

## Working-class struggle and anarchism

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Anarchism opposes the capitalist state. Some anarchists — primarily the anarcho-syndicalists, who on this issue have the same idea as Marxists do — identify with the working class as the force to defeat the capitalist state and create a new society; but most do not.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, the “father of anarchism”, was opposed to unions, strikes, and class struggle. “We...wage war”, he wrote, “not upon the rich but upon principles... We are socialists, not despoilers... men of reconciliation and progress”.

He condemned the press for supporting workers’ strikes for better wages. “It is impossible for strikes followed by an increase of wages to end otherwise than in a general rise of prices... The working men, supported by the favour of an indiscreet press, in demanding an increase of wages, have served monopoly much better than their own real interests”.

He did not even see industrial capital as exploitative. In his view only financial and merchant capital were exploitative.

He seized upon a lull in trade-union activity in Britain to exclaim: “The British workers have got out of the habit of combination, which is assuredly a progress for which one cannot but congratulate them”.

Proudhon is credited with coining the phrase later popularised by Marx, that the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the workers themselves. At any rate Proudhon wrote in 1848 that “the proletariat must emancipate itself without the help of the government”.

But Proudhon did not mean emancipation through class struggle. He meant that the workers should organise themselves into small workshop groups and trade between the groups. He claimed that by doing that “they would soon have wrested alienated capital back again... become the masters of it all... without the proprietors being despoiled...”

By the time that Mikhail Bakunin became the leading writer of anarchism, in the 1870s, working-class struggle was strong enough to make Bakunin support unions and strikes. Bakunin still (like Proudhon) opposed workers organising into a workers’ political party.

He did not see the working class as the central agent of revolution. He considered peasants and the urban unemployed, beggars, petty criminals, etc. to be much more potent revolutionary forces.

Today, anarchists identifying with Zapatismo accept the Zapatistas’ strategic decision to orient to the peasants of Chiapas, an economically little-developed region in the south of Mexico, rather than the workers in Mexico’s huge cities. “Autonomists”, in practice close to anarchism though their ideas originate from Marxist discussions, hold that the agency for change is now no longer the working class, but the “multitude”. By “refusal, desertion, exodus and nomadism”, the “multitude” can produce “a kind of spontaneous and elementary communism”.

Revolutionary activity, for them, is not about class struggle, but about “the affirmation of the movement itself as an ‘alternative society’... To conquer and control its own ‘spaces’...”.

The contemporary “social-ecology” anarchist writer Murray Bookchin insists that “we are no longer living in a world where revolutionary consciousness can be developed primarily or even significantly around the issue of wage-labour versus capital”. Instead, “the revolutionary project” must be “a counter-culture”.

The working class, he complains, expresses not universal human interests but “bourgeois egoism”. “Anarchist theories and movements” are linked by an “umbilical cord” to “organic societies... the clan, tribe, polis, medieval commune... the village and decentralised towns of the past”.

How Bookchin thinks that such an unpromising society as capitalism, with the majority of the population belonging to the proletariat, "the most inorganic of all oppressed classes", can generate a "counter-culture" except as marginal, is not clear. In practice, many anarchists pursue the day-to-day business of "counter-cultural" activity as an end in itself, and the final aim remains in the blurred distance.

## Preparation

It is no part of Marxism to deny the value of imaginative "stunts". But we do believe that revolutionaries must prepare for revolution by a focus on patient, long-term work in working-class struggles (even small ones).

The wage-working class in capitalist society has a twofold character. It is both the basic alienated class, having its life reduced to the margins around a process of labour for capital which sucks out its energy while returning to it only a pittance by which to keep its labour-power in trim; and the basic creative class, developing an ever-more-multifarious cooperative potency in production.

Capitalist production throws the working class into constant conflicts with capital over the terms and conditions of the sale of labour-power. Even if limited to the issue of wages, those battles generate class organisations of the workers — trade unions — and ties of class solidarity. Extended to issues of workers' control over production, they pose the question of the principle of solidarity replacing the rules of the market.

A cooperative commonwealth is not just a benevolent scheme to relieve the sufferings of the workers. It is the photographic positive for which the negative is provided by the struggle of the working class, within capitalist society, to lift the burdens of its class subordination by abolishing it.

In opposition to the Marxist view, focused on long-term organising, activists can be drawn to anarchism today by either one of two apparently contradictory impulses: the desire for immediately "revolutionary" activity, or the resigned conclusion that revolution is so remote that the best we can do for now is to poke at the capitalist order piecemeal but in the most colourful way we can find.

Anarchists know as well as Marxists do that only a minority in normal times are consistently active. But anarchists — again with the exception of anarcho-syndicalists — lack a coherent idea of how the minority can act today so as best to contribute to majority action tomorrow.

## Anarcho-syndicalism

Anarcho-syndicalism is the version of anarchism that identifies the society of the future as a federation of industries each run by the trade-union of the workers in the industry, rather than as federation of small local communes.

Unlike other variants of anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism focuses on the wage-working class. It has a coherent idea of what to do in un-revolutionary times: build up the unions which will later be the instruments of revolution.

Anarcho-syndicalism is far from "pure" anarchism, where the axis is the small local autonomous group (or even individuals) against (any) state, rather than workers against capital. Arguing with fellow anarchists to turn away from their closed discussion circles and small bomb-throwing conspiracies towards the unions, Fernand Pelloutier, the pioneer of French anarcho-syndicalism (which was a mass movement between 1902 and 1914) wrote that:

"Nobody believes or expects that the coming revolution will realise unadulterated anarchist communism". Trade-union administration of society would be the best "transitional state" available.

Weren't the trade unions disciplined, collective bodies? Didn't that outrage the individualist sensibilities of anarchism? Well, said Pelloutier, in unions "individuals are at liberty to quit, except... when battle has been joined with the enemy". Presumably he hoped that anarchists would overlook how big an "except" that was...

Inside the mass French trade-union movement, the CGT, the determined revolutionary syndicalists formed a self-conscious "active minority", mostly grouped around newspapers and magazines, who deliberately strove to educate rather than just to rely on spontaneous rebellion.

Trotsky described that French revolutionary syndicalism as "a remarkable draft outline of revolutionary communism".

Unfortunately, most anarchists today are not anarcho-syndicalists. When there is a big workers' struggle, the people contributing support and proposals, organising rank-and-file groups, and so on, are mostly (for better or for worse) the various Marxist or would-be Marxist groups, not anarchist groups. And the anarcho-syndicalist "draft outline" was and is lacking in several respects.

Firstly, in anarcho-syndicalist perspectives the unions have to combine the three distinct roles played in a Marxist perspective by three distinct sorts of organisation — the workers' political party (or proto-party), the unions, and the workers' councils.

The result is a sort of pantomime-horse effect. Unions, if they are to be effective, must include as nearly as possible the whole workforce, excluding only strike-breakers. Under anywhere near normal conditions, they include many workers whose social ideas are conformist and bourgeois.

To try to make the union a revolutionary-educational force is to narrow it down and make it ineffective as a union. The activists end up with neither an effective union, nor an effective party, but something which is botched in both respects. The French revolutionary-syndicalist idea of "the active minority" was a partial answer, but only a partial one, to that problem.

Further, even the broadest unions usually organise only a minority of the workforce. Usually the worst-off sections of the working class are not, or only scantily, unionised. In revolutionary times, those worst-off sections explode into activity. Workers then need much broader and more flexible organisations than even the trade unions — namely, workers' councils.

Those workers' councils will be the foundation of the future workers' state. It should be the unions instead? But if the unions are to play the role of rulers in the future society, then what will play the role of unions? Even under a workers' state, individual groups of workers may sometimes need to assert their particular interests against the collective.

Although, as Pelloutier admitted, the anarcho-syndicalists effectively abandoned the "pure anarchist" idea of immediate abolition of all government, they did keep warning the workers against what Emile Pouget, another leader of the CGT, called "the virus of politics".

The warnings could not stop the "virus" spreading. Politics abhors a vacuum.. Despite the CGT's calls not to vote, most CGT workers voted socialist... and for socialists who in their majority turned out to be unprincipled parliamentary reformists — since anarcho-syndicalist doctrine banned the more revolutionary activists from using the electoral arena for their own agitational, educational, recruitment efforts.

Syndicalism cannot be equated fully with "economism". Around the end of the 19th century, a section of the Russian Marxists, bowled over by the success of their new agitation on workplace economic issues, came to argue that socialists should focus exclusively or overwhelmingly on such economic issues, leaving outside-the-workplace political issues to the bourgeois liberals for the time being, and that socialist politics would then easily grow out of the extension of economic struggle. That was "economism".

The CGT put much effort into political campaigns against militarism, and indeed explicitly against "patriotism". That makes its collapse into supporting the French government in 1914 all the more revealing of the ultimate inadequacy of its strategy.

The syndicalists were not quite "economists". But they curtailed their political agitation by their belief that strong union organisation was ultimately enough, by itself, to make a revolution; and by their fear of the "virus of politics".

They could campaign against reactionary government measures — in 1913, the CGT established a united front with the Socialist Party, to protest against the government introducing a three-year term of compulsory military service — but they could never campaign for positive reforms to be nailed down in law! They could not campaign for votes for women, for example, because their principle was to avoid and reject voting for parliament. All their political activity was done with one hand tied behind their backs.

State

As Trotsky pointed out: “By the manner in which they treat the question [of the state], the syndicalists, unwittingly of course, contribute to the passive conciliation of the workers with the capitalist state.

“When the syndicalists keep drumming into the workers, who are oppressed by the bourgeois state, their warnings about the dangers of a proletarian state, they play a purely reactionary role.

“The bourgeois will readily repeat to the workers: ‘Do not touch the state because it is a snare full of dangers to you’...”

The anarcho-syndicalists had no real idea of how to deal with the bourgeois state, other than the thought that if they could organise a full general strike then bourgeois power would simply collapse. They took great comfort in calculations that compared the numbers of the French army with the length of railway line in France, and concluded that in a perfect general strike the army could not exert control over the railways, let alone over any other industry.

In reality, such a perfect general strike is impossible. Faced with World War One in 1914, the syndicalists knew that their cure-all of a general strike to stop war was impractical. While revolutionary Marxists like Lenin and Luxemburg, who had always rejected the anarchist myth of the perfect general strike, were able to start organising opposition to the war, the CGT collapsed into support for its own government in the war no less abjectly than the parliamentary-reformist socialists.

Only a minority among the syndicalists, people like Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monatte, remained true to their principles. And in the course of doing so, they found that they had to develop their principles, and become “political” revolutionary communists, Marxists.  
The romantic viewpoint

Marx wrote: “In bourgeois economics — and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds — this complete working-out of the human content [by ever-expanding, ever-more-diverse production] appears as a complete emptying-out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing-down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end...”

Only, Marx argues that the working class can and must press forward, through this “working-out”, to overthrowing capital and creating the free association of producers on an extensive and rich rather than a localised and poor basis.

“The mass of workers must themselves appropriate their own surplus labour. Once they have done so — and disposable time thereby ceases to have an antithetical existence — then, on one side, necessary labour time will be measured by the needs of the social individual, and, on the other, the development of the power of social production will grow so rapidly that... disposable time will grow for all. For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. The measure of wealth is then not any longer, in any way, labour time, but rather disposable time”.

“It is as ridiculous”, writes Marx, “to yearn for a return to [the] original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end”.

Anarchism — with the exception of anarcho-syndicalism — is essentially a variant of the “romantic viewpoint”.

Nestor Makhno

David Footman, in his book *Civil War in Russia*, describes the efforts in 1917-21 of the peasant army led by Nestor Makhno.

The "Makhnovshchina" was arguably the largest-scale effort ever made actually to run a significant area on anarchist lines.

Most of the "theoretical" anarchists who joined Makhno quickly quit when they saw that the necessities of battle had brought him to the same wartime expedients which they had damned as "authoritarian Marxism" when employed by the Bolsheviks: military orders, conscription, food requisitions, secret police, summary assassination of opponents (which, for Makhno, most of the time, included Bolsheviks).

Yet Makhno was a serious man of ideas, and had real support among peasants. As Footman records, "Many of [the Makhnovites'] ideas made sense to Ukrainian peasants whose one political obsession was to be rid of any outside interference. Most of their ideas make nonsense when applied to any larger or more developed administrative unit".

The Makhno movement had no idea how to organise towns. It airily told workers concerned at the fact that they had not received wages and had no food to "organise a free economic order from below". At the two workers' conferences which the Makhnovites organised in the area they controlled in October 1919, the big majority of the workers were hostile to the Makhnovites.

To peasants, or small-scale craft workers, used to living their whole lives in small collectives, it can make sense that the small collective should manage its own affairs and deal with whatever it needs from outside its area by ad hoc contracts with other similar collectives.

To the modern wage-worker, used to living in large cities, to moving from job to job and city to city, and conscious that her or his job is part of an enormously ramified chain of production, it makes no sense.

The murmured alternative

The constant whirl of capitalist restructuring implies also a constant whirl of breaking-up and sidelining workers' organisations as they exist at any given time. The organisation constantly requires rebuilding. After a series of defeats, it may stumble at a low level for a long time.

And it may need to be rebuilt in a form seriously different from what it had before the defeats. After the Chartist movement of the British workers in the 1830s and 1840s, and the mostly short-lived trade union organisations associated with it, were defeated, for a long time attempts to organise a revival came to nothing. When the working-class revival came in the 1880s, its form — the New Unionism, mostly in large-scale industry, and the first Marxist groups — was significantly different from that of 1830s and 1840s.

But, so long as capital continues, the workers' movement will rebuild, and its rebuilding will include trade-union organisation, even though we cannot predict the specific forms and tempos.

While the workers' movement remains at a low level, it cannot overthrow capital and make a revolution. But nor can anyone else. The revolutionaries need to decide what long-term work they can do, in relatively quiet times and (if the revolutionaries are not very numerous) on a small scale, which will best prepare the way for mass revolutionary action in the future.

In September 1850 Marx decided that he and his comrades faced a long period when the workers' movement would be at a low level. He broke with the majority of the Communist League exiles in London, with these words:

"We tell the workers: If you want to change conditions and make yourselves capable of government, you will have to undergo fifteen, twenty or fifty years of civil war.

"Now they are told [by the majority]: We must come to power immediately or we might as well go to sleep. The word 'proletariat' has been reduced to a mere phrase, like the word 'people' was by the democrats.

"To make this phrase a reality one would have to declare the entire petty bourgeois to be proletarians, i.e. de facto represent the petty bourgeoisie and not the proletariat. In place of actual revolutionary development one would have to adopt the revolutionary phrase".

Only by a lengthy development within capitalist society (by civil war, Marx evidently means social war, rather than necessarily military battle), does the working class become the revolutionary working class.

To adopt the "revolutionary phrase", that is, to pretend that conditions are always immediately revolutionary, is to end up recommending whatever oppositional movements, or even just protest activities, are immediately to hand, and glossing them up as more than they are, rather than cleaving to the long-term interests of the working class.

Antonio Negri once expressed well a basic idea of Marxism. "The fact that we cannot spell out the alternative does not necessarily mean that it does not exist. It exists as a murmuring among the proletariat".

Marxist tactics are about organising ourselves to hear and listen to that "murmuring among the proletariat", to develop dialogue with it, and by dialogue to raise it first to open speech and then finally to a yell of victory.