

Review: How can the working class transform the 'economy' in its own interests?

by Liverpool Discussion Group. Archive Publishing. 16 pages.

Anarchist Federation

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This thought-provoking pamphlet emanates from the Liverpool Discussion Group, appears since to have been disbanded. This group was made up of people from a left communist, Bordigist, and autonomist background. In a lot of ways they appear to have reached the same conclusions as us on key questions like the Left, nationalisation, changes within the structure of capitalism, etc. (See our forthcoming Manifesto for the Millenium). Like us they see that, contrary to Mrs. Thatcher's cry that: "There Is No Alternative", in fact there is! As they themselves say:

"Everyone today who is 'oppositional'- from 'new age' travellers to anti-roads protestors, to those taking part in the miners strike and the anti-poll tax campaign, to those who oppose the new changes in 'Public Order' legislation, is expressing, in a fragmentary way, our need to create a picture of the world, different from and in opposition to the one we get fed every day. Since 'economics' is no more than the ideology of our rulers, we need to construct an 'economics' of our own".

The pamphlet argues that the changes that happened in capitalism in the 80s, not just under 'Thatcherism' but worldwide were the direct result of our (working class) resistance to exploitation, culminating in the 70s with some factories having a labour turnover of 20% per month, shortage of labour, lack of 'skilled labour', poor motivation, absenteeism, sabotage and a widespread alienation, as well as go-slows, strikes, work-to-rule. This ability to use 'full employment' for our own ends, meant that workforces became difficult to govern and the boss class had to retaliate.

The pamphlet quite correctly notes that the 'old movement' of the Left and the unions, nationalisation and state control of the economy, need to be left behind. Indeed in the post-World War II period, capitalism used the programme of the 'old movement' to restructure and restabilise- the Labour Party introduced this in Britain, elsewhere it was managed by De Gaulle for example, hardly a 'socialist' even in the Labourist concept. Again the pamphlet argues against a lengthy transition period to a new society, pointing out that capitalism is developed enough for a short change-over.

It is admitted that the break in the old movement provoked by the Russian Revolution between social democracy and the 'Left' was not as great or as deep as might be supposed. However, they

fail to break with the Bolshevik concepts that because of 'war communism' no real advance to a new form of social organisation was possible. They say that to their credit anarchists had the merit of advancing the slogan 'Abolish the Wages System' but that a slogan was all it was. On the contrary, we argue that advance to real communism was possible, and that a Third Revolution was developing that was physically crushed by the Bolsheviks. (More on this Third Revolution in future issues).

It is argued that it is not important who manages capital – what is important is the ending of the relations of capitalism themselves, not as an ultimate goal but as immediate politics. An immense productive capacity has been created by capitalism, and it is now perfectly possible to modify/destroy the wage labour relationship.

The defeat of State power is discussed and in those areas where it has been achieved, the abolition of wage labour, all forms of trading, hiring and firing etc. Unfortunately, again Leninist notions of State power- to describe the power of workers' councils- are raised and in the next section the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is specifically referred to, as being as good a description of the workers' councils! Now we would argue that not only is this concept tied not only to Stalinism, but to Leninism in general, but that it is a dangerous and ambiguous concept. The dictatorship of the proletariat may mean the suppression of the boss class to the pamphlet writers, but historically it is identified with the dictatorship not of the mass of the population- which when you think about it is an impossible idea!- but of a party, and then the central leadership of that party, and the suppression of the working class and of revolutionary groupings, as well as mass terror, secret police, prison camps, and the militarisation of labour.

On the positive side, what a revolutionary society could achieve in the first stage is looked into. there are suggestions of what could be possible, such as a census to find out what needs cannot be satisfied from its 'own' resources, the immediate cutting of work hours by at least 50%. This could be achieved through the ending of 'socially unproductive' tasks, resulting in the increase of 'free time' allowing greater participation in the extension of the revolution, especially in those areas as yet untouched by the new economy – such as education, health, 'domestic life', consumption etc.

What the pamphlet sketches out is thought-provoking, and the Liverpool Discussion Group in its short life was one of the areas where revolutionary theory was beginning to be renewed. This renewal is continuing – and we include our own organisation as one of those areas for theoretical renewal. The pamphlet should be read by all those genuinely concerned with a vision of the new society. Unfortunately, one of the headings – 'Abandon old conceptions' still applied to some of the ways of thinking of the Liverpool Discussion Group. The dead weight of Bolshevik practices still bear down on many of those frantically looking for a way forward. A great new effort is needed to acquire new ways of thinking. For many this may be impossible, while others like the authors of this pamphlet, may have enough flexibility to go beyond old formulas.

(We understand that before the collapse of the Group that there was a modification of some of the problem areas discussed above.)

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