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Against Authority and the State

Collective Action

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Andrew Flood, *An Introduction to the Russian revolution from
an anarchist perspective*, www.wsm.ie
Errico Malatesta, *Anarchy*, theanarchistlibrary.org
Errico Malatesta, *Reformism*, theanarchistlibrary.org
Mikhail Bakunin, *Marxism, Freedom and the State*, libcom.org

In any situation where the working class successfully overthrows capitalism, one of two situations will emerge. Either a ruling minority will be entrusted (or more accurately will take power and claim to be entrusted) to make decisions on behalf of the majority, and will then claim the power to enforce those decisions where necessary, or there is no ruling minority and everyone in the 'workers state' will share in the decision making process, with equal access to this decision making process for all.

In the first situation the working class as a whole does not in fact rule, in the second there is no state. In either situation, the term 'workers state' is a lie. When authoritarian socialists trot out the lie of the 'workers state' they are ultimately defending the idea of minority rule.

We agree with Bakunin when he wrote (in *Statism and Anarchy*):

“But, the Marxists say, this minority [the government of the “workers’ State”] will consist of workers. Yes indeed, but of ex-workers who...cease to be workers. And from the heights of the State they begin to look down upon the whole common world of the workers. From that time on they represent not the people but themselves”.

Irrespective of the purported ideology of this or that state, all states are the enemies of human solidarity, and thus of any conception of socialism worth fighting for.

4. Further Reading

Anarcho, *Marxism and “Anarchism”*: A reply to the SWP, flag.blackened.net

1. Scope

A position statement outlining Anarchist Affinity's understanding on the state and related issues. This position statement draws significantly from a handful of articles by Mikhail Bakunin. We agree with Bakunin to the extent that we have quoted, but we are far from uncritical defenders of the entirety of Bakunin's work, writings or political action!

In our opinion Bakunin's utility lays in the fact that his writings synthesize arguments around authority and the state that anarchists were having with Marxists during the First International. It is these questions and criticisms made by anarchists of the period, rather Bakunin as an individual, that we find useful and worth defending.

This position statement reflects our understanding at the time it was adopted. It is our intention to develop, expand on, and refine this position.

2. The Idea of Authority

A critique of authority and authoritarian relations, practices and structures, are central to anarchist political practice.

Anarchists are irrevocably opposed to the “principle of authority”,

“that is to say on the ... idea that the masses, always incapable of governing themselves, must submit at all times to the benevolent yoke of a wisdom and a justice, which in one way or another, is imposed on them from above”

(Bakunin, 'Marxism, Freedom and the State“).

We seek to replace the “principal of authority” with decision making that is decentralized, directly democratic and participatory. For example, decisions about a strike should be made by

the workers on strike with all able to speak and participate. In contrast, decisions about the management of a river system should be made by and involve all people who depend on that river system, which may require a structure of re-callable delegates, meeting, debating and reporting back to affected communities.

Anarchists oppose “the abdication of initiative and sovereignty of all into the hands of a few” (Malatesta, ‘Anarchy’).

The idea that a minority should command and the majority should obey (however that minority is appointed and however the need is rationalized), always threatens to recreate structures of power that can ultimately solidify into a new class structure.

Authoritarian socialist critics of anarchism routinely misrepresent this critique of authority. The UK based *Socialist Workers Party* argued (in an article regurgitated by the IST tradition and it’s various descendants ever since) that “anarchism is generally taken to mean a rejection of all authority” but that “not all authority is bad”.

As an example of the “good authority” that authoritarian socialists claim anarchists reject, *Socialist Worker* argued that: “A picket line is ‘authoritarian.’ It tries to impose the will of the striking workers on the boss, the police and on any workers who may be conned into scabbing on the strike”.

This argument advanced by authoritarian socialists misrepresents both anarchism and the anarchist critique of the “principle of authority”. The picket line is not a ruling minority demanding from on high that the masses submit. A picket line of workers on strike, making decisions democratically and seeking to extract concession from the ruling class, is the antithesis of authoritarianism.

By confusing authoritarianism with its antithesis, the authoritarian socialists preserve the ‘principle of authority’ for their own use. The authoritarian socialists defend the idea that

in some certain circumstance “the masses ... incapable of governing themselves, must submit ... to the benevolent yoke” of the party.

3. The State

There is an inseparable relationship between the state and class domination. The maintenance and reproduction of any system of class rule requires political and economic power structures, legitimating ideology, and recourse to the threat and use of violence.

We agree with Bakunin when he wrote that “The State is nothing else but this domination and exploitation regularized and systematized”. There is no class rule without some form of state apparatus. The inverse is also true.

“The State has always been the patrimony of some privileged class or other; a priestly class, and aristocratic class, a bourgeois class, a finally a bureaucratic class, when, all the other classes having become exhausted, the State falls or rises, as you will, to the condition of a machine; but it is absolutely necessary for the salvation of the State that there should be some privileged class or other which is interested in its existence. And it is precisely the united interest of this privileged class which is called Patriotism.”

(Bakunin, Marxism, Freedom and the State).

The existence of a state apparatus in turn produces a privileged minority interested in its maintenance at the expense of the mass of the ruled.

Marxist critiques of this position may argue that it is possible to conceive of a ‘workers state’. Their position is mistaken.