

# **If voting could change anything... it would be illegal**

**Why Anarchists don't vote in Elections**

Andrew Flood

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**IT'S LOCAL ELECTION time and as usual politicians of all parties will be promising us wonderful things. It's probable that this election will also show an increased vote for the Labour Party. Yet it is fair enough to ask "what difference will it make".**

We are used to being promised the sun, moon and stars in elections only to receive cuts, cuts and cuts. Is this just because all politicians are liars or are there deeper reasons? Abstention from elections has been an anarchist tactic from the time of Bakunin. In this article we look at some of the reasons anarchists advocate abstention/spoilt votes.

The right to the vote was part of the hard won struggles of workers (and suffragettes!) over the last couple of hundred years. Obviously it is preferable to live in a parliamentary democracy rather than a dictatorship. Even the most flawed democracies are forced to concede rights that dictatorships do not, such as relative independence for trade unions, the right to limited demonstrations, a certain amount of free speech, etc.

However it is clear that none of these are absolutes, as anti-trade union legislation, Section 31 and the refusal to allow nationalist marches into Belfast city centre adequately demonstrate. The amount of freedom is set by how much the bosses need to give to keep the system flowing, plus the amount that is forced from them through the struggle of workers.

The real purpose of parliament is not to ensure the country is run according to the wishes of all the people, cherishing all their views equally. Parliament instead provides a democratic facade beyond which the real business of managing capitalism goes on.

The Goodman affair and the bailing out of Insurance Corporation of Ireland a few years back demonstrate how the real decisions are made in the boardrooms of the large industrial concerns. In the unlikely event of a government being elected which goes "too far" in the eyes of the bosses they are quick to use any means necessary to remove it.

## **BEHIND THE FACADE**

The best known example of this is perhaps the removal of the democratically elected Allende government in Chile in 1972. They had attempted to bring in a limited package of reforms and nationalise some of the larger American industries. The result was a military coup backed by the CIA.

The workers in Chile were politically disarmed by their reliance on a small group of elected deputies to liberate them. There was little organised resistance to the military and in the immediate aftermath over 30,000 militants were executed and 1,000,000 fled into exile.

In practise however capitalism seldom finds need for such methods, their complete control of the media and the reliance of the political parties on big business for funds is enough of a check. Organisations like the Irish and British Labour Parties spend most of their time trying to prove they can manage capitalism just as well as the Tories or Fianna Fáil.

They argue their policies are a way of avoiding strikes and any other form of class strife. They say their politics of class collaboration are more efficient to capitalism than a hard headed class strife approach of lock-outs and union busting.

To the bosses this is often a good argument, sometimes it is worth handing out a few crumbs in return for industrial peace. At other times when a serious crisis necessitates a driving down of wages or living standards they can always either force this government to implement the cuts, precipitate a general election or — in extreme cases — turn to a police states.

## **P.E.S.P. LOGIC**

This sort of logic has nothing to do with socialism. Indeed the current Fianna Fáil/PD government has been successfully pursuing the same logic through the Programme for Economic and Social Progress and before that the PNR. These deals mean the union bureaucrats actively stopping and sabotaging strikes in return for pay increases below the rate of inflation. So in a comparative 'boom' period of the Irish economy when company profits doubled Irish workers made real losses with regards to wages and employment and lost ground as regards the social wage (health care, education, etc).

The Labour and Workers Parties may have objected to parts of the PESP but they supported the idea of 'social partnership' as it is part of their strategy for government as well.

There are times of course when more radical reformist governments are elected (in other countries if not as yet in Ireland). These included Spain in 1936 and the post war British Labour government. The function of these governments however was to lead the working class away from the road to social revolution, to suggest the same gains could be made through parliament.

When put to the test however in the Spanish case by the fascist coup the government preferred negotiation with the fascists to arming the working class. In Spain the initial resistance to fascism was carried out by the militant workers of the anarchist C.N.T. who seized arms or attacked fascist barracks with dynamite and shotguns.

A similar example is seen throughout Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Russian revolution as the reformists in one country after another stood on the basis that electing them would prevent revolution. Vote for us and save capitalism. Unfortunately at such times such parties often gain mass support, this is why it is vital anarchists take up the arguments around reformism rather than assuming such ideas will just fade away with the revolution.

## **GOOD LEADERS?**

These arguments are common to most revolutionary socialists, but anarchists have another and more fundamental reason for opposing the parliamentary process. This process involves the mass of the working class relying on a few representatives to enter parliament and do battle on their behalf. Their sole involvement is one of voting every few years and perhaps canvassing and supporting the party through paper sales or whatever. A reliance on a physical leader or leaders from Neil Kinnock to Mary Robinson to sort out the situation for us.

Anarchists do not believe any real socialist / anarchist society can come about through the good actions of a few individuals. From the beginnings of the anarchist movement around the International Working Mens' (sic) Association (better known as the 'First International') over a century ago, we have argued that the liberation of the working class can only be achieved through the action of the working class.

At the time this argument was with the Marxists, now with the collapse of many major Marxist parties in the wake of the collapse of Eastern Europe it is mainly with reformists. The process of bringing about an anarchist society will either be carried through by the mass of the workers or it will not happen.

This idea is obviously the complete opposite to the parliamentary idea. We do not seek a few leaders, good, bad or indifferent to sort out the mess that is capitalism. Indeed we argue constantly against any ideas that make it seem such elites are necessary.

Parliamentary politics relies on voting for people because they are going to do the job (or some of it) for you. Even the best intentioned individual on receiving a position of power finds a divergence of interests with those she/he represents. This is as much true of revolutionaries and union bureaucrats as it is of ministers and prime ministers.

## **MAKING THE ARGUMENTS**

This brings us to the question of how should anarchists tackle the parliamentary system. How do we convince everyone not to vote? Perhaps we should put all our energy into anti-election campaigns.

In fact this is not seen as a major activity by most anarchists at all. Our aim is not to have elections where only 10% vote, for such a thing would be meaningless in itself. In the U.S.A. only about 30% vote in most elections and it is possible that up to 50% of the population is not even registered to vote. Only a fool however would claim this meant the U.S. was more anarchist than Ireland. If that 10% or 30% is still electing the government it might as well be 99%.

Our aim is to change society by winning the working class to the ideas and tactics of anarchism. This will involve the overthrow of the economic system (capitalism) we live under and its replacement with socialism under workers' self-management. Not voting may just be a sign of despair ("What's the point"), we want workers actively struggling for the alternative.

Our anti-electoralism is designed to say two things. Firstly that parliament is not the real seat of power in society. Secondly that the task of bringing in anarchism is for the working class, not some small group of TD's.

We will gain support for anarchist ideas not just through abstract propaganda but also by our involvement as anarchists in workers' struggles and demonstrating how anarchism provides the best tools for winning day to day reforms.

## **REFORMIST WORKERS**

Most of the active militants in the working class support reformist parties, this is an obvious fact. This has led many revolutionary groups to adopt slogans at election times telling workers to "vote Labour with no illusions" or "vote Labour but build a socialist alternative". We don't.

The problems with both these slogans are they still reflect the idea that change should be brought about by the small elites. They are normally defended by saying this is putting the reformist parties to the test so that they can be exposed to their supporters. This is a nonsense, as a brief look at any of the Irish left reformist organisations shows.

The reformist organisations have failed the 'test' on dozens of occasions. Workers vote for these organisations not because they believe they will introduce socialism but because they are seen to offer the best of the bad deal that is capitalism.

This is also presented as an argument for voting for the reformist parties. Is it not ultra-left to refuse to support these parties while they may be slightly better than Fianna Fail or Fine Gael? Two answers exist to this.

The first is that as the real decision making takes place in industry and not in parliament these organisations even in majority government can only do what capitalism allows them. Their only argument is to organise capitalism more “humanly”. We want to smash capitalism, not give it a human face. The sight of a “socialist government” implementing cuts and breaking strikes damages the credibility of socialism in the eyes of workers, as did the existence of the “socialist” police states of eastern Europe.

Secondly, it is a question of energy. The sort of effort that is spent supporting (critically or otherwise) reformist organisation is energy taken away from the struggles for improved working conditions, better wages etc. Elections do not take place in a vacuum in which nothing else takes place in society for a number of months.

A strike or demonstration of thousands of workers has more chance of effecting real change than 20 Labour or Workers party TD’s. In times of mass unrest energy pumped into reformist parties will be energy used to undermine the revolution. As so many Chilean socialists found, revolutionaries supporting such organisations are likely to find they are literally digging their own grave.

## **EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE**

There are occasions where anarchists might support individuals standing in elections. This is when such people stand on a single issue and abstentionist basis. At times this may be an effective way of showing mass support for something when faced with a massive hype against it from the capitalist press. Other forms of demonstrating support may be difficult due to large scale intimidation, victimisation of activists, etc.

One example of such an occasion in the Irish context was the H-Block hunger strikes of 1981 for political status. The election of Bobby Sands as MP for Fermanagh/South Tyrone and the election of two more H-Block prisoners as TD’s south of the border demonstrated a mass support for the hunger strikers. It undermined government and press claims that they had the support of only a tiny minority.

Such support must be on the basis of giving workers the confidence to openly come out and demonstrate, strike, etc. It is a tactic towards such mobilisations not an end in itself.

Problems exist with this, commonly the individual elected may take up her/his seat despite pre-election promises of abstention if elected. Even in the hunger strike case where those on hunger strikes could not take up their seats the danger of such tactics is obvious. The vote was seen by Sinn Fein as proof that a turn towards electoral politics was the correct direction for anti-imperialism to take.

The potential of a mass campaign at the time of the hunger strikes based on strikes North and South of the border was thus lost. The decision to support a single issue candidate would have to involve hard arguments on the subsequent direction of the campaign and could not be taken lightly.

Another instance where anarchists would not urge a abstention from the bosses electoral process is in the case of referendums. The WSM was involved (and indeed still is) in the Divorce Action Group. Despite the severe limitations of the 1986 referendum we still canvassed for a YES vote.

In the 1983 anti-abortion referendum anarchists advocated a NO vote. Of course we don't accept the conclusions of either referendum as final. We still fight for the right to divorce and a woman's right to control her fertility up to and including free, safe abortion on demand. Such things are democratic rights in themselves, something no majority should have a veto over.

What do we say to people in the reformist parties? They can not (and should not) be ignored. We say look at the record of your party in government or to the Workers Party when you supported the 1981 minority Fianna Fail government.

Look at what your party stands for. Look at the record of your party in the trade union bureaucracy. Look at the historical role reformist parties have played in other countries. Reformism has had it's test and failed one hundred times. Leave it, find out more about anarchism and join the fight for working class self-emancipation.

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