

**Review: *International Socialist Review* on
“Contemporary Anarchism”**

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Review: *International Socialist Review* on “Contemporary Anarchism”

The word “anarchism” is a rather vague word that covers such a wide variety of political views and approaches it is often hard to see how they have anything in common. This means it is also probably not very productive to produce “critiques” of anarchism that lump the many different viewpoints together. This problem is on display in the most recent critique of “contemporary anarchism” offered up by the International Socialist Organization in their magazine *ISR*.⁽¹⁾ A weakness of the article is that it offers only brief pit stops at the various anarchist or libertarian socialist tendencies.

Unlike some previous ISO critiques, this article, written by Eric Kerl, does make an effort to discuss the historically dominant form of libertarian socialist politics — revolutionary syndicalism and, in general, forms of libertarian socialism oriented to working class struggle and mass organizing. But its treatment is superficial.

Syndicalism & Self-emancipation

A problem with Kerl’s discussion of revolutionary syndicalism is that he never says what it is. This is particularly relevant to our organization, Workers Solidarity Alliance, which describes itself as a “social anarchist organization in the syndicalist tradition.” (I use the terms “social anarchism” and “libertarian socialism” interchangeably.)

Libertarian (or anarcho-) syndicalism is based on the principle that “the emancipation of the working class is the work of the workers themselves.” This means workers need to have a movement they control in order to be able to change the society and gain power.

Syndicalism is both program and strategy. The goal of syndicalism is the creation of a form of self-managed socialism where workers manage the industries, the land and means of production are owned by the whole society, and the old hierarchical government apparatus is replaced with a new form of popular power — rooted in the direct democracy of assemblies in workplaces and neighborhoods. The profit system would be replaced by production for direct benefit.

To escape the present system of oppression and exploitation, syndicalists advocate for the development of a certain kind of labor movement — controlled by its members, works to widen solidarity, looks out for the interests of the working class as a whole, extends a hand across borders to coordinate struggles with workers in other countries, opposes racism and sexism, rejects “partnership” with the employers, remains independent of the political parties and professional politicians, rejects the imperialist policy of the American federal state, and works to develop an alliance with other social movements.

⁽¹⁾ “Contemporary Anarchism,” July-August 2010, p. 38

Although syndicalism of the early 1900s was focused on struggles at the point of production, libertarian socialism's emphasis on mass struggle can also be applied to struggle and organizing in the community. This is why Lucien van der Walt and Michael Schmidt describe this tradition as "mass anarchism" in their recent book *Black Flame*.

Syndicalism is an alternative to the Leninist strategy of a political party capturing state power, and then implementing its program top-down through the hierarchies of the state. In our view, this would lead inevitably to the empowerment of a bureaucratic class. The working class would continue to be dominated and exploited.

Kerl states his agreement with the principle of "workers self-emancipation" but fails to acknowledge that this principle is central also for libertarian socialism. I think this leads him to misunderstand "prefigurative politics." For revolutionary syndicalists, the development of a mass workers movement where the organizations and struggles are "self-managed" by the workers themselves is "prefigurative" of a society self-managed by the working class. This is why the IWW spoke of "building the new society in the shell of the old."

Moreover, it's hard to see how a socialism based on direct, democratic workers' self-management of industry and society could come about if these practices are not first developed and gain deep support within the working class. Only if the working class becomes used to running its own organizations is it less likely to lead to "condescending saviors" ruling over us.

After discussing *Black Flame's* emphasis on syndicalism, Kerl objects by saying: "anarchism can't be reduced to its class struggle wing." The problem here is that Kerl is falling back on the ISO's fallacious tendency to group together all those who call themselves "anarchists"...as if they were all singing the same song. The authors of *Black Flame* don't say that mass/class struggle social anarchism is the only form of anarchism. What they do say, and what we say, is that support for syndicalism is based on an orientation to mass struggles of the working class and oppressed...and this is central to *our* social anarchism.

Eric Kerl's article offers no criticism of revolutionary syndicalism as a strategy. Kerl's only comment is that syndicalism is broader than anarchism because some revolutionary syndicalists have been Marxists. Examples are the IWW's "Big Bill" Haywood or Antonio Gramsci during the mass upheavals in Italy in 1919-20. When they were syndicalists, both Haywood and Gramsci were in fact **libertarian** Marxists, not (yet) advocates of the sort of Leninist Marxism advocated by the ISO. Libertarian socialist ideas in fact had significant influence in the left-wing of various socialist parties in that era.

As Carl Levy documents in *Gramsci and the Anarchists*, the Italian Socialist Party was highly influenced by libertarian socialist ideas. This is why it was possible for Gramsci's branch of the party to work closely with the social anarchist Turin Libertarian Group. The factory council movement built in Turin in 1918-20 — a radical shop stewards movement based on workplace assemblies — was based on this alliance. The construction of a "self-managing" worker mass movement was itself a living application of libertarian socialist ideas.

Kerl is trying to draw a hard and fast barrier between "Marxism" and libertarian socialism...as if the ISO's Leninist brand of Marxism is the only choice for people who find value in Marx's ideas. In fact there has been an historical two-way street of influence between Marxism and anarchism. Mark Leier's sympathetic biography of Michael Bakunin argues that there was a substantial area of agreement between Bakunin and Marx...more than people usually realize.

In the wake of the Russian revolution, many of the libertarian Marxist syndicalists like Haywood and Gramsci did gravitate to Leninism. In an earlier *ISR* article, ISOer Lance Selfa put it this way:

“In a period when real world, revolutionary events put anarchist theories to the test, the theories came up short. That was why one group of anarchists whose libertarian ideas were most connected to workers’ struggles—people like Victor Serge, Alfred Rosmer, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Lucy Parsons, and Big Bill Haywood—actually left the ranks of anarchists and joined the Communist Parties. They, like thousands of rank-and-file IWW members, came to the conclusion that only collective, mass struggle could attain socialism and that only a revolutionary party could organize that struggle.” (April 2004)

Of course, “collective mass struggle” is what syndicalism and working class-based libertarian socialism is all about. Nor do we reject revolutionary political organization.

Before he became a Bolshevik, Victor Serge had been an individualist anarchist who backed activities like robbing banks — is this a form of “working people’s struggle”? Nor is there any proof that Lucy Parsons abandoned anarchism or joined the Communist Party. Nonetheless, Selfa has a point.

The Bolshevik regime in Russia was hyped as a form of “workers power” and a “successful revolution”. With the tide of radical left opinion running that way, quite a few syndicalists were drawn to the new Leninist parties. But now we have the advantage of a century of hindsight. The various Leninist party-controlled revolutions developed dismal bureaucratic class systems and one-party police states. It’s not so clear that Leninism has stood the test of time.

Political Organization

Nonetheless, it’s true that anarchists and syndicalists in the early 1900s often lacked an effective concept of political organization. Often they organized through loose networks around papers, or loose federations with disparate ideas that obstructed common action. But this is where it is useful to focus on how libertarian Left activists have learned from experience and worked to develop a more effective concept of political organization.

Kerl does mention an early effort in this direction — the “Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists,” published in 1926. After the Russian revolution a group of Russian exiles that included Ukrainian foundry worker and revolutionary Nestor Makhno came to the conclusion that a more politically cohesive and effective type of anarchist political organization was needed. The idea was that an organization that was united in terms of its ideas and approach would be better able to get members pushing in the same direction and be a more effective influence in mass movements.

Kerl claims the Platform had “minimal influence” in the wider anarchist movement until the 1990s. This is probably an exaggeration. Nonetheless, I don’t recall the Platform being discussed in libertarian socialist circles in the USA back in the ’70s and ’80s. All of the social anarchist groups that identify with the Platform in the USA have been formed in the past decade. Numerous activists interested in the idea of a more cohesive and mass struggle-oriented anarchism is, moreover, one of the recent trends in American libertarian Left politics.

Kerl says that the anarchist movement was “in ruins” by the end of World War 2. Kerl’s comment is a bit First World-centric. In reality, significant social anarchist organizations with influence in the labor movement continued to exist in a number of countries of South America after World War 2, especially Uruguay and Chile.

In the years leading up to the imposition of a harsh military regime in Uruguay in the ’70s, the Uruguayan Anarchist Federation played an important role in worker militancy and resistance to increasing repression. In those years the “anarcho-Marxist” FAU had members in many unions and helped create the National Workers Convention (CNT) and formed part of the leadership of this labor federation. One of the main influences on the FAU in those years was the Spanish anarchist exile Abraham Guillen.

When the FAU was rebuilt after the end of the dictatorship in the ’80s, its activists reflected on their experience in the earlier period. This led them to articulate an organizational theory called *especificismo*, based on that earlier experience.

The FAU works within the tradition of what social anarchists call “dual organizationalism.” This means we recognize distinct roles for the mass organizations and a libertarian socialist political organization. The political organization is put together on the basis of agreement with a specific, unitary political perspective. Because the political organization is said to have a “specific” program and perspective, this approach is called *especificismo*.

The FAU rejected individualist anarchist influences and the looser forms of anarchist organization of the past. The FAU emphasized horizontal discipline of a democratic organization, where the members are accountable to each other. The political organization would try to articulate a strategy and path based on “rigorous analysis of society and the correlation of forces that are part of it.”

The FAU’s concept of “social insertion” means that working class members of the FAU should focus on organized activities in mass organizations and movements. The aim would not be to impose a party line or create hierarchical structures of control, but to encourage militancy and discourage bureaucratic or reformist tendencies. Kerl says that “this trend comes close to more Marxist conceptions of revolutionary organization.” But he makes the mistake of supposing this organizational perspective derives from the Platform. In fact it is an independent development of the South American social anarchists, based on their own experiences. I’ve focused here on *especificismo* partly because of its importance but also because I agree with it.

The WSA itself is a “specific” organization. We believe that such an organization should be based on horizontal democracy. We are the oldest social anarchist organization in the USA, having existed since the early ’80s. Our survival has been based in part on our efforts to maintain a supportive atmosphere for members. As we see it, the “specific” organization has a role in popular education, in development of people as activists and organizers. The WSA *Where We Stand* statement has this to say about the role of the political organization:

“Through organization activists can avoid isolation, participate in discussions with other activists who have different experiences, and get together for common political work. Through organization we can pool resources and sustain publications and other efforts to build a visible presence for our ideas.

We advocate an approach where activists work to spread widely within the rank and file of movements and mass organizations the self-confidence, knowledge, skills and opportunities for decision-making participation needed to make self-management

an effective reality. We want mass organizations to be self-managing and we work for this aim in such organizations and to counteract bureaucratic or authoritarian tendencies.”

Power, State, Coercion

Kerl repeats the usual Trotskyist myth about the anarcho-syndicalists in the Spanish revolution “rejecting power.” As Jose Peirats says in *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, it was clear in all the CNT papers of that era that the aim was “all social power in the hands of the proletariat.”

If the anarcho-syndicalists didn’t believe in “taking power” why did they take power in cities and regions? In the city of Hospitalet de Llobregat — a gritty industrial working class suburb of Barcelona — the CNT unions (strongly influenced by the CNT’s more radical wing) overthrew the city government and elected their own revolutionary committee to replace the city government. In the region of Aragon, the village CNT unions invoked a regional assembly of delegates from all the collectivized villages and elected a regional workers government, a Regional Defense Council.

To counter the drive of the Communist Party to rebuild a conventional hierarchical army and gain control of it, the radical tendency in the CNT (identified with militia leaders like Buenaventura Durruti and journalists like Jaime Balius and Eduardo de Guzman) persuaded the CNT federation to propose a joint taking of power by the two labor federations in Spain, the UGT and CNT. The proposed National Defense Council would run a unified people’s revolutionary militia. The Council would be elected by a National Workers Congress, made up of delegates elected from worker assemblies at the base. The CNT’s main concern was that the dominant armed force remain under the control of the organized working class.

In an interview for the oral history *Blood of Spain*, Eduardo de Guzman, editor of the CNT daily paper in Madrid, *Castilla Libre*, called this a “proletarian government”. The creation of the Regional Congress and Regional Defense Council in Aragon was an attempt to carry out this CNT program in one region.

But the UGT rejected the CNT proposal. Why? Because the Marxist parties in Spain (PSOE, POUM, PCE) preferred the Popular Front. That’s what happens from a practice of emphasizing “the party taking state power.” After the UGT rejected the CNT proposal, the various anarchist tendencies in the CNT split over what to do. The radical wing proposed taking power in the regions where the CNT had the power — this led to the formation of the Regional Defense Council in Aragon. Later, in March 1937, the Friends of Durruti group was formed to push for a revival of this proposal. This is what ISOer Geoff Bailey says about this in his *ISR* article:

“Some workers’ organizations understood the need to take power. The Friends of Durruti argued for...the overthrow of the government and the formation of a revolutionary junta.” (“Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War”, *ISR*, July 2002)

What Bailly doesn’t realize is that the “revolutionary junta” is the National Defense Council that was proposed by the CNT in September 1936. But Bailey can’t admit that because that would disprove the Trotskyist myth that the anarcho-syndicalists are against the working class taking power.

The real beef libertarian socialists and syndicalists have with Leninists like Kerl isn’t about power but about the state. Or to put it another way, the question is, Who will have power?

We believe that in a period of revolutionary transition, the working class needs to take over the running of the industries where they work, the buildings and land in their communities, push aside the managerial hierarchies and the old state apparatus, and build structures of worker self-management in industries...and replace the state with popular power, rooted in the direct democracy of assemblies in workplaces and neighborhoods. This is what we say about this in *Where We Stand*:

“Self-emancipation of the working class” requires that the working class gain power over society. But the working class can only actually exercise power by doing so collectively through institutions of popular self-management. A self-managing society needs a governance structure through which the people make and enforce the basic rules of the society and defend their social order. We envision regional and national congresses of delegates elected by the base assemblies that would have the basic power of making decisions about social rules and society-wide priorities. Proposals of the congresses that are particularly controversial or important should be referred back to the base assemblies for decision.”

How does this differ from a state? As Engels wrote in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, the state is an apparatus that is separated off from effective popular control, and rules over society. This is necessary if the state is to fulfill its function of guarding and promoting the interests of the dominating, exploiting classes. The direct rule of the masses through assemblies and congresses that are directly accountable to the base, and enforced by a popular militia under direct popular control, does not create a form of governance that exists as a separate hierarchical, commandist apparatus. This is why it isn't a state.

Kerl's article had started off on the wrong foot at the very beginning where he tries to define all anarchism as opposed to “any form of coercive authority.”

What about a syndicalist union using militant tactics to prevent scabs taking their jobs? If the workers agree collectively to pursue this approach, this is a collective form of exercise of coercive authority.

Moreover, in a revolutionary transformation of society mass organizations of the working class and oppressed may use coercive force to sweep aside the dominating classes and their oppressive institutions.

Social anarchists are opposed to **hierarchical** authority, not authority in general. Hierarchical structures of authority are institutions where power is concentrated in the hands of a relative few, and power is exercised over others who are thus dominated. This can be hierarchical concentration of authority based on property ownership, as with the capitalist class, or on the basis of control over organizational decision-making as in a corporation or the state or other top down structure.

Self-management is the antidote or opposite of hierarchical authority. Self-management refers to people having control over decisions to the extent they are affected or governed by them. As libertarian socialists, we advocate a society where the various forms of oppression are replaced by people controlling their lives.

ISOers like Kerl claim they are for “the self-emancipation of the working class.” How is this possible if they don't support workers' self-management? If workers aren't managing the places where we work, who would be managing them?

It's hard to see how workers can be in power in society if they are still subordinated to bosses. This presents a dilemma for the ISO. The ISO are advocates of a form of socialism based on statist central planning. Because an elected representative body could only deal with some policies and major issues, the intricate details of economic planning for the whole economy would inevitably fall to a bureaucracy of elite planners. With information and decision-making concentrated at the top, the leaders, planners and experts at the center of the system would be in a very powerful position. They would issue orders in detail to the various groups of workers. There would be a tendency for them to want to have their own appointed managers on site to ensure that their orders are carried out. For Leninists like the ISO there is also the precedent of Lenin and Trotsky advocating "one-man management" — bosses appointed from above — and opposing workers' self-management in the Russian revolution. What we see here is the basis for the emergence of a bureaucratic boss class.

Libertarian socialists, on the other hand, pose the alternative of a fight for an authentic socialism of direct workers' management of industry and direct people power, rooted in the face-to-face democracy of assemblies in the workplaces and neighborhoods. The dynamic of mass participation of working people in mass struggles, and running their own organizations, helps to develop broadly among working people the confidence, knowledge and organizational capacity needed to get rid of the capitalist system and achieve liberation. Thus the politics of class struggle-oriented social anarchism poses an alternative to the statist and hierarchical approach of Leninists like the ISO while avoiding the errors of hyper-individualism, anti-organizationalism, and adventurism which we find in other varieties of anarchism.

Debate with the International Socialist Organization Continued

The piece below is part of a debate that was prompted by Eric Kerl's article "Contemporary anarchism" in the July-August issue of *International Socialist Review*. In the September-October issue of the ISO's journal the debate was continued with three short pieces, by myself (a longer version first appeared in *ideas & action* on July 3rd), Sebastian Lamb of the New Socialist Group in Canada, and Eric Kerl. The piece below is a rejoinder to Eric Kerl's response.

1. Marxism, Leninism, Syndicalism

Kerl and the ISO want to frame the debate in such a way that those of us who disagree with the ISO from the libertarian socialist left are seen as "against Marxism." But ISO's "anarchism versus Marxism" theme is a false way of framing the disagreement. Workers Solidarity Alliance is not an "anti-Marxist" organization. A number of our members find value in various aspects of Marxism as I do.

Our beef with the ISO is over their Leninism.

Why is this important? The problem is that the writings of Lenin and the politics and practice of Bolshevism in the Russian revolution provide precedents and justifications for a political practice that, in our view, is likely to lead to the emergence of a society dominated by a bureaucratic class...with the workers continuing as a subordinated and exploited class. This is why we reject Leninism.

Kerl claims that "the heart of Marxism is working-class self-emancipation." He also claims that socialism is to be achieved through "mass struggle from below." Thus far, we're in agreement. Revolutionary syndicalism is indeed a strategy to achieve a self-managed socialist society through "mass struggle from below." However, as Sebastian Lamb of the New Socialist Group points out in his contribution to this debate, "Not all supporters of socialism from below have been Marxists...[and] most Marxists have not been supporters of socialism from below."

From a libertarian socialist point of view, the "self-emancipation of the working class" can't happen unless the working class builds organized mass movements that they control, such as labor organizations. This is the fundamental basis of syndicalism as a revolutionary strategy. Kerl doesn't talk about self-managed mass organizations as the basis for achieving worker power. If it isn't the working class-based mass social movements that are to achieve the change in society, then how can the ISO claim that they see this change as occurring through "mass struggle from below"?

Although Kerl talks about the Leninist party's "leadership" growing "organically" out of working class struggles and movements, he doesn't say anything about the need for rank and file control of mass organizations, the importance of direct democracy, or the role of the mass organizations in a revolutionary transition. Although the Bolshevik Party in the Russian revolution

did amass a large membership through recruiting rank-and-file leaders and activists in the factory committees, unions and soldier committees, this did not prevent them from conceiving of “worker power” as their party controlling a state.

2. Leninism as Partyist

I have characterized the Leninist strategy as *partyist*, that is, a strategy of a political party capturing state power, and then implementing its program top-down through the hierarchies of the state.

Kerl says this is “Cold War mythology.” That’s a rather odd response. Why would Cold War defenders of “capitalist democracy,” as they call it, be opposed to political parties “implementing their programs through the hierarchies of the state”? After all, liberals and conservatives who talk about our supposed “capitalist democracy” tend to identify “democracy” with elections of politicians — political party leaders...who then implement their decisions through the top-down hierarchies of the state. Cold Warriors don’t propose to do away with the hierarchical state machine.

It’s fairly easy to show that the actual strategy of the Bolshevik Party in the Russian revolution was partyist.

Central Government Rules by Decree

In October 1917 the Congress of Worker and Soldier Soviets agreed to take power and disband the unelected “provisional government” of Alexander Kerensky. This was a decision supported by the majority of the Left in Russia — syndicalists, the majority of the Menshevik Party (moderate socialists), the Left Social Revolutionary Party (the party with the largest support among the Russian peasantry), and most anarchists. Although the libertarian Left had criticisms of the top-down way local soviets were often structured, they were willing to give “critical support” to this change because they assumed they could continue to organize in workplaces, unions and soviets for their viewpoint.

Therefore, it is incorrect to describe this as a “coup d’etat,” as Cold Warriors do. When a social-democratic opposition walked out, the Bolshevik party attained a temporary majority of the remaining delegates. They used this to push through a proposal of Lenin to give government authority to a small committee, the Council of People’s Commissars. The Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Congress was to continue in session as the country’s nominal parliament.

But the Bolsheviks worked to pack the Central Executive Committee with dozens of trade union bureaucrats and other officials loyal to the Bolshevik Party...in violation of the soviet principle of direct election. Within some months after October, the Bolshevik government was treating the nominal parliament as a mere rubber stamp. Soon they were ruling by decree, not even submitting proposed laws to the nominal legislature.

How were ordinary workers and peasants in Russia supposed to participate in the making of decisions about the future of the country or the running of the economy?

Top-Down Local Soviets

Also, the major soviets (councils of worker and soldier deputies) in St. Petersburg (Petrograd), Moscow and other cities were structured in a top-down way. These soviets had initially been set up by the social-democratic Menshevik party at the time of the collapse of Tsarism in March, 1917. Power was centralized in executive committees which mainly consisted of members of the political party “intelligentsia.” In the Moscow and St. Petersburg soviets, power was further concentrated into the hands of an even smaller group, the Presidium. According to eye-witness accounts, the executive committees tended to treat the plenaries of delegates as mere rubber stamps. The plenary meetings soon evolved into simply a place where a delegate could go to publicize particular issues or struggles, but as a place where decisions were made.¹

There were exceptions to this, such as the Kronstadt soviet — a soviet of workers and sailors at the main navy base of the Russian Baltic fleet. In *Kronstadt, 1917-1921*, Israel Getzler gives a concrete description of the workings of the soviet in Kronstadt. Here it is clear that the ordinary working class delegates were the people who debated and made the actual decisions themselves. But neither of the main Marxist parties (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) were dominant in Kronstadt. Two libertarian socialist organizations — the Union of Socialist Revolutionaries-Maximalists (usually called “Maximalists”) and the anarcho-syndicalists — had the most political support.

In addition, there were also weekly assemblies in all the workplaces and among the crews of the ships in the Baltic fleet. These assemblies and workplace committees kept a close eye on their soviet delegates and were an important example of direct participation by the rank and file in the decision-making process.

But this kind of direct democracy was not advocated or emphasized by the Bolshevik party. After the Bolsheviks consolidated their hold in Kronstadt during the Russian civil war, they did away with the workplace and ship assemblies.

And what happened to the local soviets in other places? The first new elections of delegates to the local soviets in Russian cities after October, 1917 took place in the spring of 1918. In many of these cities the Bolsheviks were defeated...receiving only a minority of the vote in the elections. The Bolshevik Party responded to this situation by using armed force to stay in office or overthrow the soviet, replacing it with a Military Revolutionary Committee controlled by their party. It was around this time that Lenin began to talk about “the dictatorship of the party.”²

Even before the Bolshevik Party moved to abrogate soviet democracy, the only participation of rank-and-file workers they emphasized was voting for representatives, not participating in assemblies to make decisions themselves.

Top-down Central Planning

Within a few weeks after the creation of the Council of People’s Commissars, the Bolsheviks created another important institution — the Supreme Council of National Economy. This body was appointed from above and consisted of various experts, trade union officials and various Bolshevik Party members. It was given authority to devise — from above — an economic plan for

¹ Peter Rachleff, “Soviets and Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution” (libcom.org/library/soviets-factory-committees-russian-revolution-peter-rachleff)

² The refusal of the Bolsheviks to accept the results of soviet elections in the spring of 1918 is discussed in Vladimir Brovkin, *The Mensheviks After October*. See also Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p 22 ff.

the whole national economy. This body eventually became the Soviet central planning agency Gosplan in the '20s. When various regional and industry councils were created under this body, Lenin insisted that workers could not elect more than a third of the representatives.³

There were alternatives to this. At the First All-Russian Trade Union Congress in January 1918, the syndicalist delegates (with the support of their maximalist allies) proposed a national congress of the factory committee movement to create a national economic plan and control coordination between workplaces — “from below.” But the combined vote of Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates defeated this proposal.

Top-down local soviets, a central government ruling by decree, a hierarchical army run by ex-Tsarist officers, a top-down central planning apparatus, appointment of bosses from above to control workers in industry — these are all examples of top-down, hierarchical structures that were well-adapted to rule from above. They were not accountable to workplace assemblies, worker congresses or soviet plenaries.

Thus it seems to be quite accurate to describe Leninism as a strategy of a party gaining control of a state and then implementing its program top-down through the hierarchies of the state. This is in fact what the Bolshevik party did.

3. Workers Self-management or Leninist “Worker’s Control”?

After the creation of the Council of People’s Commissars in October 1917, Lenin did issue a law authorizing “workers control.” However, Lenin uses a very weak concept of “control” where this allots to workers only the power to “check” management, have a veto on hiring and firing, and demand that management “open the books,” as part of their surveillance and checking of management. Moreover, this merely legalized gains the workers committee movement in Russia had already achieved through class fights during 1917.

In the fall of 1917, Lenin assumed that capitalist management of factories would continue for some time. Thus he saw the “checking” of management by workers as a way to keep them from sabotaging the revolution.

After Lenin’s “worker control” law was passed, a syndicalist group in the factory committee movement in St. Petersburg issued a “manual of workers control” that advocated going beyond mere “control” to expropriation of capitalists and collective worker management of production. To oppose this, the central government issued a statement on November 14, 1917 which said:

“The right to issue orders relating to management, running and functioning of enterprises remains in the hands of the owner.”⁴

In *Kronstadt 1917-1921*, Israel Getzler describes a proposal in Kronstadt in January 1918 to expropriate all land and businesses and all housing. This motion was proposed in the Kronstadt soviet by Efim Yarchuk — a member of the executive committee of the Russian anarcho-syndicalist federation. This measure passed by majority vote in the Kronstadt soviet — despite the fact that the Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates voted “No.”

Like many pre-World War 1 Marxist social-democrats, Lenin envisioned socialism as retaining the hierarchical managerial systems created by capitalism. He believed this hierarchical structure

³ Maurice Brinton, “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control” in *For Workers Power*, p. 293 ff.

⁴ Brinton, p. 327.

could be wielded by the working class through a “workers state.” This idea is expressed in the following passage in *The State and Revolution*:

“A witty German Social-Democrat of the last century called the *postal service* an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true. At the present the postal service is a business organized on the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organizations of a similar type, in which, standing over the “common” people, who are overworked and starved, one has the bourgeois democracy. But the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. Once we have overthrown the capitalists, crushed the resistance of these exploiters with the iron hand of the armed workers, and smashed the bureaucratic machine of the modern state, we shall have a splendidly-equipped mechanism, from from the “parasite,” a mechanism which can very well be set going by the united workers themselves, who will hire technicians, foremen and accountants, and pay them all, as indeed all state officials in general, workmen’s wages....To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service...all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat — that is our immediate aim.”⁵

Lenin and the main Bolshevik leaders had a fixation on top-down centralization. Thus Lenin often insisted that the economy, revolutionary army and the soviet state should be “subordinated to a single will.” For example in March 1918 he wrote:

“Large-scale machine industry — which is...the foundation of socialism — calls for absolute and strict *unity of will*, which directs the joint labors of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people. The technical, economic and historic necessity of this is obvious...But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.”⁶

If workers do not directly manage the workplaces, who will? A bureaucratic hierarchy of one-man managers, assisted by “foremen, accountants and experts”? This provides a real material basis for a bureaucratic class-dominated economy. Their class power would make all talk of “equal wages” null because they would be in a position to ensure privileges for themselves over time.

Kerl responds on this point as follows:

“As for Lenin’s opposition to workers’ self-management, suffice it to say that Wetzel’s criticism leaves out context. The fledgling workers’ state existed in conditions of encirclement by Western armies, well-funded by counterrevolutionary White armies, economic chaos and collapse, and the dissolution of the working class (by as early as April 1918, the workforce of Petrograd had declined to 40 percent of its January 1917 level, and the number of metalworkers in the capital declined by almost 75 percent...). The shift toward top-down centralization and away from self-management was...a product of...the centrifugal collapse of Russian’s industrial system in the midst of civil war. It is this that explains Lenin’s shift from support for workers’ control toward more centralized forms of economic management.”

⁵ V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 426 ff.

⁶ V.I. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 268.

In reply:

First, Kerl's last sentence is disingenuous. Kerl is here supposing that Lenin's "workers control" is the same thing as workers self-management. And this is simply false. To say that Lenin "moved away from self-management" implies that at one time he supported or advocated it. But in fact he never did.

Direct participation by ordinary workers through assemblies and direct self-management of workplaces by workers were never a feature of Bolshevik practice in the Russian revolution nor were they characteristic of Bolshevik Party politics. As Marxist sociologist Sam Farber writes:

"After October...Lenin's perspective [on workers' role] in Russian factories never went beyond his...usual emphasis on accounting and inspection [that is, Lenin's concept of "workers control"]....The underlying cause here was not, as some have claimed that Lenin and the party leaders were cynically manipulating the factory committees and that once the party leaders 'got power' they had no more use for them....The key problem was that Lenin and the mainstream of the Bolshevik Party, or for that matter the Mensheviks, paid little if any attention to the need for a transformation and democratization of the daily life of the working class on the shopfloor and community...For Lenin the central problem and concern continued to be the revolutionary transformation of the central state."

Farber also points out that "there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers' control or of democracy in the soviets or...referred to those losses as a retreat."⁷ If Lenin and the Bolsheviks had advocated workers' self-management or thought it was important, why was there no expression of regret? When Lenin and the Bolsheviks retreated from the state-run economy of War Communism and implemented free trade under the New Economic Policy in 1921, Lenin did declare this to be a retreat...but not so with absence of worker power of decision-making in production.

Second, Kerl's claim about the "dissolution of the working class" is an exaggeration, to say the least. St. Petersburg's population before World War 1 was about a million. This had swelled to 2 million during the war because a large part of war production for the Russian army during World War 1 was centered there. After Russia pulled out of the war, war production collapsed. But the decline of the urban population was less severe in other Russian cities.

Moreover, the mass strikes in protest to Communist policy in St. Petersburg and Moscow was dramatic evidence that the working class still existed and was capable of collective self-activity. The Communist government responded to the St. Petersburg general strike in February 1921 with violent repression and martial law. This is the event that triggered the rebellion of the workers and sailors of Kronstadt, which was actually a solidarity strike.

Third, the civil war in Russia didn't get underway until the summer of 1918. But top-down state planning began with the creation of the Supreme Council of National Economy in the fall of 1917. And Lenin was already beating the drum for one-man management (bosses appointed from above) and Taylorist piece-rates (a technique of pitting workers against each other in competition to increase productivity) by April of 1918. The defeat of the syndicalist proposal for a national congress of factory committees and planning "from below" occurred in January 1918. The civil war can't be blamed for actions and policies that began before the civil war.

⁷ Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p. 72.

Lenin had been aware that economic disruption, violent clashes and potentially civil war are characteristics of a period of revolutionary transition. If Lenin and the Bolshevik party leaders quickly tossed out democratic worker militias, worker management of workplaces and the right to free election of soviet delegates, doesn't this tell us they did not see these things as crucial? If Kerl agrees with this reasoning, what does this tell us about the likely actions of the ISO if they were the dominant "leadership" in such a situation?

Nor can civil war explain opposition to workers management. In the Spanish revolution, the onset of civil war in July 1936 was the occasion for a deepening of the revolution through widespread worker expropriation of industry and farm land. The direct worker power in agriculture and industry was itself important to the ability of the workers' movement to create and sustain a large worker militia — hundreds of factories were converted to war production through the initiative of the workers. These revolutionary conquests motivated workers to produce and fight. Self-management strengthened the revolution.

The Spanish Communist Party did denounce the worker self-management of industry as "inopportune" "utopian experiments," and they opposed them for this reason. It's ironic, then, that Kerl is agreeing with the rationale of the Spanish Communist Party for opposing workers' management — a type of Marxist organization the ISO usually denounces as "Stalinist."

“Workers State” or Social Self-management?

Kerl writes:

“Wetzel incorrectly paraphrases Engels on the state — as ‘an apparatus that is separated off from effective popular control’ rather than a coercive instrument of class rule...”

According to Engels, the state

“is the product of society at a particular stage of development...cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms...classes with conflicting interests.”

This leads to a “public power” emerging that places “itself above society and increasingly alienated from it.”⁸ Now, why is the state “alienated from” the populace it rules over? If we look at the state, we see various bureaucratic structures where decision-making authority and key kinds of expertise are concentrated in the hands of a few, that is, forming a hierarchy, with a chain of command structure. This top-down character of the state apparatus indicates the class character of the state in two ways. First, public workers are themselves subordinate to a bureaucratic class. And, second, the state is structured this way to make it more feasible for it to act to defend the interests of a dominating, exploiting class.

A state is indeed “a coercive instrument of class rule” but it is an instrument of a dominating, exploiting class. Thus it is not possible for the working class to wield a state as the basis of its own collective self-management of society. This is why a “workers state” is a contradiction in terms.

In our “Where We Stand” statement, WSA says:

⁸ “Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 229.

“The working class can liberate itself through the development of self-managed mass movements that develop through the class struggle. We thus advocate a strategy for social change from below, based on mass participation, direct democracy, collective direct action and self-managed mass organizations....

To liberate itself from subordination to dominating classes, the working class must dismantle the hierarchical structures of the corporations and the state. The working class, through its own united action, must seize and manage directly the entire system of production, distribution and services.

Self-management must not be limited to the workplaces but must be extended throughout the society and to governance of public affairs. Self-management means that people control the decisions that affect them. The basic building blocks of a self-managed society would be assemblies of workers in workplaces and of residents in neighborhoods.”

In my *ISR* piece I described the structure of social self-management this way:

“A self-managing society needs a governance structure through which the people make and enforce the basic rules of the society and defend their social order. Thus we think there would be a central role for regional and national congresses of delegates elected by the base assemblies. To ensure accountability to the base and direct participation by the rank and file, we favor a rule that allows controversial decisions of congresses to be forced back to the base assemblies for debate and decision.”

The working class-based organized mass movement that creates this structure of industrial and social self-management would also create its own people’s militia, accountable directly to them. This would be necessary for self-defense of the revolutionary movement against external or internal attempts by armed organizations to re-create a capitalist regime.

My essay in *ISR* already provided the answer to questions Kerl raises: “Wetzel proposes an armed body...Will this militia exist indefinitely? What is the basis for its dissolution?” The mass working class-based movement that creates the structures of social and workplace self-management also creates the militia. The popular power this movement creates is the basis for the control of this militia.

The idea that the working class mass organizations are the source of “the authority” of the militia is a long-standing syndicalist principle. Thus the principles of the syndicalist International Workers Association say:

“Revolutionary unionism advocates...the replacement of standing armies, which are only the instruments of counter-revolution at the service of the capitalism, by workers’ militias, which, during the revolution, will be controlled by the workers’ unions.”⁹

Thus syndicalism is opposed to party armies, like the party-army that the Chinese Communist Party used to put itself in power in China. Party armies are embryonic states.

⁹ www.iwa-ait.org/?q=statutes

Kerl responds to my description of a governance structure based on assemblies, delegate congresses and a people's militia as a "workers state" under another name. But, then, a few sentences later he contradicts himself:

"Wetzel...misunderstands the workers' state..." He says I "ignore the purpose of a militia — organized coercion." But if I say that the governance structure proposed by libertarian socialists must have the means to "enforce" its decisions (including a militia), how am I ignoring the existence of "organized coercion"?

Moreover, the ability of a society's governance system to exercise "organized coercion" does not make it a state. In early tribal societies that lacked a division into classes and lacked the bureaucratic structure of a state, their ability to govern their affairs still entailed occasional ability to use "organized coercion"...as when one tribe went to war against another in a fight over land. An armed band fighting to exclude another tribe from their lands is a form of "organized coercion."

Kerl's reply in *ISR* fails to engage with libertarian socialism in any meaningful way but relies on hackneyed phrases and misconstruals. Leninist state socialism in the 20th century was a monumental failure...a failure that contributed to discrediting socialism itself in the eyes of many. It's not plausible to propose to simply go back to Lenin and the Bolsheviks of 1917 as if their politics had nothing to do with the emergence of dismal bureaucratic class-dominated regimes.

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Tom Wetzel

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