

Anarchism and Elections

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We are all used to the scenario. You don't see your local political 'representatives' for years and suddenly when an election is called they're all swarming all over your neighbourhood like flies around cowshit — the politicians and the wannabe politicians. It's a scene which is going to be enacted all over Ireland — both North and South — shortly as general elections loom on both sides of the border. Yet again we'll have the great choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledumber as to who we want to sit in Leinster House or Stormont for the next four or five years — even though we know that it's not really going to make any difference.

We will of course also have the candidates who tell us they're different — the ones who claim to be 'honest', 'anti-corruption', even 'anti-capitalist'. The only guarantee there can be about this election — as with previous ones — is that you won't come across any anarchists on your doorstep asking you to trust in them. Anarchists have always opposed participation in the sham of parliamentary elections and this time around it will be no different.

Democracy??!!

The main reason why anarchists are so opposed to parliamentary elections is because we are fervent believers in democracy — in real democracy. What passes for democracy in terms of how parliament operates is in fact the complete opposite. You only have to look at the recent USA Presidential election for proof of that — the person who got the most votes didn't win the election, tens of thousands of people intimidated out of voting because of the colour of their skin, ballot papers laid out so confusingly that some people didn't know who they were voting for — and of course the result being declared before all the votes are counted. Now this didn't take place in some backward 'banana republic' where they're only starting to get the hang of this democracy thing. This was in the supposed 'greatest democracy in the Western World'. Oh and of course almost half of the people didn't bother to vote at all. In fact George W. Bush was elected president with the votes of less than a quarter of those entitled to vote.

OK you might say, but things don't operate like that in Ireland. We have a very fair electoral process after all. We even use Proportional Representation to ensure that the make up of the parliament reflects closely the voting intentions of the voters. Does it though? At the last general election, every single political party claimed to be opposed to Ireland entering the NATO-led so-called Partnership for Peace (PFP). We're now members of PFP. I don't remember any politician promising at the last election that they would ensure that the gap between rich and poor would be widened, that funds would be diverted from much-needed spending on hospitals and education in order to give tax breaks to the corporate sector. Yet this is exactly what has happened.

Why is it that no matter what parties are elected to government, nothing really changes? When 'New Labour' replaced the Tories in Britain, did they set about repealing Thatcher's anti-union legislation? Did they implement a new fiscal policy which would reverse some of the worst effects of Thatcherism on the working class? Not bloody likely. In fact, if we hadn't been told we could easily have presumed that Blair was actually leading a Tory government.

Likewise in Ireland (i.e. the South) over the past decade there have been 5 different parties in government (Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Labour, Democratic Left, Progressive Democrats). Yet the change from one government to the next has been unnoticeable — policies, economic or social, haven't changed. Now there are two more parties waiting in the wings to get a bit of the action

(Sinn Féin and the Greens) but, of course, before they will be allowed to join the club they have to prove that they will be 'safe', that they won't try implementing any radical policies. Anyone who thinks that's an exaggeration has only to look at the example of how well the Green party in Germany adapted to the trappings of power.

Liars and Cheats?

Why is it that politicians ignore their mandate? Is it because they're all liars and cheats (yes I know a lot of them are!!) or is there another reason? Let's suspend reality for a moment and presume that in the upcoming general election in the 26-Counties a majority government is elected on a platform of imposing a 75% tax on the profits of corporations, and re-investing this money in housing, education and health. Do you think they would be allowed?? How would business and the wealthy react??

We all know the answer to that particular question. Before the newly-elected Minister for Finance would have time to even try out his Ministerial Merc for size, the owners of business and capital would have pressed the necessary buttons on their computers and transferred all their wealth out of his nasty clutches, leading of course to immediate total economic collapse and mass unemployment. Or if the new Minister for Finance was smart enough to have pre-empted this and put in place exchange controls to prevent the transfer of funds abroad, we would instead see a total economic blockade and an international refusal to trade with the Irish economy, with similar catastrophic economic results.

This is exactly what happened in Britain in 1974 when a Labour government was elected on a much more limited platform of reform. Even the threat of these limited reforms led to international capital effectively 'ganging up' on the British economy, and forcing a backdown by the Labour government. For more on this see 'Anarchist FAQ' J.2.2, www.anarchistfaq.org

The basic fact of the matter is that parliament is not allowed to be democratic — capital will not invest in a country or an economy which does not meet its approval. 'Democratically elected' governments can therefore be very easily controlled. Even the threat of a withdrawal of capital or a boycott of investment in the Irish currency would be quite enough to whip any government which was thinking along radical lines back into step. And, of course, as the globalisation of capital marches ever onward, and as communication technology develops and improves, this threat becomes more and more real. Not alone is the Irish economy, for example, (on both sides of the border) more dependent than ever on international investment but the task of removing that investment is becoming easier all the time.

Concessions

That's one reason, therefore to oppose parliamentary elections — parliament is not democratic, no matter what political party is elected to government their room for manoeuvre is extremely limited. Indeed it could well be argued that the only times in which parliaments/governments have conceded anything in terms of social or economic rights have been when they have been left with no other option. The introduction of the Welfare State by the 1945–51 British Labour government is a good example of this. The Welfare State was not conceded by the State at this time because of some paternalistic 'nice guy' feelings. It was conceded only because the State had

no other option. In short “..the dangers of not giving in outweigh[ed] the problems associated with the reforms.” ‘Anarchist FAQ’ J.2.2 paragraph 21

Those reforms that have occurred, those concessions that have been given by parliament have come about as a result of popular protest movements demanding change, not as a result of any particular politicians being elected. The problem is that when history is being taught, it is usually taught from the ‘one great man’ perspective. Lincoln freed the slaves because he was a nice guy! The welfare state was introduced because it was the right thing to do! Apartheid was abolished because De Klerk realised that black people were okay! The ‘great man’ theory teaches us that a particular politician/leader was good so he did a certain thing but then the ‘bad man’ took over and did something else instead. This leads people to believe that if they want change they should find a ‘great man’ and manoeuvre him into a position of power, and leave it to him to sort things out!!

The reality is of course different. As I’ve said above, the welfare state was only introduced because, even during a World War, there was a huge number of strikes and a great deal of social unrest in Britain. The ruling class were shit scared that if they didn’t concede something, the working class would set about taking over completely. As it was put by the Tory MP Quintin Hogg (again quoted in ‘Anarchist FAQ’) “If you don’t give the people social reforms they are going to give you social revolution”.

The point being made here is that while politicians and governments do eventually announce the policy, what that policy is has less to do with the people elected and more to do with the political and social situation in the country.

Put them under pressure!

Anarchists therefore prefer to spend our time helping to create the conditions outside of parliament that will force politicians and governments to make concessions to the working class rather than wasting our time running around trying to get politicians elected.

A good example of this – and one in which the Workers Solidarity Movement was centrally involved – was the campaign against water charges in Dublin and the subsequent election of Joe Higgins as Socialist Party TD for Dublin West. For a detailed report on this campaign see ‘Red & Black Revolution 3’ – on the web at struggle.ws

When a by-election was called in the Dublin West constituency in 1996 following the death of Brian Lenihan TD (member of parliament), the campaign against double tax water charges was in full flow. The campaign which had been built up over the previous two years was the strongest campaign of political resistance to any government measure for over two decades. It was a campaign which had great popular support and involvement.

Over 10,000 households were paid up members of the campaign, Council attempts to disconnect water supply from non-payers had been thwarted by community protest, their attempts to take people to court for non-payment had served only to provide a focus for popular protest. In short a campaign had been built which had rendered the charge uncollectable and unenforceable, 2 years into the campaign over 50% of households were refusing to pay the unjust charge and the campaign was very much on winning ground.

It was in this context that the Dublin West by-election was called, and that the Socialist Party (Militant Labour as they were called at the time) saw the electoral road beckoning. When a con-

ference of the Federation of Dublin Anti-Water Charge Campaigns was called in January 1996, a proposal was put forward by Militant Labour that the campaign should endorse Joe Higgins (chair of the Federation) as a by-election candidate.

Anarchists present at the meeting argued strongly against this proposal. We made the point that our opposition was not based on a distrust of Joe or a belief that he would 'sell-out'. Rather our principal argument was that we would much prefer to see the charges defeated by the working class organising on the streets to show their opposition. We argued that people had to seize back control over their own lives and that this was not done by electing some official to fight our corner. Empowerment would come from defeating the combined forces of the state, the government and the local authorities, by organising together and fighting the imposition of the charge.

As I have already said, a campaign had already been built which had rendered the charge uncollectable — a campaign which did not rely on any great leaders but which relied instead on the resistance of ordinary working class people. Our argument was that diverting the campaign into voting for Joe Higgins — or anyone else — as TD was in fact an act of disempowerment. The message the campaign should have been giving people was — YOU have defeated the water charges. By standing side by side with your neighbours and resisting Council attempts to intimidate us WE together have forced the government and the politicians to back down.

Unfortunately, the anarchist voice was very much in the minority at that conference and while our arguments were well received, the decision of the meeting was to endorse Joe's candidacy. And while he was not elected in the by-election (he took a seat in the next year's general election), his vote certainly was high enough to send shock waves through the political establishment. But the thing that was really terrifying from the government's perspective was the sight of ordinary working class people refusing to bow down, standing shoulder to shoulder and delivering clear and tangible evidence that Solidarity is indeed Strength.

Who makes the decisions??

This is one of the key messages of anarchism, and one of the key reasons why we oppose the electoral strategy. The very act of going into a polling booth and putting a number or an X on a piece of paper is in itself an act of disempowerment, it is an acceptance that someone else has the right to make decisions on our behalf.

In every situation in which decisions have to be made, there are basically two options — either the decision is made by the people effected by it or it is made by someone else. Capitalist society being what it is, usually our decisions are made for us by someone else. Being an anarchist however means refusing the right of rulers to rule (and no matter how nice or benign they might be they would still be rulers). The argument is simple — rather than choose who should make decisions for us why don't we use our energies to attempt to build a new society in which we can make those decisions for ourselves? Instead elections are based on the idea of getting someone else to act on our behalves? "far from empowering people and giving them a sense of confidence and ability, electioneering disempowers them by creating a 'leader' figure from which changes are expected to flow." 'Anarchist FAQ' J.2.2. paragraph 27

True democracy of course would be a different thing. As I wrote earlier in the article, we only tend to see our politicians when elections are called. Then they turn up on our doorsteps and listen to our 'problems' with such apparent concern that you would nearly believe that they care.

But that's all part of the game as we know — what they really want to know is 'will you vote for me?'. If they can get a 'yes' to that question all their apparent concern will have been worthwhile. The more senior politicians — Blair, Ahern etc. — have this worked out to a fine art. They portray the 'man of the people' image, shaking hands, slapping backs, even bringing the US president into the local for a pint. But the one thing these guys do to perfection is avoid having an actual conversation with a real person.

Mandate — what mandate??

Because at the end of the day elected 'representatives' are not actually representatives at all. Representation implies a mandate, a mandate implies being bound to keep your promises and being recallable if you don't. So while, people might vote for a particular political party/candidate on the basis of the policies in the manifesto, there is absolutely no mechanism by which the voter can ensure that these policies are carried out.

Take the following example. In the Irish (26-County) general election campaign in 1982, all political parties said they were opposed to the imposition of local service charges. Following the election, a Fine Gael-Labour government was formed and within months passed a law empowering county managers to impose a charge for services. While this engendered much anger among working class communities throughout the State, there was no mechanism by which those TDs who had broken their mandate could be disciplined or recalled by the voters. They simply had to wait for the next election. By the local elections in 1985, service charges were a big issue. Fianna Fáil fought the election on an anti-service charge ticket and won significant votes because of this. Immediately after the elections however their councillors around the country did a complete U-Turn and voted for charges. Yet again there was no electoral remedy.

By the time of the 1987 general election, Fianna Fáil had given a written commitment to the National Association of Tenants Organisations that if returned to government they would scrap local charges. You would have thought that this pledge would be taken with a pinch of salt but yet again people voted for Fianna Fáil on this basis. They returned to government, and service charges remained. In fact charges remained for the next decade until the massive campaign of people power referred to earlier in this article led to their abolition.

As an example of the problems associated with both a lack of a system of recallability and a dependence on electing the 'great man (or woman)' to sort out the problem, the service charges issue demonstrated quite clearly the shortcomings of parliamentary democracy. In fact over that ten-year period at least 3 TDs — Eamonn Gilmore and Kathleen Lynch (Democratic Left now merged with the Labour Party) and Emmett Stagg (Labour) — were elected to Dail Eireann on the basis of their opposition to service charges and ended up in a government which was taking people to court for refusing to pay them.

Direct Democracy

This demonstrates quite clearly what might be referred to as the democratic deficit — the fact that parliamentary democracy does not come anywhere close to real or direct democracy.

Direct democracy is advocated by anarchists as the alternative to parliamentary democracy. Direct democracy is based on delegation rather than representation with delegates being elected

only to implement specific decisions. Delegates would not have the right to go against the mandate of those who elected them. Delegates would enjoy no special rights or privileges and, unlike TDs or MPs, would be subject to instant recall and dismissal if they disobey their mandate. Perhaps even more importantly, direct democracy involves both local and workplace assemblies at which all those effected by a decision would be given the opportunity to contribute to the making of that decision. From local level, the assemblies would federate upwards through the delegates but at all times the power would be built from the bottom up rather than from the top down. for more on direct democracy see WSM pamphlet 'Parliament or Democracy?' by Kevin Doyle, pages 39–46

Direct democracy is the political system with which anarchists aim to replace parliamentary democracy, the system by which capitalism will be crushed and replaced with a new free and equal society. And the tactic by which this will be brought about is the use of direct action. Direct action simply means that instead of looking to someone else – politician, boss, bishop or anyone else – to act for you or to make decisions for you, you act for yourself. Direct action in the current circumstances means protest organised and controlled by ordinary working class people aimed at bringing about change.

This can involve putting pressure on politicians to bring about a change in policy, for example the way in which the non-payment campaign described above forced the abolition of water charges. It can involve bringing pressure to bear on companies as when groups of workers take strike action for improved pay or conditions. Its central ingredient is that it is “..any form of activity which people themselves decide upon and organise themselves which is based on their own collective strength and does not involve getting intermediaries to act for them.” ‘Anarchist FAQ’ J.2 paragraph 9

Direct action is, on the one hand, a means of fighting back, of workers asserting their freedom. It is also the most effective way of fighting back. When there are no big leaders, there is nobody to buy off. Working class history is littered with examples of movements which have challenged the status quo, which have brought thousands and tens of thousands of people on to the streets demanding their rights, but which have been defeated because all that was necessary to defeat them was either the imprisonment or the buying off of the leaders. With direct democracy and direct action, this is not possible. If ownership of the particular strike or campaign remains in the hands of everybody, it isn't possible for the establishment to 'buy off' everyone without making some concessions.

Illusions

There are many on the left who would agree with the anarchist analysis of elections and parliament. Indeed they would also agree with our analysis of direct action as the way to bring about real and meaningful change. They argue however that it is possible to combine both, that the limits of electioneering can be overcome if it is combined with direct action protests. 'Vote for us but have no illusions in the system' might be the slogan they start off with. And that's the important phrase – 'start off with' because ultimately this position must inevitably lead to compromise.

History is littered with examples of parties which started off from this position but which became part of the system. From Marxian Social Democracy at the turn of the 19th/20th century right through to the current German Green Party, we have seen example after example of radical par-

ties starting off from the position of declaring the need for direct action and extra-parliamentary action. Indeed they often refer to their electoral involvement as the least important part of their strategy. In every single example, however, the parties involved have ended up considering the gathering of votes as more important than the message. The revolutionary slogans and policies eventually get watered down in order not to offend potential voters, the elected 'representative' loses touch with 'the real world.

Pierre Joseph Proudhon, an anarchist who made a brief foray into parliamentary politics in 1848, described his experience thus: "As soon as I set foot in the parliamentary Sinai, I ceased to be in touch with the masses; because I was absorbed by my legislative work, I entirely lost sight of the current of events .. one must have lived in that isolator which is called the National Assembly to realise how the men who are most completely ignorant of the state of the country are almost always those who represent it?.. fear of the people is the sickness of all those who belong to authority; the people, for those in power, are the enemy." Quoted in 'Demanding the Impossible' by Peter Marshall, Page 244

Very soon, the party becomes dependent on both the media exposure and the funding which comes with parliamentary representation. Almost without noticing the more radical parts of the message are quietly ditched, and by the time the party arrives at a position of power not alone does it no longer advocate direct action but in fact such activities are denounced. See 'Anarchist FAQ' J.2.6 for more on this

Another argument often put forward in favour of voting for a particular candidate/party is the 'single issue' argument — supporting that candidate/party because of their opposition to the death penalty, support for abortion etc. The argument is put forward that if the candidate, on election, implements this one policy it will be a major advance. But again it's impossible to insist on the mandate being carried out. And what about all the other issues that this 'single issue' candidate will be making decisions on if elected. In Ireland in the past candidates elected on 'single issues' such as keeping a local hospital open have ended up supporting the government on a whole host of economic issues. One of the independents propping up the current government — Tom Gildea — was elected on the 'single issue' of television deflectors in Donegal.

New ideas

Ultimately anarchists support abstention from the electoral process because, in the words of Emma Goldman, "participation in elections means the transfer of one's will and decisions to another, which is contrary to the fundamental principles of anarchism." "Anarchists and Elections", Vanguard III, June-July 1936, quoted in 'Anarchist FAQ' J.2.5, paragraph 1 Rather than sowing illusions in the current system, we seek to win working class people to a whole new set of ideas, to a belief in our own abilities and strength, to the prospect of building a new society based on real grassroots democracy. This we do through involvement in the day-to-day struggles of our class, at community and workplace level.

For the Workers Solidarity Movement this currently means in practice involvement in our own trade unions at shopfloor level, in rank-and-file trade union campaigns against so-called 'social partnership' and for trade union democracy. It means involvement in the campaign against double taxation service charges (Yes, the victory referred to earlier in the article was short-lived —

now they're called refuse charges), building and developing the fight against racism and helping to build the growing anti-capitalist movement.

In all of these campaigns, in all of our political activity, it means arguing for direct democracy, arguing for and implementing direct action tactics. Because the means leads to the end, if our goal is a free and democratic society, our tactics and our methods of organisation must at all times be open and democratic.

This is our driving force and it is this desire for a free and democratic society that leads us to reject participation in the parliamentary sham.

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