

From Riot to Revolution

Anarcho

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“We have seen how the Revolution began with popular risings ever since the first months of 1789. To make a revolution it is not, however, enough that there should be such risings — more or less successful. It is necessary that after the risings there should be left something new in the institutions, would permit new forms of life to be elaborated and established.” Kropotkin, **The Great French Revolution**

Anarchism is often portrayed by historians and others as somewhat utopian, having no real idea of how to get from capitalism to a free society. Lenin, for example, asserted that anarchists “while advocating the destruction of the state machine, have absolutely no idea of what the proletariat will put in its place.” The truth is, of course, different. Anarchists see the initial framework of an anarchist society as being created under statism and capitalism when working class people organise themselves to resist oppression and exploitation. In summary, the very process of collective class struggle would create the basis of anarchism.

Therefore, anarchists do not abstractly compare a free society with the current one. Rather, we see an organic connection between what is and what could be. An anarchist society would be based on the working class’s own combat organisations, as created in their struggles within, but against, capitalism and the state.

In this sense, anarchy is not some distant goal but rather an aspect of current struggles against domination, oppression and exploitation (i.e. the class struggle). Anarchism draws upon the autonomous self-activity and spontaneity of working class people in struggle to inform both its political theory and its vision of a free society. Means and ends are linked, with direct action being the means of generating combative working class organisations and preparing people to directly manage their own personal and collective interests. The struggle against hierarchy is the school of anarchy. It teaches us not only how to be anarchists but also gives us a glimpse of what an anarchist society would be like, what its initial framework could be and the experience of managing our own activities which is required for such a society to function successfully.

Anarchy in Action?

The events in Argentina speak for themselves. Popular risings there have been in abundance. After two-and-half-decades of IMF-backed free-market reforms, more than 40% of the 38m population live below the poverty line and 100 children die daily from hunger and disease. People have had enough. Millions of people have challenged the state of siege. People are fighting on the streets, standing up to those who express and exploit them. In Cordoba, a car-making centre north-west of Buenos Aires, workers protesting at government plans to reduce wages and apply other austerity measures, occupied the town hall, and then set fire to it.

Various governments have collapsed but in the lives of the working class, nothing changed — except for feelings of victory. In the streets the confrontations continued. The power they express, the power of mass direct action, inspires and will not be easily forgotten.

The question is, what comes next? Will riot become revolution? The answer to this question depends on what forms of popular self-organisation are being created. Luckily, such forms of working class power are being created.

The most exciting thing is the largely spontaneous appearance of “popular assemblies” after the insurrection last year. These self-managed assemblies are neighbourhood based on and run by huge mass meetings of thousands. There are currently 30 assemblies in Buenos Aires and

many others all over the country. According to the anarchists of the Argentine Libertarian Federation, the assemblies *“meetings are open and anyone who wishes can participate,”* and common to all assemblies is the *“non-delegation of power, self-management, [and a] horizontal structure.”* In the French Revolution, the people of Paris formed the directly democratic community assemblies called “sections.” Kropotkin pointed to these as examples of both the popular institutions required to make a revolution (*“the districts of Paris laid the foundations of a new, free, social organisation”*) and *“the principles of anarchism.”* It was by means of these popular assemblies that *“the masses, accustoming themselves to act without receiving orders from the national representatives, were practising what was to be described later as Direct Self-Government.”* A similar process is at work in Argentina. As one assembly moderator put it, *“here, no one is in charge, we are going to take turns.”*

Other forms of popular power are developing. The unemployed workers movement has played a key role in many of the revolts. It has been building for the last five years and in the last year it has helped force the government to introduce policies to aid the unemployed. Its tactics are to paralyse transportation by blocking off major highways in order to make their demands. They are called piqueteros (*“the picketers”*). Any agreements made are discussed by the participants directly. They do not delegate leaders to negotiate with the government. They make it come to the blockades and the people there discuss what they should demand and what they should accept. They have the same healthy *“distrust of all executive power”* which Kropotkin praised the Parisian Sections for!

There are attempts by workers to organise themselves. Throughout Argentina strikes have occurred. Committees of struggle and to co-ordinate the protests have been created. Occupations have started. In Río Turbio, the mine workers have occupied the mines. In Neuquén, the workers have occupied ceramics factory of Zanón, where a workers congress was held in December.

This congress saw almost 400 ceramics workers, teachers, unemployed workers and students meet to discuss the current events. The main organisers were the ceramics workers union (SOENC), the teachers’ union of Río Negro (UNTER), a militant unemployed workers’ organisation (MTD) and the teachers of ATEN Centenario. Members and delegations of several other organisations of the region also participated. After intense discussion on a multitude of issues, including the next measures to be taken in their struggle and the need for co-ordination of current struggles, a declaration was agreed. This stated that the ceramics workers of Zanón *“struggle for the nationalisation and the reopening of the plant under worker control”* and are *“mobilising together with the unemployed workers of Neuquén ... and with the teachers and government employees.”* They aim to intensify *“the co-ordination and unity between struggles with the aim of setting up a Regional Co-ordination”* as a step towards the unification of *“the struggles on a national level”*. They called made *“an urgent call for an immediate congregation of the National Assembly of Employed and Unemployed Workers with a 1 in 20 representation, just as was voted in the last Picketers’ Assembly in La Matanza.”* This would seek to unite all those *“that are struggling through democratically elected representatives voted in Assemblies within the workplace.”*

On Saturday, February 16, such an assembly was created when thousands of workers, unemployed and members of the popular assemblies, met in the Plaza de Mayo square in Buenos Aires.

Clearly, Bakunin’s prediction that the *“future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal”* is taking

shape. The ideas of anarchism are being applied by those in struggle. This is to be expected, as those ideas are just generalisations derived from past working class struggles!

Anarchists in Action

The anarchist group Organizacion Socialista Libertaria (OSL), the strongest current of organised anarchism in Argentina, is playing an important role in the struggles. According to one of their messages, *“anarchist militants have been battling the police since the morning in the Plaza de Mayo”* while the OSL have joined in marches to Plaza de Mayo together with other social organisations.

The OSL are encouraging the process of working class community self-organisation, with *“each militant discussing in his or her neighbourhood the best way to establish a minimal territorial organisation with the goal of defeating the state of siege.”* While *“governmental secret services are continuing to spread fear, paranoia and battles between one neighbourhood and another,”* the OSL have *“decided to start an ideological debate with others in those neighbourhoods where self-managed peoples’ organisations are present. It is in these areas where we will call on the other organisations to study what has happened and to develop a way of acting which will allow us to reorganise against the terror of the State and to organise self-management, or at least, the seeds towards it.”*

They are also involved in the unions, attending meetings called by the CTA trade union federation to decide on its actions. They are aware that the Trade Union leadership *“did not want to go out and agitate as they were afraid the situation could get out of their hands.”* The key will be to encourage any attempts by workers to organise independently of their leaders.

The importance of anarchists getting involved in the struggle is clear. As they put it:

“We must throw ourselves fully towards building people’s organisation, because if we the people are not capable of giving ourselves the society which we want and need, ex-President Menem is there waiting to be called, as a replacement part so that nothing changes.”

The need for anarchists to argue for their ideas is important. A process of revolutionary self-education is occurring in Argentina, as in any revolution (as Kropotkin stressed, *“by degrees, the revolutionary education of the people was being accomplished by the revolution itself”*). For example, one Palermo neighbourhood assembly participant notes that she was *“very surprised because there are people participating who otherwise never left their homes. My 70-year-old neighbour had never taken part in anything, but now she has such an extremist stance that it is truly astonishing.”*

However, self-education and self-liberation through struggle is a process, a process that anarchists can aid. As can be seen from many demonstrations, the protests have a nationalist tinge to them. This is to be expected, as the current crisis is the result of foreign domination (aided and abetted by the local ruling class, of course). It would be a tragedy if this working class revolt gets sidelined into boosting Argentinean capital within the national market. Equally, many of the protestors will be demanding that capitalism works correctly rather than seeking its end. Anarchists must clearly argue that crisis is inevitable under this system and, equally as important, that local ruling elites as just as bad as foreign ones and so nationalism is no solution. Anarchists must do all they can to argue that only working class self-management can create a decent society and encourage the struggle towards that end.

This struggle gives those involved a sense of their own power (both as individuals and as a class). It also gives them experience of managing their own lives and of organising their own struggles. This is a good foundation for building a strong anarchist movement in Argentina. In case we forget, one hundred years ago anarchism played the leading role in the labour movement there. The current events are producing organisations with a distinctly libertarian nature. Could these be the basis of a regenerated working class anarchist movement like the old FORA anarcho-syndicalist union federation? If so, it will not happen automatically, it will require the anarchists to take an active part in working class struggle and organisation. As can be seen, the OSL is doing precisely that.

Towards revolution?

As anarchists have long argued, the class struggle creates the framework of a free society. This process is at work in Argentina. How can the transformation of riot into revolution be helped? While this task can only be the work of those who take part in it, a few words of general advice can be drawn from history — the first steps have already been taken!

The practical basis of an alternative are already falling into place. The embryo of popular power, of a free society, is being created in the community and workplace assemblies. Self-management must be encouraged within them and any attempts to delegate power resisted. These organs must be strengthened and federated. As in every struggle, co-ordination and solidarity must be ensured.

Many neighbourhoods are organising popular general assemblies to decide how to carry the struggle forward. Their federation is essential. As Kropotkin argued, the French popular assemblies “*sought for unity of action, not in subjection to a Central Committee, but in a federative union.*” This was “*made from below upward, by the federation of the district organisations; it spring up in a revolutionary way, from popular initiative.*” The Argentinean ones have started to do the same, with some assemblies already choosing delegates who participate in weekly inter-neighbourhood plenary sessions (some of which draw some 4,000 people). Only by federating together the popular organs of self-management can the state be abolished.

Consumer goods have been expropriated by the people. The next stage is the expropriation of the means of production — the fields, factories and workshops — by workplace assemblies. They must be placed under workers’ self-management and federations of workers’ assemblies created (to co-ordinate struggle and self-managed production). Any attempt to nationalise them (as the Leninists propose) must be opposed in favour of socialisation — replacing private capitalism with state capitalism is no solution. Only socialisation under workers’ self-management will see capitalism ended.

An awareness of this need is developing. At the Zanón congress, a 22 year old worker from the plant stated that the each centimetre of the plant, each tile that was piled within the long corridors stood for “*the millions that we produced, and everything that the province gave to Zanón, and now that Zanón doesn’t want to be responsible for it, it’s going to be ours.*” That perspective has to be generalised and turned from a defensive strategy to an offensive one.

The building of federations between the community and workplace assemblies is essential. This is for three reasons. Firstly, to build working class power to resist and finally overthrow the current system by combining economic and social self-organisation. The assemblies and their

federations must have the real power to ensure they become expressions of the will of the working class and to provide a framework by which collective decisions, direct action, solidarity and self-defence can be organised. Secondly, to aid the creation and distribution of goods. A step in this direction would be the community assemblies setting up consumer co-operatives to facilitate the distribution of goods and their encouragement and support of workers expropriating their workplaces. Thirdly, to create a possible framework in which to socialise the means of life and place them under true common ownership and control.

In a nutshell: All power to the community and workplace assemblies!

The call for and subsequent creation of a “*National Assembly of Employed and Unemployed Workers*” is a positive one, as long as it is made up of mandated and recallable delegates and is complemented by local and regional federations of assemblies. Without constructive building from the bottom-up, any national assembly will be artificial, simply a mouthpiece for various would-be politicians and new bosses. Nor can it be a grouping of existing unions and party committees as this would simply be a top-down joining of various bureaucratic committees and not a real expression of popular self-rule. Any National Assembly must be an organ for working class struggle, simply co-ordinating and executing the decisions of the base assemblies. Only this can make the popular slogan “*all the politicians out*” a reality.

Any attempt to centralise power must be resisted as it will disempower the grass-root assemblies and kill the revolt. The seemingly widespread call for a “*Constituent Assembly*” is basically a call for a left wing bourgeois government and for the popular assemblies to be put under its control. It must be opposed as it is the death of grassroots self-management. The ruling class may try to recuperate the current struggle by means of elections to such a body, side-tracking the revolt into parliamentary channels. The left, by standing “revolutionary” candidates, will aid this process of transferring the focus of the struggle away from mass self-activity and self-organisation onto “leaders” working within capitalist institutions. This will undermine the autonomy and power of the grassroots organisations. Equally, the left’s calls for a “workers’ government” must also be opposed as this will simply replace working class power and self-management with party power. To delegate power into the hands of a few party leaders will not and cannot solve the current crisis or create socialism, which can be created only from below by the people themselves.

There is a need to co-ordinate struggle, but this must be based on bottom-up, federal, organisations. A call for a “*People’s Assembly*,” based on mandated delegates from the community and workplace assemblies is paramount — as is the awareness that popular organisations must not surrender their self-rule and become mere ciphers, stepping stones for a political party to take power. Any working class assemblies (and their councils) must be autonomous, free from the control of any political party or organisation (including anarchist!). All power to the assemblies must **not** become transformed into “all power to the Party through the assemblies.” Decisions must reflect the debate in the assemblies, not in the small, restricted, leadership of a political party!

Only self-organisation and direct action from below will ensure that this mass protest does not simply result in a new gang of thieves being placed in power. Only when the working class has organised itself from below upwards will it be in a position to dispense once and for all with bosses and politicians. The struggle against capitalism is building the framework of the free society that will replace it. The job of anarchists is to encourage these processes and show how they can form an alternative to capitalism.

As in every revolution, the “principles of anarchism” are being born from the class struggle, the deeds of working class people fighting for a better life. Argentina is no exception and as can be seen, the embryos of popular self-management are being created. We have a lot to learn from these experiences. The current protests not only reinforce the validity of anarchist ideas, it also allows us to improve these ideas just as anarchists learned from past working class revolts.

The role of the unemployed workers movement is important, suggesting that anarchists should seriously look at creating similar groups here. Equally, the importance of the community assemblies is obvious. Anarchists have long argued for this and we should apply this principle in “community unionism.” These would be similar to the anti-poll tax unions and such groups as Haringey Solidarity Group and the Govanhill Pool protests in Glasgow. Equally, the need for a libertarian presence in the workplace is essential. This may involve a pronged strategy of rank and file groups within existing unions plus dual unions to link up activists across industries. Lastly, the anarchist movement needs to discuss strategy and tactics in an open forum as in the conferences at Bradford, Glasgow and London.

The events in Argentina also show the direction the anti-globalisation movement must take — it must apply its principles of direct action, solidarity, self-managed self-organisation within everyday life and struggles. While mass demonstrations like those of Genoa are essential, they cannot replace the need to build strong roots in our communities and workplaces. Without this grassroots activity, the anti-globalisation movement will wither, just as a flower cut off from its roots. Demonstrations by themselves will not end capitalism or its imposed, top-down, globalisation. Only when the bulk of the population take direct action, organise themselves and fight for their freedom will real change occur. As Argentina shows.

The power of the working class in revolt is clear — it has managed to bring down numerous politicians. The question is, will it be able to bring down all governments and all bosses? That remains to be seen. The possible framework of a free society can be seen, will the Argentinean anarchists be able to encourage these first steps and help them become organs of working class power? Hopefully. As the OSL say:

“we will be there with our conviction that a different way of living is possible and that is what we are fighting for!”

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