



Socialism from Below

It may seem dead obvious but it is impossible to go anywhere without first knowing where you are headed for. Without a clear view of the objective and the forces impeding or aiding your advance towards it one can become "all movement and no direction." One question which a socialist must always have on the tip of her tongue is where am I going and how can I get there? If you are heading for socialism then you must have a clear idea of what, exactly, it is.

"Man is born free but everywhere he finds himself in chains" this phrase rings truer today than ever before. Often the chains are very visible. For example in Nigeria; basically a puppet state of the oil giant; Shell. In a letter recently smuggled out from there nineteen political prisoners known as the Ongi 19 informed the world:

"We are allowed to take our bath just twice a week from a well which was until recently a dumping pit for dead inmates and still contains human skeletons. This is also the source of our drinking water..."

The capitalist system causes wars, disease, famine and misery and is slowly killing our planet. But more than this it sells an illusion of freedom and individual choice while in fact Nigeria, as in most of the world, limiting even the most basic civil liberties. But the choices, **even** for relatively 'affluent consumers' in America and Europe, are pitiful and banal Adidas versus Nike, Spice girls versus Oasis, United versus Liverpool.

What people are lacking, more than anything else in this capitalist world is freedom. The American anarchist Emma Goldman once put the question very well:

"the problem that confronts us today..is how to be one's self and yet in oneness with others, to feel deeply with all human beings and still retain ones own characteristic."

Anarchists aim to build a world where this problem can be solved.

The anarchist version of socialism is a

proposal for a free society. The task is to recreate society so that people can realise their full potential as free individuals. This is the most basic premise of anarchism. That said, there is no such thing as absolute liberty and we would always hold that my right to swing a frying pan ends where your nose begins. Maximum personal freedom must be realised but not at the expense of others.

Freedom is central to anarchism. It is not



an optional extra it is basic to our conception of socialism. The only real guarantee of personal freedom is a non-exploitative, non hierarchical and collectively run system. To only way to create this is to hard wire it in to the struggle for socialism from the very start.

If the end is socialism and freedom than the means (of fighting for it) must justify that end. Freedom requires a particular social environment in which

to blossom and grow. We believe this must be based on direct democracy and direct management of production by ordinary people for the good of all. Direct management of production means that workers must take over their workplaces, decide what is produced, how it is produced and why it is produced. This self-management must be not just on the level of the individual workplace but covering the entire economy.

In many revolutionary struggles workers have thrown up different organisations of worker's control or management to do just this. The Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Spain in 1936, Hungary 1956 and Portugal in 1974 all saw the emergence of workers committees or councils. Even in Ireland during the war of independence; the whole city of Limerick declared itself a soviet for a while.

All of these worker's formations were democratic but the democracy used was direct. Direct democracy is the democracy that anarchists advocate. It is different to parliamentary democracy and Leninist dictatorship in a number of ways:

1. Direct democracy is as much about coming up with new ideas as about giving the nod to proposals already worked out by some set of leaders. It means people originating ideas themselves.
2. It is about delegation. People are elected by assemblies to carry out particular tasks or mandates- if they fail to do this then someone else is elected in their place. Power is in the hands of the assemblies not the delegates.
3. It is about extending democracy to the workplace and therefore to the complete running of society so that we can decided what to produce and how. Only in this manner can socialism become what as the Russian anarchist Michael Bakunin described it:

“the government of industry administered on behalf of the whole community” This would really be ‘government’ by the people, **of** the people and **for** the people but not **on behalf** of the people.

We do not believe that the bosses will not concede this easily or lightly. It will have to be fought for but again the means must justify the end. The tools which are needed and which, we think, should be built into every campaign against capitalism from the start is freedom and real democracy. This means that within unions, community groups and campaigns people must organise in a democratic way and always set their agenda, the must decide what they are fighting for and how they want to get there. This is the only way they can empower themselves and eliminate the dependence on leaders so essential to the functioning of capitalism. As Rudolf Rocker argued in his book *Anarcho-Syndicalism* “Socialism will be free or it will not be at all”

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The Russian Revolution

In 1922 after seeing the product of the Russian revolution first hand, Emma Goldman described how “Soviet Russia had become the modern socialist Lourdes”. Eighty years after the revolution in Russia a reflection on that period has more than just historical value. Many left wing organisations still hold up this era as the model for future revolution. In order to challenge this Bolshevik conception of organisation and revolution we look at what the consequences of this model were.

The Bolsheviks organised as a vanguard party, which intended to lead the revolution. This structure led to particular outcomes and a look at the

will of the soviet leader, of the dictator during the work”. So much for every cook governing. These are not just isolated incidents. The party soon began to institutionalise its dominance, for instance factory committees instead of being allowed to form federations which were hand picked by the party. It is in this context that Daniel Guerin argued that “In fact the power of the soviets only lasted a few months, from October 1917 to the spring of 1918.”

How the Bolsheviks did go about ‘securing’ the revolution? Trotsky as leader of the Red Army reintroduced bourgeois army discipline, not only including executions for desertion but also all the petty regulations like saluting that gave officers special positions. He abolished election of officers writing “*The elective basis is*



‘hidden’ history of the Russian Revolution illustrates this. Lenin in *State and Revolution* talks of a society where every cook shall govern. But in reality the party in its capacity of leader of the revolution was governing. By November 9th 1917 a soviet in the Peoples Commissars of Posts & Telegraphs had already been abolished by decree. Even earlier than this, the revolution having barely liberated the workers from wage slavery, Bolshevik leaders were telling workers that “*the best way to support Soviet Government is to carry on with ones job*”.

Lenin in March 1918 wrote that the party relates to workers by leading “*them along the true path of labour discipline, along the task of coordinating the task of arguing at mass meetings about the conditions of work with the task of unquestioningly obeying the*

An unexpected disaster?

Almost 130 years ago (50 before the soviet revolution) Michael Bakunin described how the nature of “*states, must tend towards complete power and having become powerful it must embark on a career of conquest, so it shall not be conquered*”. This analysis seems to almost prophetically predict the course the Soviet Union took. Bakunin, however was no prophet. When he saw the centralised way, through State power, that the Marxists wanted to bring about revolution, he could make some accurate predictions of the product of that revolution. “*The rule of scientific intellect, the most autocratic, the most despotic, the most arrogant and the most contemptuous of all regimes. They will be a new class, a new hierarchy of sham savants, and the world will be divided into a dominant minority in the name of science, and an immense ignorant majority*”

Was this you..

Bogush was one of the anarchists of Russian origin deported from the USA in 1921 for his part in opposing the imperialist slaughter of world war one. Soon after arriving he went to see the area controlled by the Makhnovists at a time when they were in their third treaty with the Bolsheviks. He was a few hours there when the Bolsheviks for the third time betrayed this treaty, attacking the Makhnovists without warning. He immediately returned to Krakov where he was arrested by the Cheka, and shot in March of 1921.

politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree". The White Terror was responded to with collective punishments, categorical punishments, torture, hostage taking and random punishments, these were not just directed at known 'Whites' but also at their friends and families. On the 3rd of September 1918, *Ivestia* announced that over 500 hostages had been shot by the Petrograd Cheka, not because they had committed a crime but because they were unlucky enough to come from the wrong background.

Some will argue that this terror was legitimised by the White Terror. But the terror by April of 1918 was to be used against political groups that supported the revolution but opposed Bolshevik rule. Over two days in April 1918 40 anarchists were killed or wounded and around 500 put in prison in a series of attacks in Moscow and Petrograd. All the major anarchist publications were banned in May 1918. This despite the fact that anarchists had fought for the revolution in October, four anarchists being on the MRC which coordinated the rising. Over the next four years, hundreds then thousands of anarchists were to be arrested, jailed, tortured, exiled and executed. Other pro-revolution left parties suffered a similar faith and by 1919 so did workers who acted independently against the regime.

Bolshevik modes of organisation have particular outcomes, the centralisation of power. This sort of organisation means that 'Stalin didn't fall from the moon' but was the inheritor of this undemocratic organisation. This is in opposition to 'Socialism from Below' and the motto of the First International, "*The emancipation of the toilers must be the work of the toilers themselves*" and not the work of some 'vanguard' party.



"The irrefutable experience of history has shown that the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of the revolutionary classes"

"...our task is to study the state capitalism of the Germans, to spare no effort in copying it and not shrink from adopting dictatorial methods to hasten the copying of it"

"Socialism is merely the next step forward from state capitalist monopoly. ...socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly"

Lenin

More Information:

1917: http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/russia_wsm.html

Anarchism: <http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/wsm.html>

The Anarchist Alternative

.... We believe, in fact, that in a time of social revolution, what is important for the workers is for them to organise their new life themselves, from the bottom, and with the help of their immediate economic organisations, and not from above, by means of an authoritarian political centre

Trotsky on Socialism from Below

"The very principle of compulsory labour is for the Communist quite unquestionable ... the only solution to economic difficulties that is correct from the point of view both of principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power - an almost inexhaustible reservoir - and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation and utilisation".

"I consider that if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully"
1920, War Communism & Terrorism

"the working class...must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded just like soldiers. Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps"

9th Party Congress, 1920

In attacking an internal faction of the Bolshevik Party at the 10th Party Congress in 1921 he accused them of "*having placed the workers right to elect representatives above the party. As if the party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers democracy.*"

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The S.W.P. & Socialism from Below

Anarchism stands for 'Socialism from below'. This means a future society where ordinary working men and women control all aspects of that society. It also means that struggle for that society must be conducted with that goal in mind. That is, that our organisations must have an internal structure that puts all of the members in direct control of all decisions taken.

The largest non-anarchist organisation that claims to stand for 'Socialism from Below' is the British Socialist Workers Party. What sort of internal life might we expect such an organisation to have if it stands for 'Socialism from below'?

We might expect the following as a (very) bare minimum

"Regular election of all party full-timers, branch and district leadership, conference delegates, etc. with the right of recall..

The right of branches to propose motions to the party conference.

For a regular internal bulletin, open to all members. ...this bulletin should contain a full account of all party activity in every district, with recruitment figures, etc. to the extent that this is compatible with security.

The right for members to communicate horizontally in the party, to produce and distribute their own documents.

For an independent Control Commission to review all disciplinary cases (independent of the leadership bodies that exercise discipline), and the right of any disciplined comrades to appeal directly to party conference."

These points are actually demands taken from a document produced in July 1994 by people who had been expelled from the SWP (the ISG). They described life in the SWP as follows

"The leaderships' control of the party is unchecked by the members. New perspectives are initiated exclusively by the Central Committee (CC) who implement their perspective against all party opposition, implicit or explicit, legitimate or otherwise

"Once a new perspective is declared a new cadre is selected from the top down. The CC select the organisers who select the district and branch committees - any elections that take place are carried out on the basis of 'slates' so that it is virtually impossible for members to vote against the slate proposed by the leadership

"...district committees are appointed rather than elected; the CC monopolise all information concerning the party, so that it is impossible for members to know much about what happens in the party outside their own branch"

"...conferences have no democratic function, but serve only to orientate party ac-

tivists to carry out perspectives drawn up before the delegates even set out from their branches. At every level of the party, strategy and tactics are presented from the top down, as pre-digested instructions for action"

These criticisms make it clear that the decision making structures of the SWP sharply follow a 'Socialism from above' model. A model is so complete that even **discussion** is impossible without the leaderships approval.

This group also demanded *"The right for members to communicate horizontally in the party, to produce and distribute their own documents."* In August of 1995 the SWP leadership in Britain banned SWP members from an email list set up by members of the SWP's international tendencies. They were banned from communicating horizontally with other members of these groups and instead told *"...that debate takes place through the party branches and at national meetings and conferences"*.

In 1991 dissidents in Southampton SWP asked *"When was the last time a motion or slate to conference was opposed?"* and pointed out

"The CC usually stays the same or changes by one member. None of the CC's numerous decisions made over the preceding year are challenged or brought to account"

"...the framework for discussion is set by the CC. The agendas at national events... are set by the CC or its appointees and are never challenged.."

In an interview in the British 'Socialist Worker' in January 1993 Tony Cliff interpreted the failure of the miners struggle against pit closures not on what ideas were influencing the class, or even the level of militancy but on how many people had joined the SWP in the week before! He asked

"Imagine if we had 15,000 members...and 30,000 supporters...socialists could have taken 40 or 50,000 people to parliament...the Tory MP's wouldn't have dared vote with Michael Heseltine. The government would have collapsed" [my emphasis].

This idea of the size of the party as being the sole measure of success or failure has nothing in common with 'Socialism from below'.

This attitude is why the SWP runs front organisations designed to recruit people into the party. The largest of these in recent years has been the ANL, and the way the party leadership related to this was described by the ISG as *"...the party has run the ANL purely as a satellite of the SWP. Local ANL work is organised from SWP branches... In the conference discussion period of 1993 comrades were instructed to make sure that the SWP branches alone organise all ANL work."*

This is an international pattern, the ANL in Ireland never had meetings where its membership could decide what its priorities or tactics should be. In 1994 a split from the German SAG not only described party conferences as *"not exercises in democracy but rallies where the leadership hector the faithful into higher level of activity"*. But also that the German IS group runs a *"tiny anti-fascist alliance consisting of SAG comrades, and treating them like a satellite organisation"*.

Anyone who has been a member of the Irish SWP for more than a couple of months will be aware of these problems. Many join the SWP every year but only a small minority of the organisation remain members beyond six months, the lack of 'Socialism from below' in all aspects of the Parties activity may be the main reason for this. Are many of those who leave do so convinced that 'Socialism from below' is an empty slogan? Few of these people would consider anarchism as in the SWP the only 'education' about anarchism is laughable.

The problem with the SWP's 'Socialism from below' is that it is based on Leninism, a doctrine in theory and practise that is 'Socialism from above'. These four pages can only begin such a discussion, our hope is that people will seek to educate themselves further and in doing so discover the real tradition of 'Socialism from below', and that is anarchism.

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