

# **An Overview of Anarchism**

**Introduction to its Foundations**

Anarchist Signal Collective

# Contents

<b>Foundations - Bullet Points</b> . . . . .	3
<b>Classless Society</b> . . . . .	4
<b>Mutual Aid</b> . . . . .	5
<b>Council System &amp; Federalism</b> . . . . .	6
<b>Freedom &amp; Accountability</b> . . . . .	8

Anarchism emerged as the anti-state wing of the socialist movement, which is commonly referred to as libertarian socialism or libertarian communism. Anarchists, without exception, are opposed to all structures of hierarchical domination, including capitalism, the state, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, imperialism, and settler colonialism. Instead, anarchists strive for a horizontal, stateless, classless, socialist society free from domination, that is grounded in the principles of solidarity, self-management, freedom, federalism, ecological sustainability and mutual aid.

Within the anarchist movement are diverse currents of thought and practice that all share these principles while emphasizing different priorities & tactics. Yet anarchists broadly agree that a new society can only be brought into being through social revolutionary action by independent mass movements, which advance dual-power, practice prefigurative politics, and organize workers' strikes.

## Foundations - Bullet Points

- **Classless Society:** Abolition of capitalism and the state, with resources and decision-making collectively managed in a libertarian socialist framework.
- **Horizontalism:** Rejection of hierarchical systems in favor of horizontal(i.e. non-hierarchical), self-managed structures without ruler positions, where power is distributed equally among everyone rather than concentrated at the top.
- **Means & Ends Unity:** Commitment to prefigurative politics, holding that the struggle for a classless self-managed society must be organized through the same horizontal and self-managed means it seeks to establish, rejecting systems that reproduce the very hierarchical power structures they seek to abolish.
- **Mutual Aid:** Reciprocal systems of support ensure universal access to essential goods, resources, and social wealth, managed collectively by communities. This also includes services like healthcare, education, and other vital services for the common benefit.
- **Council System:** Abolition of state top-down structures and establishment of horizontal council-based decision-making systems. Interests are voiced through direct voting by self-managed workers or residents of a region and recallable delegates are chosen to coordinate and communicate council decisions, holding no personal power.
- **Federalism:** Autonomous Communes / Districts / Regions join together with councils at higher and higher levels, using delegation, in order to manage increasingly complex matters, while keeping all power on the base level thus keeping decision-making horizontal.
- **Freedom & Accountability:** Upholding the freedom of individuals to make choices about their own lives, including unrestricted bodily autonomy and self-expression, free from coercion and harm while holding people accountable who infringe on others.

## Detailed - Foundations

## Classless Society

Capitalist societies, like the feudal and slave-based systems before them, divide people into distinct classes with differing economic positions and social power. Anarchists highlight the power divide between the capitalist class i.e. those who own and control the factories, land, or housing, - and the working class, that is us, who have to sell their labor for a wage in order to make ends meet. Through markets, wages, and coercion, capitalists dictate how time is spent, how work is organized, and even who gets to live with dignity. The working class's survival is bound to the profits of the capitalist class, giving capital not just economic power but social control over every sphere of life. For anarchists, the solution is clear: class society must be abolished, no matter what it looks like. This would include the abolition of private property i.e. the private ownership of factories, businesses, land etc. which should instead be collectively owned and controlled by the workers themselves. Anarchists seek to abolish capitalism and replace it with a libertarian socialist/communist system rooted in solidarity, self-determination, and collective access to what we need to live and thrive. Only then can we reclaim control over our lives, ensuring that decisions about work, production, and resources serve everyone, not the capitalist class. "Anarchism creates an economic and social basis that fuses the country's economic and social life into a harmonious whole and guarantees every individual parity with everyone else and affords the maximum well-being to all. This basis is common ownership in the form of the socialization of all of the means and instruments of production (industry, transport, land, raw materials, etc.)"<sup>1</sup>

The anarchist conception of class incorporates not just the economic relationship but also the relationship to the means of hierarchical administration and coercion (i.e. the state). The state is not a neutral tool, it is a hierarchical institution that, by its very nature, perpetuates class structures, forming its own ruling class. "The state is and can be nothing other than the centralized executor of a class detached from the people, for the subjugation of a people disenfranchised and reduced to a dominated class."<sup>2</sup> "A whole mechanism of legislation and of policing is developed to subject some classes to the domination of other classes. The state is therefore the perfect example of a hierarchical institution, developed over centuries to subject all individuals and all of their possible groupings to the central will. The State is necessarily hierarchical, authoritarian - or it ceases to be the State."<sup>3</sup> Anarchists seek to abolish the state in favor of horizontal(i.e. non-hierarchical) self-management. "The class struggle created by the enslavement of workers and their aspirations to liberty gave birth, in the oppression, to the idea of anarchism: the idea of the total negation of a social system based on the principles of classes and the State, and its replacement by a free non-statist society of workers under self-management. Anarchism wants to transform the present capitalist society into a society which assures the workers the products of their labours, their liberty, independence, and social and political equality. This other society will be libertarian communism, in which social solidarity and free individuality find their full expression, and in which these two ideas develop in perfect harmony." Anarchists believe a stateless, classless society can only emerge through prefigurative revolutionary practices; by building structures, & organizing in ways that reflect the world we seek to build. This principle, known as "Means and Ends Unity"; insisting that in our struggle & transition toward a free

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<sup>1</sup> Delo Truda Group, "Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists," 1926

<sup>2</sup> Erich Mühsam, "The Liberation of Society from the State: What is Communist Anarchism?," 1932

<sup>3</sup> Peter Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchy," 1913

society we use libertarian socialist means, (organizing horizontal and developing structures of collective self-management) rather than adopting the hierarchical structures of state socialism that inevitably reproduce class society. "There can be no separation of the revolutionary process from the revolutionary goal. A society based on self-administration must be achieved by means of self-administration."<sup>4</sup>

## Mutual Aid

Anarchists envision a society grounded in the principle of mutual aid: a system of reciprocal support and cooperation where everyone contributes according to their ability and receives according to their need. Labour and social contributions would be freely and fairly shared among all, just like wealth. Mutual aid is about collaborative exchange, where individuals offer what they can, and everyone has access to what they require. In an anarchist society goods and resources are held in common, and all people share the right to use them freely. "The means of production being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the human race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All belongs to all."<sup>5</sup> This vision also includes things like healthcare, education, housing, food, and access to important utilities; essentials that capitalism turns into commodities, forcing us into wage slavery. Under capitalism, we must sell our time and energy to survive, to enrich the capitalist class. Anarchism abolishes the production of commodities for profit and replaces it with production for human need. Decisions about what and how to produce will no longer be driven by the pursuit of individual wealth, but made collectively by all people in the interests of everyone's well-being. We already do the work that keeps society functioning. We build and maintain everything, yet we don't control any of it. Capitalism depends on our labour but excludes us from power. In an libertarian socialist/communist system, we take back that control and decide ourselves what work gets done. No more luxury apartments while others sleep outside. No more wasted labour producing junk while real needs go unmet. Instead we engage in necessary work, shared and planned together.

Anarchism isn't a dream where everyone becomes kind, generous, and wise. It doesn't depend on some ideal human. It will involve average human beings doing average human things: getting tired, making mistakes, being selfish. That's fine. Anarchism does not require morally perfect humans. The point is to build systems that empowers all of us, one that incentivizes cooperation instead of domination. People are shaped by the systems they live in and capitalism trains us to compete, hoard, and treat each other as threats or obstacles. But people are also capable of care, solidarity, mutual aid and cooperation, capacities that are as natural to us as breathing. Mutual aid is innate to humanity, while capitalism distorts or suppresses these capacities, anarchism builds on them instead. "The mutual-aid tendency in man has so remote an origin, and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of humanity, that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time."<sup>6</sup> It starts from what already exists, the fact that humans cooperate every day, at work and in life, but under conditions we do not control. Without the profit motive, we depend on one another and build our lives on community interdependence where our collective

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<sup>4</sup> Murray Bookchin, "Post-scarcity anarchism," 1971

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kropotkin "The Conquest of Bread," 1892

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kropotkin "Mutual Aid A Factor of Evolution," 1902

goal becomes supporting the well-being of all people. "What is important is that a society should be brought into being in which the exploitation and domination of man by man is not possible; in which everybody has free access to the means of life, of development and of work, and that all can participate, as they wish and know how, in the organisation of social life."<sup>7</sup>

## Council System & Federalism

Anarchists oppose "liberal democracy" because of its hierarchical and capitalist nature. It "proclaims freedom of speech, of the press, of association... In reality, all these freedoms are of a very relative nature: they are tolerated as long as they do not contradict the interests of the ruling class."<sup>8</sup> It enshrines class structures, granting the capitalist class control over the economy, while wealth functions as political power, shaping policy, representation, the press, and education. Its hierarchical institutions protect politicians from accountability, which in practice makes "liberal democracy" a dictatorship of the ruling class.

In contrast, an anarchist society makes decisions collectively through the "Council System" historically also referred to as "Free Soviet System." (Soviet meaning workers' council.) The council system is built from the ground up, starting at the base usually commune level and expanding to higher-level councils in a federation. Higher-level councils are merely the direct expression of base-level councils used for coordination, not a central authority. At the base level, people gather in workers' councils & commune councils to make choices on issues that affect them using direct voting i.e. directly discussing and deciding on proposals instead of representatives. Only free and direct participation in decision-making allows for genuine self-management, unlike voting on representatives who wield power over us. "Representative democracy, however, harmonizes marvelously with the capitalist economic system. This new statist system, basing itself on the alleged sovereignty of the so-called will of the people, as supposedly expressed by their alleged representatives...who, while claiming to represent the people, unfailingly exploit them."<sup>9</sup> Through these councils we all can self-manage the communes, organize housing, education, the distribution of goods, or regional projects like environmental conservation, and collectively establish the commune's guidelines. Instead of a boss, the workers themselves coordinate the distribution of work shifts and tasks, the workplace policies, as well as the assessment and planning of production. Workers' councils could arise through the organizational frameworks of syndicalist organizations or through autonomous workplace assemblies. Communes/Councils are based on free associations, allowing anyone to join or leave freely, so long as they agree to the collectively established guidelines of the commune/council.

A libertarian socialist/communist framework utilizes decentralized planning to ensure that everyone's needs are met. Whether for shared infrastructure, fair distribution of goods, or complex production chains, such projects require broad coordination. "In the new system of production, the functions of organization will devolve upon specially-created agencies, purpose-built by the working masses: workers' councils or workers' administrations of factories and plants. These agencies, liaising with one another at the level of municipality, province and then country, will make up the municipal, provincial and thereafter general (federal) institutions for the man-

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<sup>7</sup> Errico Malatesta "Anarchy," 1891

<sup>8</sup> Delo Truda Group, "Organizational Platform"

<sup>9</sup> Mikhail Bakunin "Statism and Anarchy," 1873

agement and administration of production.”<sup>10</sup> When it comes to a complex division of labor, for example the production of a tram, the affected industries in the supply chain could decide to send delegates to a higher-level council in the federation to manage coordination and to find common solutions. Delegates convey the affected council’s proposal to a wider assembly, comprised of delegates from various groups within the federation. These delegates, unlike representatives, hold no personal power, they carry out council decision or tasks, following a specific mandate and can be recalled at any time if they act against the will of the base. Mandates, directly voted on, provide guidelines or instructions delegates must follow, keeping them accountable. At a higher level council, delegates sent from the base level engage in discussions to synthesize positions and develop proposals that reflect the will of participating commune/workers councils. The outcomes are then shared back with the base councils along with explanations and any implications for review and amendments through direct voting. If amendments are proposed, they are sent back up the federative structure for consideration. This iterative process ensures that the final decision is as participatory and inclusive as possible. The final ratification always rests with the base level, since in a horizontal federation power belongs collectively to all individuals, not representatives. “We consider the working people capable of building, on their own and without parties, commissars or generals, their own free soviet system, in which those who are elected to the Councils will not command and order us but on the contrary, will be only the executors of the decisions made in our workers’ gatherings and conferences”<sup>11</sup> The system works by balancing higher-level councils with the autonomy of lower ones and the direct voting on the base instead of representative democracy. “The council system when purely applied, creates no sort of bureaucracy, no special claim on the part of individuals, no comprehensive absoluteness of power.”<sup>12</sup> Because as an organizational model, the council system is fundamentally federalist. “Only a federalistic social organization, supported by the common interest of all, can free us from the curse of the political machine.”<sup>13</sup> The basics of the federalist council system were first advocated by early anarchist thinkers such as Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin and were later refined and expanded by a wide range of anarchist theorists. “A federal organization, from below upward, of workers associations, groups, communes, districts, and, ultimately, regions and nations – the sole condition for real as opposed to fictitious freedom ” - Bakunin<sup>14</sup>

“The forerunners of the council system appreciated well that along with the exploitation of man by man would have to vanish also the domination of man by man. They realised that the state, being the organised power of the ruling classes, cannot be transformed into an instrument for the emancipation of labour. Likewise, it was their view that the primary task of the social revolution has to be the demolition of the old power structure, to remove the possibility of any new form of exploitation and retreat.”<sup>15</sup> Councils must operate free from the authority of hierarchical organizations & parties that seek to integrate them into the state apparatus. Councils should exclude political parties as decisions are made through direct voting with independent delegates, not party representatives ruling over us. “The state will be replaced by a federalist sys-

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<sup>10</sup> Delo Truda Group, “Organizational Platform”

<sup>11</sup> Revolutionary Insurgents of the Ukraine (Makhnovists) “A word from the Makhnovists to the labouring cosacks of the Don and the Kuban” 1920

<sup>12</sup> Erich Mühsam, “The Liberation of Society from the State”

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Rocker, “Federalism” 1937

<sup>14</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, “Statism and Anarchy”

<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Rocker, “Anarchism and Sovietism”

tem of workers organisations, united federatively and self-managing. This system excludes just as much authoritarian organisations as the dictatorship of a party, whichever it might be.”<sup>16</sup> In hierarchical structures where a political party has authority over the councils, they inevitably centralize decision-making and suppress councils, turning them back into state organs. This process could be seen in the USSR, where the Bolsheviks subordinated the soviets(councils) to centralise power within the Bolshevik one-party state, ultimately stripping the soviets of their autonomy and power. ”The council system tolerates no dictatorships as it proceeds from totally different assumptions. In it is embodied the will from below, the creative energy of the toiling masses. In dictatorship, however, only lives barren compulsion from above, which will suffer no creative activity and proclaims blind submission as the highest laws for all. The two cannot exist together. In Russia dictatorship proved victorious. Hence there are no more soviets there. All that is left of them is the name and a gruesome caricature of its original meaning.”<sup>17</sup> The anarchist conclusion is clear: ”Everything for the councils! No power above them!”<sup>18</sup>

## Freedom & Accountability

Anarchism values self-determination as essential to its ideals, ensuring individuals can act freely as long as their actions impact only themselves and do not infringe on others. In an anarchist society, freedom of self-expression, speech, love, and identity is a fundamental freedom. This freedom allows individuals to live authentically and define their own lives without coercion. This principle of self-determination also means the recognition of abortion as a fundamental freedom, full recognition of drug ownership, ownership of firearms, the allowance of sports fighting, the recognition of both suicide and assisted suicide, etc. though we should implement systems to mitigate potential harm and ensure that choices are informed and non-exploitative. Anarchists do not settle for abstract or hypothetical notions of freedom, but insist on the real positive freedom to act, to create, to be, the freedom of actual and active opportunity to freely develop oneself.

”True liberty... is not the negative thing of being free from something, because with such freedom you may starve to death. Real freedom, true liberty is positive: it is freedom to something; it is the liberty to be, to do; in short, the liberty of actual and active opportunity.”<sup>19</sup> Or as Rudolf Rocker put it: ”For the Anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capacities and talents.”<sup>20</sup> Anarchists do not believe that everyone should be able to ”do whatever they like,” because some actions invariably involve the denial of the freedom of others. For example, anarchists do not support the ”freedom” to harm, exploit, or oppress others. Anarchism supports ”freedom for everybody, with the only limit of the equal freedom for others; which does not mean that we recognise, and wish to respect, the ’freedom’ to exploit, to oppress, to command, which is oppression and certainly not freedom.”<sup>21</sup> When individuals make decisions that affect others, they are held accountable for the outcomes, whether acting as an individual or as part of

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<sup>16</sup> Delo Truda Group, ”Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists”

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Rocker, ”Anarcho-syndicalism: Theory and Practice,” 1938

<sup>18</sup> Rudolf Rocker, ”Anarchism and Sovietism”

<sup>19</sup> Emma Goldman ”Red Emma speaks: An Emma Goldman reader”

<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Rocker ”Anarcho-syndicalism”

<sup>21</sup> Errico Malatesta, ”Life and Ideas: The Anarchist Writings of Errico Malatesta,” edited and translated Vernon Richards, 2015



a decision-making body. One's freedom cannot include to terrorize, violate, attack or harm others. Discrimination on the basis of ability, race, gender, or sexuality reinforces and perpetuates hierarchical power structures. Anarchists understand that we live in relation to others, and true freedom cannot mean diminishing someone else's freedom by harming them. "Freedom for each individual so long as he does not violate the equal freedom of others."<sup>22</sup>

So what happens if someone violates another's autonomy, infringes on someone, harms or even kills someone? How would a community defend itself against this harm? Since an anarchist society rejects authoritarian & punitive means like the bourgeois justice system and police, the response lies instead in transformative justice, rehabilitation and community defense. Transformative justice is a set of community based practices that address harm by holding people accountable without punishment, repairing the harm done to the individual/community and changing the social conditions that allow harm and injustice to happen. Anarchists aim to address the root causes of harmful behavior by transforming the material and social conditions that create it things like poverty, hierarchy, oppression, inequality, stress, and the systems that continually reproduce them. "It is the result of economic conditions, of social inequality, of wrongs and evils of which government and monopoly are the parents. Government and law can only punish the criminal. They neither cure nor prevent crime. The only real cure for crime is to abolish its causes, and this the government can never do because it is there to preserve those very causes."<sup>23</sup> But we do not believe that this will eliminate all anti-social behavior and as long as someone "violates the equal freedom of others... we must defend ourselves."<sup>24</sup> In situations of immediate danger, anarchist communes may rely on community-defense militias. Unlike police forces, these groups hold no special authority or privileges; they consist of community members who coordinate collectively to provide self-defense and intervene when individuals pose harm to others. "We must reckon with a residue of delinquency which in the meantime will oblige the mass of workers to take defensive action... by making it impossible for anyone to derive personal advantage from the detection of crime, and by leaving defense measures to interested groups, society can reconcile complete freedom with protection against those who threaten it."<sup>25</sup> Punishment has consistently failed to reduce harm, it entrenches oppression and pushes violence underground. Through transformative justice, we envision a system where offenders are held accountable in popular assemblies of the community and those affected, where we work to repair the harm done and move forward through rehabilitation. "Discarding every concept of punishment and revenge, which still dominate penal law, and guided only by the need for self-defense and the desire to rehabilitate."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Errico Malatesta, "Life and Ideas"

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Berkman, "What is Communist Anarchism?," 1929

<sup>24</sup> Errico Malatesta, "Crime and Punishment," 1933

<sup>25</sup> Errico Malatesta, "Crime and Punishment"

<sup>26</sup> Errico Malatesta, "Crime and Punishment"

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