

The Violence Question

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Anarchism is opposed to any interference with your liberty, be it by force and violence or by any other means ... But if someone attacks you, then it is he who is invading you, he who is employing violence against you. You have a right [and a duty] to defend yourself...

To achieve its purpose, the revolution must be imbued with and directed by the anarchist spirit and ideas. The end shapes the means, just as the tool you use must be fit to do the work you want to accomplish ... Revolutionary defence excludes all acts of coercion, of persecution and revenge. It is concerned only with repelling attack and depriving the enemy of the opportunity to invade you...

[The strength of the revolution] consists in the support of the people, in the devotion of the agricultural and rural masses ... Let them believe in the revolution and they will defend it to the death ... The armed workers and peasants are the only effective defence of the revolution. By means of their unions and syndicates they must always be on guard against counter-revolutionary attack ... the active interest of the masses; their autonomy and self-determination are the best guarantee of success...

Let them [counter-revolutionaries] talk as they like... To suppress speech and press is ... a theoretic blow offence against liberty [and] a direct blow at the very foundations of the revolution ... [While forcible attack will be actively resisted] the revolution must be big enough to welcome even the severest criticism, and profit by it if it is justified...

Alexander Berkman,
“Defence of the Revolution”,
in his *ABC of Anarchism*, various editions

INTRODUCTION

There are three basic positions which can be adopted on the “violence question”—pacifism, terrorism or defensive violence.¹

PACIFISM

With regret we have to dismiss pacifism as being hopelessly unrealistic.

Restricting a struggle to pacifism or non-violent direct action in a campaign or strike can in some circumstances seriously undermine that struggle. We are against the adoption of such tactics as an absolute principle, although obviously it may be tactically wise to rely on peaceful methods of protest in certain situations.

Violence will also be an inevitable part of a revolution as the ruling class will not give up its power or wealth without a bloody struggle. To refuse to prepare to meet this contingency with counter-violence, or to rely on pricking the conscience of the oppressor to prevent bloodshed in such a situation, is a recipe for the massacre of the working-class and poor.

¹ Some of these issues are dealt with in greater depth in the pamphlet *You Can't Blow Up a Social relationship: the Anarchist Case Against Terrorism*. Anonymous Australian comrades. See Zabalaza Books zabalazabooks.net

ARMED STRUGGLE AND “TERRORISM”

We reject the tactics of armed struggle and “terrorism”.

This approach relies on the military actions of an armed vanguard to free the working class and poor (or other oppressed groups, e.g. national minorities). It is thus substitutionist to the core in that it substitutes the activity of a small group for the actions of the toiling masses as a whole. It is clearly therefore elitist and sows the seeds for a new elite to take power over the heads of the workers and the poor in the event of the armed struggle succeeding. In fact, this tactic readily degenerates into authoritarianism even prior to the actual seizure of power as the armed vanguard is not accountable to the working people and is instead controlled by a typically unelected central circle of leaders. In this model the masses are reduced to a passive role, acting at most as the providers of logistical support to the guerrillas. Even if sizeable popular support can be won for the armed struggle, this fact remains. Such a tactic is clearly at odds with Anarchism which involves the masses in self-managed action to establish an anti-authoritarian socialist society.

Generally speaking, the tactic of armed struggle is a relatively ineffective one. This is particularly true where the armed struggle is urban based (and thus almost never unable to consolidate “liberated” territories), but it also holds in the case of rural ly-focussed struggles. The murder of individuals in no way weakens the system. Bosses, police and so on are all easily replaceable. So are powerlines and other facilities. The military power which clandestine guerrilla forces can mobilise is typically minimal compared to the full power of the State. As Anarchists we realise that under capitalism and the State the strength of the masses lies primarily in their economic power – their ability to struggle at the point of production- yet the tactic of armed struggle relegates the workplace struggle to a secondary role (if any at all). Even in conditions of harsh political repression, underground activity should prioritise workplace organising over the formation of a guerrilla army.

Although the intention of those engaging in armed struggle is often to secure freedom for the oppressed, the actual effect may be quite different. Typically, armed struggle puts the lives of working people at risk which provides the State with an excuse (and, often, the popular support) needed to introduce more repressive measures. We also do not support the tactic of small groups provoking a violent response from the State in order to “radicalise” the majority. In fact, this is often used by the State to victimise activists and intimidate those involved.

This is not to say that we deny the sincerity of those who take up the gun in an attempt to change society, merely that their method is a wrong one. However, while we do not advocate armed struggle, we defend those who participate in it from repression, reactionary attacks and criticism. we never side with the State against such groups. The real problem is not the gunmen, the primary responsibility lies with the system which leads people to resist in such a manner.

OUR POSITION: SELF-DEFENSIVE VIOLENCE

Our position is to accept the need for self-defensive violence.

Short of revolution, there are many occasions on which the State uses violence to break the collective power of the working class and poor. For example, attacking picket lines and demon-

strations, victimising, arresting and even murdering activists. We always support those who are victimised and defend them against State repression.

On occasions, demonstrations or strikes can turn to violence. We recognise that this is an inevitable feature of large-scale resistance to the bosses and rulers. In such cases where violence is inevitable, we argue for the creation of self-managed defence squads under democratic mass control.

Violence sometimes also takes place in smaller situations due to the necessity of intimidating scabs or due to frustration. In such cases, we defend those involved from State repression. Where such manifestations can only damage the struggle, we argue against the use of violent tactics. In cases where their use is correct we argue for the greatest possible democratic control of their use and implementation.

We do not glorify or encourage random attacks in members of the ruling class. Attacks on individuals and their property may well demonstrate an ineffective expression of legitimate anger but the function of Anarchists is to argue for collective action by the working class. These tactics may make individuals in the ruling class uncomfortable but they do not undermine the ability of this class to rule. Obviously we defend those who show their anger in this way, but we also argue that such energy is better directed at mobilising and politicising the working class.

Revolution should be as bloodless as possible. As we mentioned above, violence becomes inevitable as the ruling class will not give up its power and wealth without a bloody struggle. Our violence will be in defence of the gains of the revolution. We will work to minimise the violence by winning the State armed forces to the side of the workers and the peasants. The defence of the revolution will be organised through an internally democratic workers militia under the control of the trade unions and other working class and working peasant structures of self-management. The need for such violence will be almost universally understood.

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