, they also face attacks from other working class people.

Because of this it is necessary for these people to form their own communities not only in order to organise together but also to talk together without having to justify what they say to people who do not share their oppression. It is essential that people form groups which are all women or all ethnic minority/majority or all LGBTQ or all disabled and so on and so on. These groups provide a space in which people can understand what is unique about their own oppressions and in which they can be free of the prejudices – conscious or unconscious – of people who do not share their experiences. These groups can be the basis of communities of resistance, where a shared understanding becomes a set of shared tactics and actions to take on both the state and the everyday prejudice and violence that can make life hell for anyone defined outside the norm.

These unique understandings and tactics become an important part of a culture of resistance. They strengthen the challenge that all exploited groups make to capitalism by broadening and deepening the range of resistance that the ruling class faces. The power differences and hierarchies that the ruling class uses to keep us divided from one another are not overcome by some false ‘unity’ that ignores the differences in our experiences of exploitation and oppression. They are overcome when different people use their own experiences to come up with unique forms of resistance that meet their own needs. This is the foundation of alliances between different groups, between men and women, black and white, immigrant and native, queer and straight and so on, not a unity built on ignoring these differences.

These communities of resistance are as vulnerable to co-option as any other kind of resistance. Feminist groups find themselves taking government funding and becoming part of the administration of capitalism rather than resisting it, ethnic minority/majority activists become ‘community leaders’ and end up as part of the problem. It should be stressed, however, that this is not a special feature of this kind of group. Workers’ organisations are just as vulnerable to being co-opted as women’s or queer organisations for example. Indeed, it is often the divisions caused by different hierarchies that are used to do this. Early trade unions were bought off by the expulsion of women and immigrant workers from the workplace, giving male workers a little slice of power as a bribe. Queer groups have often seen gay men take positions of leadership and power in exchange for downplaying, indeed sometimes even opposing, the needs of lesbian women or transgender people, breaking the unity brought by a common oppression with the privileges of male power in a patriarchal society. As always, it is direct action and self-organisation that can avoid this kind of co-option.

The ultimate goal of revolutionary ‘identity’ struggles is the same as any other kind of revolutionary struggle. It is not for equal rights or a place at the capitalist table. It is instead the

complete transformation of the way society is organised. The struggle is for a world in which everyone has the chance to be a full human being and do whatever it is that they need to grow and fulfil themselves. In the end, 'identity' struggles seek to destroy the need for that identity, just as workers in struggle want to stop being workers and start being people. The future we're fighting for is one in which there are only people, and the colour of their skin, who they chose to sleep with or what kind of genitals they happen to have are their business and no one else's.

The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation

If people are capable of running their own struggles and of fighting for themselves to meet their own needs then what is the point of an organisation like the Anarchist Federation? We are an organisation of conscious revolutionaries who see ourselves as working towards an anarchist communist revolution but, as we've made clear in this pamphlet, we don't think that any revolution will be down to us. It will be the self activity of millions of working class people that makes the revolution, not the work of a handful of people with some nice ideas. We are not a revolutionary party that will lead the working class out of its 'trade union consciousness', out of reformism and into revolution. We are not the embryo of a workers' council or a revolutionary union that will grow and grow until we eventually take over. We do not lead anyone, we do not act on behalf of anyone but ourselves.

The Environment and the Social Wage: The German Anti-Nuclear Movement

In 1975 the West German government began building a nuclear reactor in the tiny hamlet of Wyhl. Since 1971 a grassroots movement had been building to oppose the new reactor, but had been ignored at every stage of the planning process. On the 18th February, one day after construction had begun, local people occupied the site and were dragged away and beaten by the police. A few days later on the 23rd February, 30,000 people came back and reoccupied the site, forcing the police to back down. Within a month the construction license had been withdrawn and the reactor was never built.

This was the first major victory for the German anti-nuclear movement which had been growing since the 1960s in the belly of the peace movement and through local citizens' initiatives. Through the late 1970s hundreds of thousands of people were involved in occupations and direct action aimed at stopping the government's nuclear power programme. Projects in Wackersdorf and Gorleben were defeated and in 1981 100,000 people faced off 10,000 police with sticks, stones, molotovs and slingshots in protest at a proposed plant in Brockdorf.

The German anti-nuclear movement is the single most successful environmental direct action movement in recent history. It started with local communities organising themselves to resist building projects through legal channels (lobbying, protests and so on). It grew into a major alliance between anarchists, the libertarian left, local groups and national campaigns that was able to fight and win against some of the biggest police mobilisations ever seen in Germany. In the end, some parts of this movement were co-opted into the German Green Party and other parts faded away as the government backed down, but its influence still lives. Even in 2008, it was possible for 15,000 to blockade nuclear waste shipments and any German government can guarantee that moves towards a new nuclear programme will be met with resistance.

There are, however, some things that a revolutionary organisation can do that would be far less likely to happen without it. Anarchist communism is a living working class tradition, but there are times when that life hangs by a very thin thread. In periods of defeat and division, when the

working class has few organisations of its own and there is very little struggle, something has to keep the lessons that have been learned alive. The revolutionary organisation is an important store of knowledge and skills. It is a kind of memory that keeps alive a vision of the working class as united and defiant even when the class has been kicked in the head so many times it's starting to forget its own name, let alone its past.

This means producing leaflets and pamphlets, organising meetings and education to keep ideas and history alive. This is not just an academic exercise, playing with ideas for the sake of it, it is intensely practical. Accounts from the early days of the Poll Tax struggle make clear that people were drawing inspiration from the stories of previous fights against taxation, going back to the 14th century peasant's revolt! Knowing that something has happened before can make people feel that it is more realistic to fight back now. And this need not just be some vague 'inspiration', however important this is. A revolutionary organisation with national and international contacts can be an important channel for information which bypasses hierarchical structures like the unions or the media and puts workers in different, isolated, struggles in direct contact with one another.

There is much to it than this of course. Members of a revolutionary organisation are also militants in their own right and intensely involved in struggles where they live and work. The ideas of anarchist communism spread not just through the words of our organisations but also through things that we do. Whatever we are involved in, we push for direct action and self organisation and resist takeover and co-option by authoritarian groups. Our membership of a broader organisation of revolutionaries gives us access to the experiences of our comrades and allows us to discuss and debate the issues and tactics of any particular struggle without having to worry about the basics. The high level of political agreement within a revolutionary organisation allows us to worry about the crucial details rather than having to make the same arguments against the unions and for direct action again and again and again.

It is in these two main ways – preserving and spreading the memory and lessons of previous struggles, and supporting committed but potentially isolated militants in day to day struggles – that a revolutionary organisation contributes towards a culture of resistance. The ideas of anarchist communism work. When we use them to fight, our chances of winning increase because these ideas empower us and show us our own strength rather than telling us to rely on some set of leaders or representatives. The revolutionary organisation is one important way of spreading those ideas, of putting them into action and using them to build a culture of resistance.

5. There is no Conclusion

Anarchist communism is a living, breathing working class tradition that grows out of the actions and experiences of millions of people over the centuries of struggle against capitalism. The one lesson that we learn again and again is that people fight back. Wherever they are and whatever is happening to them, people fight back. Sometimes we win, more often we don't, but whenever we make progress the principles of direct action and self organisation are usually at the heart of it. Our defeats are never total: there's always something left to move forward and carry on fighting. Our victory will never be final: human beings will always seek to change and experiment, to experience new things and new ideas.

We believe that as long as capitalism, patriarchy, white supremacy and all the rest of it still exist there will always be people who resist. We believe that they have the best chance of winning when they organise using anarchist communist principles. As long as that resistance goes on, the Anarchist Federation and the many groups like us all over the world will do whatever we can to bring those ideas to the people that need them. Whether at work, at home or in the community people will always fight back, and anarchist communists will always be there to support them as best we can.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Anarchist Federation
Introduction to Anarchist Communism
April 2013

Retrieved on 4th October 2021 from afed.org.uk
Second Edition.

theanarchistlibrary.org