

Social Democratic and Anarchist Antimilitarism

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

1908

Antimilitarism has the great honor of being the most hated and persecuted by the powerful and leading figures in society. They feel that anyone who attacks militarism is attacking the foundations of modern society. It seems to be understood that it is impossible for modern society to continue to exist without militarism, hence the great hatred that antimilitarism arouses. On the other hand, it has the consequence that even the Social Democrats are forced to take a stand on it, if they do not want to lose all influence over the workers, especially over the young. The popular universal formula according to which everything is made a private matter was not dared to be applied here either.

Are the Social Democrats not antimilitarists? They answer this question themselves. Bebel said at one of the party congresses that "there is no Social Democratic party in the whole world that fights against militarism as much as the German Social Democrats!"

Unfortunately, this is only self-praise, because in all other countries this party is accused of fighting militarism only very weakly and with feeble means. It does oppose the war and naval budget, criticizes the various excesses of militarism, but it does not attack its essence. In fact, it does the same with religion, form of government, prostitution, alcoholism, etc., presenting them all as consequences of capitalism, which would disappear with its fall. This is not entirely untrue, but it is also certain that the specific fight against all these things does its part to accelerate the collapse of capitalism.

In the last few years, the Social Democrats have also been forced to concern themselves with antimilitarism; despite all the hostility from Bebel and Vollmar, Dr. Liebknecht has not let this question rest and has published the little work on "Militarism and Antimilitarism" as the fruit of his work. This pamphlet is so peculiar to the Social Democrats that it is worth discussing it in more detail, especially where it refers to the anarchists and anarchist antimilitarism, and especially to me.

The booklet is of course written in German, which means it is highly scientific and solid; everything that is not German is naturally superficial. In one place it states that the German Social Democrats have done their duty in matters of antimilitarism, and in another it states that they have done "almost nothing" in terms of special propaganda work aimed specifically at future

conscripts. But if we look closely, we will find that the Social Democrats, like a snake in the grass, are only taking up antimilitarist propaganda “in order to nip anarchist antimilitarism in the bud.”

But what is such antimilitarism? These questions will baffle some, but the answer is: yes! One must gradually get used to seeing the difference between anarchism and social democracy not only in practical questions, but also in all questions of principle. Liebknecht states it as follows: “The social democratic conception (of antimilitarism) is historically organic; the anarchist conception is arbitrary and mechanical.” I read this scholarship with devout amazement, but it is and remains a misfortune that even scholarship cannot make untruths true.

Let us hear him further: “Anarchism works primarily with ethical enthusiasm ... in short, with all kinds of impulses on the will...” Liebknecht does not necessarily reject this, for he goes on to say: “Of course, it — social democracy — also uses ethical arguments, the whole pathos of the categorical imperative ... That, however, only plays a secondary role here...”

Take it easy, Mr. Critic, and console yourself: Even with anarchists! Otherwise, it would follow from Liebknecht’s description that both movements work with the same means, or at least want the same thing. So there is no difference and yet there is a difference.

How does the author accomplish this intellectual feat? Through the following achievement: “For anarchism, influencing the will is the only essential prerequisite for success; for social democracy, it is only of secondary importance alongside the objective economic stage of development, none of which can be skipped, even with the best will of the masses and a class.”

Very good. There is only one mistake in this description, namely that it is completely incorrect. Can one assume, with a little goodwill, that the anarchists are so stupid as not to know that economic conditions have to be taken into account? Let us leave aside the word “objective”; it is a poor choice, since we always perceive things with our subjective sense organs. Mechanical is the view that things must come about “all by themselves” and that man is actually just a tool without willpower, a small cog in a large machine of events.

Liebknecht further teaches us: “The fundamental difference in the basic views is also evident in the fact that anarchism believes it is possible for a small, determined group to achieve everything... Socialism is certainly also of the opinion that a well-qualified, determined and clear-headed minority, carrying the masses along with it at decisive moments, can exert an important impetus. The difference, however, is whether, as socialism does, one strives for and considers such an influence possible only in the sense that that minority is only the awakener and executor of the will of the masses, the will that the masses are mature and capable of developing as their social will due to the particular situation, or in the sense that a determined handful of scoundrels are only the executors of their own will and use the masses only as a tool for this purpose, as anarchism does as a true enlightened despotism.”

It is also very understandable, but always a proof of well-recognized weakness, when, in order to protect one’s position, one must completely misrepresent the opinion of one’s opponent. I would actually be interested to know where Liebknecht discovered this view of anarchism. It is well known that the Blanquists had such ideas, and that the Social Democrats must of necessity achieve this with their “dictatorship of the proletariat” since they can never win over the proletariat as a whole. But we know of anarchism that it is not about gaining power and putting oneself in its place. On the contrary, it knows very well that any movement that is not sufficiently rooted in the people is bound to fail.

Mr. Liebknecht also wants to convince his readers that the anarchists fight militarism as something independent and believe that they can abolish it without capitalism. Are we dealing with

ignorance or deliberate distortion in such a statement? The anarchists have always stressed that militarism cannot be completely eliminated as long as capitalism exists unimpaired. But the difference between the social democrats and us is in fact that we anarchists know that the elimination of capitalism does not mean that militarism is eliminated.

Here lies the core of the whole problem, we repeat it. The social democrats do not want to get to the root of militarism; they just want a people's army, similar to that of Switzerland, instead of the existing army system. They only want a change in form, not in essence. What the social democrats call antimilitarism are in reality reforms in the army, e.g., improving pay, food, clothing, barracks, treatment, making service easier, combating the mistreatment of soldiers, etc., etc., in short, what radical bourgeoisie also want. During the elections, the Social Democrats lure in the support of both the soldiers and the officers; they do not attack militarism as an institution. Only we "stupid" anarchists say: Even if all these demands could be satisfied adequately and honestly — even then we will still be anti-militarists!

Can you see the difference now? We are fundamentally opposed to militarism in all its forms, even in that of a people's army, even in the Social Democratic state of the future. They — the Social Democrats — only criticize the form of militarism, its nature and right to exist in general, leaving it completely untouched.

Liebknrecht calls the one tactical method used by the antimilitarist anarchists, namely to bring about a military strike at the time of war mobilization, fatalistic and claims that the anarchists wanted to conjure such a thing out of thin air. Perhaps he is even right as far as Germany is concerned, for, as he explains, "antipatriotic militarism has no basis in Germany and will not find any basis." The man of the 3 ¼ million party is mocking himself and does not even know how much! For we, the anarchist antimilitarists, are not affected by all these blows. Of course, if our propaganda were not constantly hampered by the ruling powers and the Social Democrats, many things would be different...; if my suggestion in Brussels had been followed and consistent antimilitarist propaganda had been started in Germany ten years ago, we would be much further ahead today than we are. For we know the evolution of an idea: it is only gradually that people understand it. But first of all, the planting of its seeds must begin, then comes the period of propaganda, which stirs up and awakens the minds; if the enthusiasm and the knowledge of its nature are present, then it will find its way all by itself, despite all hostility.

For Liebknrecht, my pamphlet "War on War" is very characteristic of anarchist antimilitarism, but he does not criticize it so much as dismiss it. A good, serious criticism would have filled me with satisfaction; but unfortunately he does not seem to be capable of such a criticism. Let us listen to his wisdom: "For him (namely for me), it is not the crowned kings who are the masters of the world, but the bankers, the financiers, the capitalists, and by no means capitalism as an organically necessary social order."

Completely untrue! I never said this. On the contrary, I explained that wars arise from capitalism and as a result become possible and impossible with it. Is it really absolutely necessary to falsify the opinion of an opponent, even if it completely agrees with what one claims oneself?!

But let us hear him further: "For him, reaction is the party of authority, which extends from the Pope to Karl Marx." I can certainly understand his bitter mood when he sees the context in which I use the name Karl Marx. But unfortunately he is only angry with the person who speaks the truth, not with the person who causes this unpleasant truth.

The unpleasant truth here is as follows: every party of authority — and this is the social democratic party just as much as the conservative party, differing only in the forms — must, if

victorious, have a means of power in order to be able to assert itself. This means of power for every form of state is offered in militarism. Thus, social democracy must in principle be militaristic, cannot be antimilitaristic. Aren't the financiers, the capitalists, the supporters of capitalism? They are. It is therefore quite logical to identify it with the essence of capitalism itself. Splitting hairs can never mean being right; sometimes it would be better to remain silent.

I said that it cannot be anti-militaristic in principle. For the Social Democrats, in their entire "fight" against militarism, are only concerned with the fact that militarism is currently in the hands of the ruling class and not in their own hands! This is where the fundamental dividing lines emerge: the Social Democrats want to transform the existing army into a people's army, the Anarchists want to overcome militarism in general and thus fight it as an institution, just as they fight the state. We can look to the future with confidence: the time will come when the proletarians of all countries will understand the idea, this idea of peace and culture, which is being fought most fiercely, not least by the Social Democrats.

But this unprincipled propaganda is already beginning to take its revenge. A pamphlet as harmless as Liebknecht's, which would appear to be extremely reactionary in a country like France, was even immediately suppressed and its author accused of high treason!

The three million-member party is powerless against all these flagrant abuses by the German state; it cannot support Liebknecht; it will quietly let him go to prison without revolutionary protest.

This is the curse of the evil deed of the Social Democrats, which has made a caricature of the workers' movement. It is we anarchists who must protect it, as well as antimilitarism, from becoming a caricature of its true principles. Antimilitarism must not become a caricature; it is up to us to found a healthy and fighting movement for it, which will be truly antimilitarist.

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In his book on “Militarism and Antimilitarism,” Dr. Liebknecht made lengthy, partly open, partly hidden attacks against our Dutch comrade Domela Nieuwenhuis. The latter published his reply in the Flemish monthly “Ontwaking,” which was sent to Liebknecht long before he began his sentence in the fortress. Comrade N. complied with our request and request for a translation of this reply, and we present it to the German reader below, with a few additions which N. added specifically for publication in the “Free Generation.” It should also be noted that L. never responded to this reply.

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