

A New World in Our Hearts

A reply to “After Gothenburg: Where now for anti-capitalism?”

Anarcho

December 22, 2008

After the shootings at the anti-EU demonstrations in Gothenburg, the **Communist Party of Great Britain** (CPGB) decided to give its two pence’s worth of “advice” to the anti-globalisation movement (“*After Gothenburg: Where now for anti-capitalism?*” by Mark Fischer, **Weekly Worker**, no. 389, Thursday June 21 2001). This advice can be summarised up as follows:

“you will be stuck physically and politically if these groups and the anti-democratic anarcho-prejudices they embody are not vigorously challenged... Against anarchist provocations and hopeless confrontations with state forces.”

In other words, the globalisation movement must police itself and “challenge” the anarchists and other libertarian revolutionaries in it. Sadly for the CPGB, the analysis that leads them to this conclusion is fundamentally flawed. Therefore it is wise to analyse their claims and show that their position means the death of the anti-globalisation movement under authoritarian and bureaucratic rule of parties.

It seems strange to blame “anarchists” for what happened in Gothenburg. After all, while the media reported “anarchist” riots they also reported “red flags” and banners with pictures of “*Marx, Mao and Che*” on them. How many “anarchists” would carry such obviously Marxist imagery? None. The simple fact is that the rioters came from many political perspectives and it seems strange that Fischer, like the capitalist media, decides to concentrate on just one and use it as a scapegoat. Perhaps this is because the Leninists perceive the anarchists as the major political threat in the movement and so seek to undermine it by any means necessary?

Fischer is clear that we (i.e. anti-globalisation activists) “*have to be highly critical of the set-piece, semi-ritualised violence that sections of the anti-capitalist movement are ideologically wedded to.*”

Strange, then, that Fischer admits that “*all credible accounts of the shooting indicate that protesters were responding to crude provocation by Swedish police. A Reclaim the City street party on Vasagatan was threatened by a large contingent of police in riot gear. A smaller group of around five to eight police became detached from the main body and attacked the gathering.*” He argues that “*what clearly emerges from all [reports] is that the crowd acted first to defend itself against police attacks.*”

After presenting this evidence, he decides to ignore it and attack the “anarchists.” He **then** concludes, as quoted above, that “*we also have to be highly critical of the set-piece, semi-ritualised*

violence that sections of the anti-capitalist movement are ideologically wedded to” that and claims that “such provocations are elitist and totally counter-productive.” Since he admits the police threatened the street party this can only mean, apparently, that defending yourself is “elitist and totally counter-productive.” How strange. But why let facts get in the way of a good rant?

He argues that “it is urgent that the anti-capitalist movement now re-orientates politically and organisationally. It must turn to the working class, the only class with a consistent interest in genuine anti-capitalism and with the muscle to make it a real force.” This assumes two things. Firstly, that the anti-globalisation movement is not made up of working class people. Secondly, that anarchists do not see a role for “the working class.” Wrong on both counts. Anti-globalisation protestors do include working class people. Anarchists do base our politics on the working class, the class struggle and the essential need for working class organisation, direct action and solidarity.

He then makes an even stranger pronouncement:

“Something like the Gothenburg outrage was bound to come. Anti-capitalist mobilisations have confronted state forces in very disorganised and unserious ways.”

Yet this was a street party threatened by the police, not a “mobilisation” like Prague. It was also not organised or planned, but was rather a **response** to police actions (as he admits himself). Moreover, he makes no mention of the police attack on the venues people were staying and organising in the week running up to the demonstrations. As such, Fischer is forcing events into an ideological straitjacket from which only the truth can escape.

He moves on to attack Ya Basta. While it may escape his notice, we should point out that while Ya Basta are close to anarchism, they are in fact autonomists and not anarchists. Moreover, they are dedicated to non-violence direct action. The capitalist media portray them as “violent”, but in fact they are not (unless you, like the capitalist media, think people “arm” themselves with protective clothing).

He argues that at Prague, Ya Basta “assumed effective control of one leg of the protest, leading people into a four-hour stand-off with the Prague police. As the hours dragged by, comrades on the main body of the march were reduced to passive spectators while the lines of white-overall-clad Ya Basta activists tussled theatrically with police lines.”

In actuality, at the organising meetings held beforehand, it was agreed that Ya Basta would lead the yellow section of the march. This section had the near impossible task of trying to force their way, non-violently, to the conference centre across a very narrow bridge directly above the valley. This frontal approach to the conference centre was the most difficult and least likely to get very far, a fact that YB was aware of, if Fischer is not.

Fischer complains that “the protest had been split into three legs.” This was decided beforehand at the organising meetings. Rather than being “foolhardy enough” it in fact was very successful, fooling the police and allowing Blue and Pink blocks to get very close to the conference centre before the police reacted. As such, the only “foolhardy” decision would have been to have one march and for it to follow Yellow block’s route (what the CPGB and IS actually did on the day, with predictably dismal results).

He then complains that the “protesters were corralled into very tight spaces by the unrepresentative YB group.” In fact, the route decided upon was a “very tight space” and had nothing to do with YB. Geography, not ideology, was the cause. Moreover, it had been decided by the organising group that YB would lead this section and so it was hardly “unrepresentative.” Then, Fischer

claims, *“this organisation then spent hours frivolously provoking the historically volatile Czech police.”* It would be hard to get to the conference centre without forcing the police out the way. As such, of course, this would “provoke” the police — unless our “Communist” is arguing that the demonstration should have walked away from the conference centre or did exactly what the police demanded, it is hard to know how *“provoking the police”* could have been avoided.

He then states that YB were *“constantly haranguing the crowd to squeeze up to support their comrades at the front.”* This is, in fact, untrue. Given that YB were directly in front of the riot cops (plus their APC). The last thing they wanted was for people to squeeze up behind them as it would have meant them being forced against police lines. While the International Socialists and other Trotskyists were trying to force the march forward, YB were being sensible and asked people **not** to squeeze up as this would have turned them into jam.

Ironically, the reason **why** the CPGB and other were stuck had nothing to do with Ya Basta. The Leninists had put themselves down for the Pink section of the march but, on the day, swapped (without telling anyone). According to the **Weekly Worker** (no. 353 Thursday September 28 2000):

“Come the march itself, the damage was partially repaired by the decision of a majority of the ‘pink’ contingent (with the SWP and its international sections to the fore) to simply veer off the agreed route. This pink section then partially merged with the yellow to advance on the conference.

“Of course, it was blocked by ranks of riot police...”

Needless to say, the Weekly Worker did not make any suggestions what should have happened in Yellow Block. They argue that it should have been under “democratic” control. What stopped the protestors organising a mass meeting while they were “stuck” behind YB? Why did they not march to another block (as it was, due to the actions of the Leninists, a section of Blue Block had to go and re-enforce Pink block as it was under-manned, so weakening Blue sector in the face of police attacks).

That the protestors, including a fair number of Leninists, did nothing suggests that Leninist organisation does not promote independent thinking or action. If they were “passive spectators” then it suggests the failure of Leninism rather than YB who had announced exactly what was planned for Yellow Block beforehand.

Fischer states that *“it was disaster waiting to happen.”* A disaster did not occur, of course. No thanks to Leninists like the CPGB and IS.

They claim that *“most of the revolutionary left is guilty of tailing the movement rather than seeking to engage critically as Marxists with it.”* There is, of course, a reason for this, namely the fact that the “revolutionary” left had no idea that such a movement existed until it exploded in Seattle and on J18 in London. Then, as is usual in the history of vanguardism, the Left decided that the anti-globalisation movement was a good recruiting ground and joined in. They have since spent a lot of time trying to catch up and so, unsurprisingly, are tailing the movement. As such, this is to be expected — vanguards are usually at the rear of social struggles.

Part of this process of *“engaging critically”* the movement seems to involve attacking the structures and tactics which made the movement international news. It seems strange that Leninists are urging a movement to reject the tactics which made it successful and instead embrace those which had to be rejected in the first place to make a success, but that is what they are doing. In

other words, we are being urged to we reject tactics we know work and to embrace those which these new tactics were designed to replace. How ironic.

Even stranger, they quote a report from the Trotskyist **Abetarmakt** and note that it “correctly” points out that Ya Basta’s tactics (“*imposed with no real mandate from the mass of protesters*”: Fischer) can constitute the group as “*a barrier against the more active elements. De facto, they can become an extra row of police ...*”

How ironic. Who exactly are the “*more active elements*” whom YB are “policing”? Those who want to “provoke” the police more “actively” than YB’s non-violent direct action? In other words, the kind of actions Fischer condemns earlier in the article? Moreover, YB **are** protesters and other protestors had the choice in Prague of joining Yellow Block and finding another Block more in-line with their wants. Given that this had been agreed by the organising group and that people freely joined Yellow Block, how can this be said to be “*no real mandate*”?

Fischer states “*Right behind ya! is spot on, comrades – and that is exactly where you will be stuck physically and politically if these groups and the anti-democratic anarcho-prejudices they embody are not vigorously challenged.*”

Not that YB are anarchists, of course. Nor, of course, is it mentioned that Yellow Block was freely joined and had been agreed to by the organising group before hand. How this is “undemocratic” is not really explained. Perhaps real democracy is thousands of people electing a handful of people to tell them what to do, just as in bourgeois society? Surely not?

Fischer then argued that “*there is also a far more insidious form of subversion threatening the movement than direct repression – the danger of incorporation. A Guardian editorial draws a sharp distinction between anarchist rioters and the ‘thousands whose methods were more peaceful and whose case was more serious’*” Which, of course, is the position of Fischer! He, like the corporate media, draws a distinction between the protesters and the anarchists – perhaps, like the state, so he can justify their expulsion from the demonstrations at some later point?

He then rewrites history:

“The anti-capitalist movement is embryonic – nothing more. If it is not to be trapped into a sterile pattern of small-scale, dwindling confrontations with the police forces of various states, it must radically re-orientate.”

Prague saw 10 000, Gothenburg 25 000, Barcelona 50 000 (according to some accounts). Dwindling? Small-scale? No, far from it. The protests are getting bigger – in part due to the effectiveness of previous demonstrations. Of course, Fischer is right in that the movement must grow and growth means change. But we must ensure that change is for the best and does not unlearn the lessons gathered so far. Sadly, Fischer’s “re-orientation” will see the anti-globalisation movement turn back into the dead-end of Leftism rather than progress to real anti-capitalism.

He argues the need for a “*Programme.*” He argues that “*there are different strands within the movement. What unites some is hostility to features that – in their distorted way – actually express the progressive side of capitalism. The growing interdependence of the world economy, the ever closer links between peoples, the breaking down of the divisions between languages and cultures – these are phenomena that anticipate communism, a world community of associated producers.*”

So we have “communist pro-capitalism”. Indeed, logically, “communists” should go to these demonstrations to **encourage** capitalist globalisation and support “free trade” (which, let us not forget, was what Marx did). Needless to say, such a message would not be welcomed.

Most protestors are aware that “*ever closer links*” and the “*breaking down*” of divisions simply mean the imposition of US-Anglo-Saxon cultural, economic and political hegemony on the world. The protestors are quite right in struggling against this corporate lead banalisation of the world. It is not progressive in the slightest. Let us be clear, the idea that socialism will only come about after everyone speaks English and eats in McDonalds is one which most protestors rightly reject. We want a globalisation that reflects and protects diversity, not one that inherits a world made bland by corporate power. If the vision of the future is nationalising McDonalds, then (quite rightly) no one in their right mind will fight for it (particularly the workers in McDonalds!). We have to break with the capitalist rationality that drives the world economy, not embrace it as “progress.” A world community of associated producers deserves better than this and so do we!

What **really** “*anticipates*” the “*world community of associated producers*” is not the forces at work in the capitalist economy. It is the movements in **opposition** to those forces. We must create such a community in our organisations and movements today, not put it off to sometime in the dim and distant future. Only freedom and the struggle for freedom can be the school of freedom. As such, we must build what we can of the new world in current one and do so precisely to fight, and replace, that world. As such, our organisations must be decentralised, federal — free associations of free people, producing a better world today in the process of destroying capitalism.

He stresses that “*indeed, despite the gross distortions that accompany them under capitalism, without these trends such a world is impossible.*”

Thus the trends of capitalism make socialism possible. This perspective is common to Leninists, with Lenin himself arguing that socialism was just state capitalism made to benefit the whole people. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Capitalist structures cannot be used for socialist ends. The first task of anarchism will be the transformation of society to make it fit for people, not for profits, and that means rejecting capitalist “trends” in favour of new, anti-capitalist, ones. It is these trends of resistance that make a new world possible.

Fischer argues that “*we need a democratic programme that looks forward, that charts a path to genuine globalisation under communism.*” That is true. We need to discuss where we are, where we want to go and how to get there. We need a libertarian programme that looks forward and charts a path to genuine globalisation from below within a free society of free and equal individuals — **anarchist**-communism.

We can see the differences by comparing his programme to a **real** anti-capitalist one, to an anarchist one:

“An end to unelected bureaucracies – for a Europe-wide constituent assembly.”

An end to elected as well as unelected masters — for a world-wide federation of workers’ councils and free communes. For workers’ councils and communes based on mass assemblies and a federation run from the bottom-up by means of mandated, elected and recallable **delegates**. Against the state and the running of society from the top-down by politicians (even “red” ones) elected to govern for us. For workers’ self-management of production as the first step towards the abolition of work. Against capitalism and any kind of boss (even “red” ones). Power to the people, not to representatives.

“Cross-Europe organisation. To the extent that the European ‘super-state’ becomes a reality, we need common working class organisations with our brothers and sisters across the continent, up to and including a Communist Party of the EU.”

Global organisation. Regardless of whether “super-states” develop, we need common working class organisations which will fight for a free society. These organisations must reflect the world we want to see created and so must be based on self-managed workplace and community unions, run by and for their members in a federal structure which combines direct self-government with the widest possible solidarity. To complement these working class organisations, anarchists must federate together and strengthen the International Anarchist Federation and its member federations.

“For democracy... we must be aware that there is a huge democratic deficit in our own movement.”

For anarchy. We must be aware that electing our masters does not make us free. We must practice self-management and become used to making our own decisions on whatever scale is required. This applies for the current movement, the revolution and the future society. We must be aware that self-management, not representative democracy, in our movement is the only way forward.

“We need: Fully accountable, elected and instantly recallable leaderships on all our actions and protests. No more imposed leadership from small unrepresentative groups.”

We need to govern ourselves. All organising committees must be made up of accountable, elected and instantly recallable **delegates** who express the decisions of the membership. No more minorities who can impose their “leadership” on the movement – rather the movement must govern itself, directly and without new bosses (elected or not). Decisions reached must be based on the input of all and come from below, not imposed from above.

“Mass mobilisations. Centrally, the organised workers’ movement across the continent of Europe must make anti-capitalism its own, bringing its numbers, its discipline and its programme to the fore of the protests.”

Continue the mass demonstrations. The anti-capitalist movement must bring its numbers, its discipline and its programme into the fore of the organised workers’ movement. We must combat the trade union bureaucracy, its top-down “discipline” (i.e. obedience) and reformist programme with the self-managed rank and file groups and unions, based on the discipline of self-government and solidarity and a revolutionary programme aiming for a free world based on working class self-management of society.

“Democratically controlled defence corps. Against anarchist provocations and hopeless confrontations with state forces.”

Self-managed and self-organised defence by protestors themselves. For a **“federation of the barricades”** (Bakunin). For sensible responses to police provocations. Against police provocations and hopeless political analysis which do not get the facts right. Against would-be governments dictating to protestors what they can and cannot do. Against the separation of “defence”

from the mass of protestors. Against “defence corps” as these would seek to enforce the decisions of “leadership” onto protestors. Against a separated and specialised body which would soon only “defend” the (separated and specialised) leadership against the protestors.

Let us think about how Fischer’s “*democratic*” movement would work in practice, using the example of Gothenburg. The street party would be only open to paid-up members of the “anti-capitalist” movement as non-members have not elected the leadership (and so would be unlikely to follow them). When the riot cops appeared, the “*defence corps*” would have consulted the “*democratically elected leadership*” of the world-wide movement (as it would be as undemocratic for local leaders to make the decision as it would be for the protestors present to do so, as its impact would be international in its ramifications). Until such time as the global leadership had decided what to do, the “defence corps” would defend the police from “*anarchist provocations*” (i.e. any protestors who were not waiting for the decisions of the leadership and were defending themselves against the cops). Once the leadership had decided what to do, the “defence corps” would ensure that any protestors who did not agree with the decision would be stopped.

Needless to say, the riot cops themselves would wait until the process of consulting the leadership was complete, as would the protestors who could not act for themselves as this would be “undemocratic.” Everything would stop as people waited the decisions of the leaders who would make decisions based on a full understanding of the needs of the situation, of course.

Thus, in the name of “democracy”, the anti-globalisation movement would grind to a halt in bureaucratic inertia. The decisions which affected the thousands of protestors in Gothenburg would be made by a handful of people at the top. The same kind of “democracy” in Russia which placed the fate of millions into the hands of the Bolshevik Party Central Committee — whose decisions were enforced by the Bolshevik “defence corps,” the Cheka (or secret police).

Ironically, Fischer exposed the failure of his own organisational structures. He argues:

“The workers’ movement internationally must condemn this act of police terrorism. Our movement needs to respond to such outrages with mass protest actions, with 24-hour general strikes, marches, pickets and boycotts. We must all stand unequivocally with comrades on the streets on Gothenburg, whatever their ideological affiliations, whatever our criticisms of the tactics they employ.

“At least, that is what ought to happen.

“In truth, the workers’ movement is drawn up in defensive formation across Europe. Our leaderships are compromised, incapable of mounting an effective counter-attack against the new offensives of capital. It was the absence of mass combative working class contingents on these protests that allowed the tragic events to unfold in Sweden.”

The fact is, of course, is that the workers’ movement is organised in a centralised, top-down fashion, with power at the top, in the hands of “leaderships.” That these leaderships are “compromised” is unsurprising given the way they are structured. In order to be a “leadership” these groups have to have power to enforce their decisions onto the membership (as it would be “undemocratic” for workers to strike without getting permission from the union). They also seek to reduce their accountability to their members (which is easily done in centralised structures). This, by necessity, generates bureaucracy and, as such, “compromises” those elected to such positions. To re-produce such structures in the anti-capitalist movement will, of course, compromise it as well. We should seek ways of organising that do not reproduce the errors of the past.

Fischer ends:

“Gothenburg is a wake-up call to the anti-capitalist movement. We need new politics to come to the fore, a new kind of anti-capitalism. That is the way to mobilise millions to sweep away the rotten system of capitalism, its craven apologists and its gun-toting street fighters.”

The “*new kind of anti-capitalism*” and “*new politics*” are nothing of the kind. It’s the decidedly old (and rotten) politics of Leninism. The politics that introduced state capitalism in Russia and crushed the Russian Revolution in favour of party dictatorship in 1918.

The new politics have been created in the anti-globalisation movement. These politics are, of course, confused and incomplete. There are reformist elements and revolutionary ones. There are anarchists, there are social democrats. There are autonomists and, of late, Leninists. We must develop and discuss our politics, but we must not repeat the mistakes of the past. And in order to do that, we must have honest and accurate discussion rather than ideological inventions and distortions.

Anarchists are arguing their ideas in the movement and urging us not to repeat the mistakes of the past. The key way forward is not to ignore our own experiences of non-hierarchical organising and direct action in the 21st century in favour of the politics of a long dead German. Yes, in order to destroy capitalism we need the millions to revolt – not because we “mobilise” them but because they mobilise themselves. We need to take our politics to where we live and work and create a mass movement organised and run from below which creates a free society rather than just changing who the boss is.

Join with us. A new world is possible, but only if we start creating it today!

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A reply to "After Gothenburg: Where now for anti-capitalism?"

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A critique of a Leninist attack on anarchism after the Gothenburg anti-globalisation demonstrations of 2001. Shows the limitations of Leninism and presents the anarchist alternative to both capitalism and Leninism (i.e., state capitalism).

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