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Anarchism, Marxism and Renewing Socialism From Below

Todd Gordon and Jerome Klassen

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2001

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New Socialist Group in Toronto. Comment by Wayne Price, a
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Federation of Anarcho-Communists (NEFAC).
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Wayne's comments around our discussion of the state are also disconcerting. We argued that the capitalist state cannot be used as an instrument of liberation and that, instead of participating in governments, radicals should build mass movements and institutions of workers' power from below. We were clear that "It is the construction of these movements and alternative institutions...that provides the basis for revolutionary socialist change." While Wayne elaborates on our arguments, it is not clear that we have any disagreement. We should have more concrete discussions on the nature of the institutions and organizations that could provide the basis for a transition to a stateless socialist society.

Because of space limitations, we have raised only a few issues. However, there is much more that we would like to discuss with Price and with NEFAC. We encourage NEFAC and the NSG to continue these debates and discussions.

how Marxists and anarchists who are committed to these ideas might begin to work together.

Our main disappointment with Wayne's response is its evasion of a number of the issues we raised in our article. For example, Wayne ignores our suggestions on engaging in joint work to build more class conscious activist movements. His one comment on the topic — "We need to work together where we can, and clearly state our disagreements where we must" — doesn't move the discussion forward. We'd like to have a more focused discussion on how we can begin to work together. For example, we'd like to discuss the following questions: can we share space in our publications for ongoing debate and dialogue? Can we hold joint public forums? And how can we work together in our coalitions, unions and communities?

Wayne also misreads or misrepresents a number of our arguments, which he rebukes using the same arguments that we made! This is most clear in his comments on our call for radicals to form their own political organizations. We argued that radicals need their own organizations to develop revolutionary theory, to develop strategies for intervening in the class struggle, to help popularize anti-capitalist ideas, to co-ordinate activities across regions, to improve accountability and democratic decision-making amongst anti-capitalist activists, and to rebuild movements. Instead of addressing these arguments, Wayne makes a distinction between Leninist politics and anarchist politics and insinuates that our notion of political organizing is synonymous with his description of Leninism. Yet, Wayne's description of the goals of anarchist political organizing is extremely similar to our very clear and substantial description of the kinds of political organizing that we think need to take place. We feel that we have more in common with the politics that Wayne presents than he recognizes. We seem to have a common basis upon which to develop our theories on the role of political organizations in activism.

Over the last few years there has been an increase in the influence of anarchism on the left. Anarchism is attractive for a new layer of radicalising activists, especially those working within the global justice movement. Many young activists are attracted to the anti-authoritarian and grassroots inspirations they identify with anarchist theory and practice. Many of these activists have, in turn, injected these same inspirations back into their movement work.

The growth of contemporary anarchism is related to the growing anti-capitalist sentiment amongst activists and their commitment to using more effective means of struggle. For example, a growing layer of global justice activists no longer identifies the enemy simply as "globalization" or "corporate power" but as "capitalism." At the same time, many of these activists have started to rely less on symbolic forms of protest and to engage instead in forms of struggle that build people's capacities to challenge systemic forms of domination.

It is in this context that anarchism has re-emerged. But like any progressive movement that seeks to grow and draw more people into its fold, anarchism needs to be engaged constantly in a process of critical self-examination and dialogue. Indeed, the same must be said for the whole of the revolutionary anti-capitalist left. The New Socialist Group, for example, aims to be part of such a process of critical self-examination. It is only out of such a process that a dynamic revolutionary politics — for us, a politics of "socialism from below" — can be renewed. We think a renewed socialism from below needs to be informed by the best of Marxism and anarchism.

The Past and the Present

The history of the relationship between anarchism and Marxism has been marked by a great deal of hostility. While there is a history of differences between Marxism and anarchism

that should not be obscured, their current relationship must be shaped by the demands of the present political period. Allowing debates over past revolutions to consume present discussions does little to advance the revolutionary anti-capitalist movement.

Instead, anti-capitalists need to think collectively and critically about the renewal of a revolutionary project. Despite the emergence of an anti-capitalist sentiment in recent years, revolutionary anti-capitalists remain a small, though committed, minority on the left in most of the so-called “advanced” capitalist countries, with scattered support on some university campuses and almost none in workplaces and unions. It is with this in mind that dialogue must be pursued, and the possibility of common activity considered.

First, we will sketch out a theoretical framework for building an anarchist-Marxist common front. We have two guiding assumptions: first, that the task for anti-capitalists is to build an organized and programmatically coherent social opposition to capital and to the state; and second, that neither the Marxist tradition nor the anarchist tradition has, to date, developed a complete theory of socialist revolution. Because a future revolution will not occur in the same way as, for example, the Russian Revolution (1917) or the Spanish Revolution (1936), it is our task to advance the struggle by creating a revolutionary theory, not based on historical scenarios, but on present political situations.

Despite our urge to move forward, however, we believe that both the anarchist tradition and the Marxist tradition contain important insights that must be appropriated if we wish to build a larger and more effective anti-capitalist movement. In fact, we contend that the development of a larger anti-capitalist movement critically depends on a synthesis of “red” and “black” theory and practice. This synthesis could emerge by combining some of the key insights developed by both the Marxist and the anarchist traditions.

marginal from the ‘40s to the ‘80s. Marxism has resulted first in pro-imperialist Social Democracy and then, after an attempt to start over by Lenin, in Stalinism, finally declining back into “private” capitalism, but leaving behind mountains of skulls and rivers of blood.

A new beginning is needed, and has already begun in the mass movement. We need to work together where we can, and clearly state our disagreements where we must.

Response to Wayne Price

By Jerome Klassen and Todd Gordon

We are excited that NEFAC (Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists) and the NSG (New Socialist Group) have begun to discuss and to debate the future of revolutionary socialist activism in our publications. Hopefully, these discussions and debates will strengthen our abilities to build a socialism from below current in today’s movements. We welcome Wayne Price’s response to our article “Anarchism, Marxism and Renewing Socialism From Below” (New Socialist, No. 32) as a positive step towards achieving this goal.

In our article we argued for the creation of a new revolutionary socialist politics informed by the best of Marxism and anarchism. We argued that the Marxist critique of capitalism and its call for activists to form their own political organizations to assist their struggles for workers’ revolution are important insights that Marxism can offer the anti-capitalist movement. We also argued that the anarchist critique of the state along with its commitment to direct-action politics and its sensitivity to questions of democratic decision-making and representation are important insights that anarchism can offer the anti-capitalist movement. Finally, we made some suggestions on

Furthermore, it is not enough to say that “socialists must be against the state.” For a long time now, radical Marxists and others (such as nationalists) have wanted to overthrow their states. They wanted to destroy the existing bourgeois-bureaucratic-military states. But they wanted to create new states. In China, Yugoslavia, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Cuba, revolutionaries overthrew the old states, only to set up new, state capitalist states — Of course, calling them “Socialist” or “Communist” or “People’s Democracies.” In Lenin’s *State and Revolution*, he proposed to overthrow the old, bourgeois state, and to replace it with a new, workers’ and peasants’ state, “a bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie.” It would then, by itself, “wither away.” All the effort was put into creating the new state. The “withering away” part was supposed to happen by itself. I am not saying that Lenin was a Stalinist, only pointing out that opposition to the existing state does not prevent revolutionaries from working to create new states.

Anarchists sought to replace existing states with federations of popular associations. They have sought to replace the state with methods of participatory, direct, democracy, with an armed, popular, militia instead of the regular police or army. They have advocated as little centralization and representation as is only absolutely necessary at the moment. The anarchists have been weak in seeing the importance of this communal federation serving as a center of power in opposition to the existing state. This was a major source of anarchist failure in the ‘30s Spanish revolution. It was recognized, too late, by the anarchist Friends of Durruti grouping. But the basic concept, of replacing the bureaucratic military state by a federation of popular associations is correct, as against the goal of a new state.

As the authors say, “neither the Marxist tradition nor the anarchist tradition has developed a complete theory of socialist revolution.” More bluntly, each has a disastrous history of failure. Anarchism has failed to make any revolutions and was

Learning from Marxism...

A great strength of the Marxist tradition has been its systematic critique of capitalism. For Marxists, capitalism is not simply about “the right to private property” or about “the rule of corporations.” While these phenomena exist under capitalism, they must not be seen as root causes of the system. As Marx revealed, capitalism is based upon a fundamental social relation between workers, who are obliged to sell their labour power as a commodity on the market, and capitalists, who own and control the means of production and who therefore employ wage-labour. For Marx, it is this social relation, a relation through which capital exploits workers to make a profit, which is central to capitalism.

Clearly, the way in which we understand capitalism has political consequences. For example, if we theorise capitalism as the “right to private property” or “the rule of corporations,” we could then theorise anti-capitalism as being “anti-property” or “anti-corporate.” This kind of analysis and practice ignores the exploitative social relations between workers and capitalists that lie at the heart of capitalism. It therefore ignores the political need to organise the working class to challenge capitalism. An anti-capitalist activism informed by Marxism, then, recognises the domination of labour by capital as the basis for capitalist exploitation and strives to organise the working class to overthrow the system.

A third insight of the Marxist left is the idea that radical activists need to form their own political organisations. Marxists have shown that anti-capitalists need their own organisations to develop revolutionary theory, to develop strategies for their interventions in the daily class struggle, and to expose broader layers of the working class to radical ideas. Political organising has also helped to establish long-term alliances amongst various working-class and social justice organisations and thus to activate and consolidate the critical mass required to launch

more sustained campaigns against capital and the state. Establishing political organisations can also improve accountability and democratic decision-making amongst activists. If these values and results are deemed important, then the new anti-capitalist left should start working towards developing more long-term and democratic organisations.

These three ideas – the critique of capitalism, the need for workers’ revolution, and the need for radicals to organise themselves into political structures – represent three insights that Marxism can offer to the anti-capitalist movement.

... and from Anarchism

Consider, now, three important insights developed in the anarchist tradition. First, anarchists have correctly insisted that socialists must be against the state. They have correctly argued that the hierarchically structured capitalist state cannot be used as an instrument to liberate the working class from its oppression and that as an alternative to participating in states and governments activists need to build radical mass movements and structures of direct democracy from below. It is the construction of these movements and alternative institutions (e.g., workers’ councils, independent media) that provides the basis for revolutionary socialist change.

A second anarchist insight that needs highlighting is a dedication to direct action politics. Instead of pleading with the state, employers, and other representatives of the ruling class, anarchists are known for taking direct action to win their short-term objectives. However, as anarchists have demonstrated, direct action can win not only short-term goals but, when organised with a view to building mass movements, it can also help to strengthen the capacities and powers of the oppressed that will be needed to establish a democratic and self-regulating society in the future. Direct action thus becomes the method for

be elected to a bourgeois parliament nor to seize power during a revolution – that is, it is not a party. As a minority, it opposes the servility of the mass, and seeks to persuade people to give up their faith in bosses and rulers. In the course of mass struggles, it openly seeks to promote self-reliance and self-organization. It consistently opposes those political tendencies which try to mislead the movements into reliance on new or old “strong leaders.”

This leads the authors to praise anarchists for being “against the state...[T]he hierarchically structured capitalist state cannot be used...to liberate the working class.” One long-time dispute between the anarchist and the Marxist movements has been whether to run in elections. Marx and Engels argued strongly for this; Lenin denounced the “infantile leftists” in the Communist movement who rejected electoralism. Most Marxists have agreed (except for some, such as William Morris or those “infantile leftists”). Anarchists have mostly felt that the electoral system is corrupting for any radical movement. They do not believe that it is good for people to send someone to Congress to be political “for” them. Nor have they believed that there is a “parliamentary [electoral] road to power.” Considering what the Republicans did to prevent Al Gore from being elected, imagine what both Republicans and Democrats would do to prevent a radical socialist party from being elected!

The dismal histories of the Social Democratic parties and the West European Communist parties support this anarchist belief. So does the even briefer electoral history of the German Green party (which has rapidly gone from being nearly anarchist to being lap dogs for German imperialism). What is not clear, to me anyway, is where the authors stand on this vital issue. If they reject the capitalist state as an instrument of liberation, as they say, and advocate mass direction action, then do they reject electoralism as a strategy? They do not give their position.

logical balance. This criticism has much truth in it, but it does not contradict the continuing importance of the class struggle.

However, the heart of Gordon and Klassen's paper is its coverage of what is usually discussed under the headings of "state" and "party." It lists as an "insight of the Marxist left...that radical activists need to form their own political organizations." This would be a relatively homogeneous organization, formed around an agreed-upon political program, as opposed to fairly heterogeneous, mass organizations, such as unions, workers' councils, or community organizations. Thus a radical organization is composed only of those who agree with its radical program, while a union is composed of everyone who works in a particular industry. This is a response to the objective reality that oppressed people come to revolutionary politics in layers, first a minority, then some more, and some more, rather than all at once. The minority which "first" comes to revolutionary politics needs to organize itself to further the process of others changing their consciousness.

This is consistent with Lenin's concept of the vanguard party, but it also fits in with the pro-organizational tendency within anarchism. That includes the early Bakuninists, the Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, the Spanish FAI with its federation of affinity groups, and the current Platformist tendency within international anarchism. The difference between the Leninist and anarchist conceptions is that Leninists centre their politics around the party (supposedly representing the real interests of the workers). The whole point of their politics is to build a centralized revolutionary party and to put it into power. Its relation to mass organizations, such as unions and workers' councils, is instrumental. Support for the mass organizations is only a method of putting the party into power.

On the other hand, the anarchist political organization exists only to promote the mass organizations. Its members may be elected to union or council positions, but it does not aim to

activism because it builds the political consciousness and social capacities required for creating a self-managing society.

This commitment to direct action is connected to the larger anarchist sensitivity towards the concrete processes of struggle. According to Barbara Epstein, anarchism "has brought [to movements] an insistence on equality and democracy, a resistance to compromise of principle for the sake of political expediency. Anarchism has been associated with efforts to put the values of the movement into practice and to create communities governed by these values. Anarchism has also been associated with political theatre and art, with creativity as an element of political practice. It has insisted that radical politics not be dreary." By valuing diversity and insisting on egalitarian methods of organising, anarchism has also become a pole of attraction for many feminists and anti-racists.

These three insights – the critique of the state, the commitment to direct-action politics, and the sensitivity to the concrete processes of activism – represent three insights that anarchism can offer the budding anti-capitalist movement. It is the authors' belief that the future of anti-capitalist activism depends on uniting in practice both the Marxist and anarchist insights mentioned above.

Revolutionary Socialism Today

This practice must begin with an honest assessment of the state of revolutionary politics. Currently, the revolutionary anti-capitalist perspective is still very much in the minority within the movement. Injecting an anti-capitalist politics into our movements must thus become a more consistent part of our work. We need to be the "loyal" but radical left wing of the movement, consistently challenging ideas that global capitalism can be reformed or that mass direct action isn't a "legitimate" form of protest.

To do all of these things effectively is very difficult. Anarchists and Marxists should therefore consider engaging in joint work. An anti-capitalist common front could involve such things as developing collective strategies for intervening in the movement and holding joint public forums for spreading our ideas. We may also want to share space in our publications for constructive dialogue. Such collective work, aimed at rebuilding a revolutionary anti-capitalist consciousness amongst activists today, could help to renew the revolutionary anti-capitalist theoretical tradition and thus lead to a more serious and constructive engagement between Marxist and anarchist ideas.

The march organised by CLAC (Convergence of Anti-Capitalist Struggles) against the Summit of the Americas in Quebec City last April, which included both anarchists and Marxists, is one example of revolutionaries from different traditions collectively promoting anti-capitalism. The Ontario Common Front and the emerging movement against racism and war are other places where anti-capitalists from different traditions are active. But, as radicals in these coalitions we need to do more than simply be active next to one another. We need to begin considering ways to collectively build a broad movement that can challenge reformist analyses, inspire militant mass action, and expose new layers of people to anti-capitalist ideas.

The suggestions offered here should be seen as possible first steps to rebuilding revolutionary socialist politics. If we're to avoid the pitfalls of the past, we must be patient and treat the renewal of a revolutionary project as a process, and not as something that will take place overnight. Hopefully, our shared commitment to the radical transformation of capitalism can help to break down the walls currently dividing the various socialist traditions so that we can struggle to ensure that another world is not only possible, but guaranteed.

Comments on Gordon and Klassen's "Anarchism, Marxism, and Renewing Socialism From Below"

By Wayne Price

The October-November 2001 issue of *New Socialist* included an article by Todd Gordon and Jerome Klassen entitled "Anarchism, Marxism and Renewing Socialism from Below." The editors of *New Socialist* are pleased to publish a reply from Wayne Price on behalf of the Northeastern Federation of Anarcho-Communists.

This is a response to the brief essay by two members of the Canadian New Socialist Group. They propose greater practical cooperation between anarchists and Marxists, forming "an anti-capitalist common front." They also propose a theoretical dialogue. This may lead to eventual merger, "a synthesis of 'red' and 'black' theory and practice." They base this on the "politics of 'socialism from below,'" a term raised by the Marxist Hal Draper (who was a vehement opponent of anarchism). They assert that there are "key insights" to be learned from both Marxism and anarchism, and that followers of each tradition can learn much from the other.

Marxism, they point out, centers its social and economic analysis in the workers' role in the process of production. Politically it focuses on the effort "to organize the working class to overthrow the system." Most anarchists have long agreed with this — especially, but not only, in the anarcho-syndicalist tradition. Both Marxism and anarcho-syndicalism have been criticized for downplaying other struggles, such as that of women, of oppressed races and nations, of gays and lesbians, or for eco-