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Our Program is the Anarchist Revolution!

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Perspectives for Revolutionary Anarchism

Discusses the meaning of “revolution” and whether it is possible. Should revolutionaries support reforms? Should we make demands on the state? Must a revolution be violent?

Around the time of Jesus, a gentile is said to have gone to the famous Rabbi Hillel and offered to convert to Judaism, if Hillel could explain his religion in the time the seeker could stay standing on one leg. Instead of throwing the man out, Hillel said, “What is hateful to you, do not do to others [a version of the Golden Rule]. That is the Law (Torah); all the rest is Commentary.”

If someone were to challenge me to explain the political theory held by my comrades and me, while he or she stood on one leg, I would say, “Our program is the anarchist revolution.” Or something similar, such as, “Our program is the libertarian-socialist revolution.” Or “. . . the international proletarian revolution — the revolution of the world’s working class and all oppressed people.” (I take these to mean the same thing.) All the rest, however important, is “commentary”: surplus value and exploitation, the nature of the state, the role of the family, etc.

“Revolution” is often used to mean a drastic change in society. To many people it is a horrible concept, meaning bloodshed and senseless violence. Oddly enough, I live in a country which boasts that it began in a revolution. It is also used in a fairly meaningless way to mean an exciting change, as appears in advertisements for various services and products which declare that they offer a Banking Revolution! or an Automobile Revolution! or a Revolution in Lipstick!

“Revolution” comes from “revolve,” to turn over. It means to overturn (or overthrow) the ruling class, so that those who were on top are replaced by those who were formerly on the bottom — with the necessary changes in social structures. Throughout history, revolutions did replace one ruling elite with another, even if the new bosses had used the masses merely as tools in overthrowing the old bosses — and often gave some benefits to the working people.

The anarchist revolution proposes to be the most thorough-going revolution ever, not only overturning one ruling class (the capitalist class) but overturning the very existence of ruling classes at all. Instead of being the overturn of one minority by another, it will be the overturn of the capitalist minority by the vast majority of the world. By the very act of taking power, the working people will signal the end of classes and all oppressive social divisions. The existence of a permanent layer of society which specializes in doing the work of the world and another layer which does the directing, deciding, and exploiting, will be done away with.

A revolution is the most democratic event there is. It is the irruption of the masses into history. An anarchist revolution will occur when working people decide to no longer depend on rulers and wise elites to tell them what to do, when the people decide to rely only on themselves and on each other. It occurs when they decide once and for all to be done with all bosses and with the division between bosses and the bossed.

Revolutions Have Happened

If we glance out the window in the U.S. or other industrialized (imperialist) countries, it looks obvious that we are far from any kind of social revolution. Working people generally accept the capitalist system. The general prosperity seems to be more-or-less continuing. The U.S. appears to have destroyed the Soviet Union, which once claimed to stand for “socialism” and “communism” and which boasted “We will bury you!” Bourgeois ideologists claim “the end of history” and a New World Order. At least, they did claim this, before the Iraq war showed the very real limitations of even U.S. imperial power.

Yet we know that there HAVE been revolutions, big, world-shaking, ones. Rarely — because most of the time people do what they feel they have to do, put up with what they must put up with, and make the best of things. But every now and then, the instability of existing conditions shakes people up enough that they suddenly have hope for a better world. Then they rise up and “storm heaven.” Often the revolutionary people have been defeated. But sometimes they have succeeded, even if this meant only replacing one elite with a less repressive or otherwise better new elite. The existing capitalist system we live under came to power in a series of revolutions, sometimes called “the Atlantic revolution.” They included the English revolution (of Cromwell and others), the U.S. revolution, the French revolution, the Latin American revolutions (of Bolivar and others), and the mostly failed European-wide revolution of 1848. These were the bourgeois-democratic revolutions which made the modern world. Whatever democracy, freedom, and benefits of industrialization have been provided by capitalism, were due to these popular revolutions.

Political instability, revolution, near-revolution, and various sorts of social shakeups have characterized recent events. This is easy to forget since world history moves slowly most of the time, taking generations to effect changes, very rarely bursting into explosions. We study history to know that things were not always as they are and will not always stay the same. Revolutionaries are like geologists who study the gradual shifts in the underground tectonic plates and predict that someday there will be a great earthquake in California — even if they cannot say when.

Soon I will be 60 years old. In my first years I was too young to be aware of the Chinese revolution or India’s winning independence. Nor was I aware of the national revolutions of most of Africa, except the later ones in Angola, Mozambique, and South Africa. I was aware of the Cuban revolution and the Vietnamese war of national liberation, the Portuguese revolution, and the U.S. Civil Rights-Black Liberation struggles and the Women’s Liberation movement and Gay Liberation movement. I participated in the antiwar movement of the 60s and the general radicalization which changed our culture enormously. Since then, I have seen the collapse of the Soviet Union, the upheavals in Eastern Europe, the collapse of fascism in Spain, the revolution against the Shah of Iran, and the end of apartheid in South Africa. These regimes had seemed to be eternally indestructible, and now they are gone. If the problems of their countries are far from solved, at least the struggle is on a different basis.

I cite this history of unsuccessful and partially-successful revolutions and of mass struggles not to argue that a working class socialist-anarchist revolution MUST happen or “is inevitable,” as some Marxists do. But neither can we assert that a revolution CANNOT happen. History has not ended. Changes will come,

positive or negative. There will continue to be mass struggles, social upheavals, and revolutions. As Rosa Luxemburg wrote somewhere, “All revolutions fail, except the last.”

In any particular period, capitalism may be more-or-less stable and prosperous, at least in the imperialist sectors of the world. Therefore limited (relative) gains may be won, as they were during the long boom which followed World War II, up to about the late 60s. After the war, it appeared that the working class was able to raise its standard of living significantly, at least in the imperialist nations. Fascism was overcome and democracy reigned (again: at least in the imperialist nations). Even the oppressed nations won political independence and, some of them, a degree of industrialization. Or so it seemed.

However the basic radical critique of capitalism still applies (as developed by libertarian Marxism as well as anarchism). Capitalism is not capable of providing consistent, stable, lasting benefits for the world’s working class and poor. Its economic and industrial development of the “Third World” remains uneven and distorted. The world economy is bumping downhill toward a possible collapse. Wars continue, including the spread of nuclear weapons, with the threat of eventual nuclear wars. Its ecological-environmental crisis threatens terrible devastation upon us all. Capitalism’s commitment to political democracy is limited and easily veers towards authoritarian repression. Our program is the socialist-anarchist revolution, not only because it would be a good thing — but because we NEED an anarchist revolution. To quote Luxemburg again, the eventual alternatives are “socialism or barbarism.”

Should Revolutionaries Advocate Reforms?

Most of the time, most struggles are for improvements under the existing system: higher wages and better working conditions, publicly supported health care, anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action policies for People of Color and for women, the right to form unions, protection from police spying, environmental protection, an end to whatever is the current war, and so on. None of these, in themselves, challenge the existence of capitalism and its state. There is a long history of far-leftists who prove how very “revolutionary” they are by refusing to support such demands and even opposing them, denouncing them as “palliatives” and “sops and lures.” Such attitudes exist among many today. Similarly there are many anarchists who oppose the very existence of unions (or at least those which are not “revolutionary unions”). After all, unions make deals with the capitalists rather than seek to overthrow them! There are even radicals who argue against defending the standard of living of U.S. workers until most U.S. workers are as poor as people in the oppressed nations. Not to mention certain “primitivists” who want everyone to live on the level of pre-civilization hunter-gatherers.

My trend of revolutionary anarchists is definitely FOR supporting struggles for such reforms. We are part of the working class and the general population, not a morally superior minority which stands above them and judges them. So long as we are forced to live under capitalism, we think it is a good thing for people to eat better and to have more leisure. People have the right to want things to be better and, at least, not to have their children pressured into joining the military and killing and being killed. People should not have to wait for

the revolution before fighting for small improvements in their lives — nor will they wait. This is especially true in the long nonrevolutionary periods between revolutions.

The issue is HOW we fight for reforms. The key strategic principle is that WE DO NOT ACCEPT THE LIMITS OF CAPITALISM. When the bosses say that they cannot afford raises, and even demand rollbacks, or the state declares that it cannot pay for public healthcare, most union officials and such go along with this. These “leaders” of the working class declare that they do not want to bankrupt the company or bust the government budget. This is regarded as “realism.”

In our view, every ruling class makes a deal with its working class. In the U.S., the capitalists get to have riches beyond the dreams of kings of the past. In return they have given the workers a (relatively) high standard of living (if not as high as the Scandinavian countries) and a (relative) degree of freedom and democracy (these benefits went mainly to white people, of course). Similarly, the rulers of the former Soviet Union got to have uncontrolled power and wealth in return for giving their workers guaranteed jobs, housing, and health care, even if all of a low quality.

When the capitalists start to attack the standard of living of the workers — as they have been doing for over a decade now — we point out that they are breaking their social promise. If they cannot maintain prosperity and freedom for everyone in this highly industrialized nation, then let someone else run the country — that is, the workers. If the company cries poverty, then let the workers look at the books and the processes of production. If the owners cannot run the firm and pay the workers, then they should be expropriated and the plant (office, yards, whatever) be managed by the workers and community. The state says it cannot pay for social services (it even lost the whole city of New Orleans). Then let us replace the state with an association of social agencies. Meanwhile we do not accept rollbacks in wages and cuts in social services. We denounce union leaders and union-supported politicians who accept these attacks on the workers.

The same goes in all areas. When the U.S. government gets “stuck” in a war, as it is now, the liberal Democrats are concerned how to get out while still maintaining U.S. imperial concerns. The “leaders” of the peace movement are worried about how to elect such bourgeois politicians to office and how to persuade them to carry out more “reasonable” policies. Instead we reject the whole international politics of nation states, imperialism, and power politics, talk of “we” and “they,” and demand immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces everywhere, and indeed oppose all U.S. military power.

This orientation goes together with a strategic approach in the movements of the workers and oppressed people. Anarchist workers are consistently for militancy and for political independence of the working class. In each particular instance we think about how to increase militancy and independence, how to mobilize people to fight harder and more successfully against the rulers. The more militant, independent, and democratic — that is, revolutionary — the struggle is, the more the rulers are likely to grant reforms. The existence of a revolutionary wing of a movement makes it more likely that the bosses will deal with the reformists (as Malcolm X pointed out during the Civil Rights movement). Even in a period when only reforms can be won, a revolutionary movement is needed.

Revolutionaries support struggles for reforms because they are struggles. Anything which gets the people moving against the rulers is good. Anything which increases their self-reliance and willingness to struggle is good. Revolutions do not begin as revolutions. They begin as class struggles.

The distinction between reform and revolution is not necessarily a sharp one; it depends on the context. In times of stability and prosperity, reform struggles are good only as promises for the future. But when the system starts hitting difficulties — as it has begun to do — then reform demands may be the trigger for revolutionary upheavals. This has happened over and over again in the course of past revolutions (let me mention the fight over the British tax on tea which precipitated the U.S. revolution or the demonstration of working class women demanding bread which set off the Russian revolution).

Should Anarchists Support Reform Demands on the State?

Marxists and social democrats call for reforms through state action. They believe that statism is the answer: either a state-owned economy or at least a capitalist economy with strong state regulation and intervention. Anarchists have always opposed state-capitalist programs. The state is another capitalist instrument of oppression; it can never be anything else. We wish to smash it, not enhance it.

However, while the state is not better than private corporations, neither is it necessarily worse. Our attitude toward demands on the state should be of a tactical, not a principled, character. For example, it is clear that the drive toward “privatization” of public services (turning government-provided services over to private businesses) is meant as an attack on working people. It is a way to get rid of job protection for public employees and to cut services for the working class community. For these reasons, workers are right to oppose it and anarchists should be part of the struggle against privatization.

Under capitalism, the state claims to represent the community, indeed to BE the community, the “public.” This claim should be exposed as the lie that it is by demanding that the state act in the interests of the community. In practice, the state has a lot of money and it does regulate the overall policies of the capitalist class. Anarchist workers can make demands on this state the same way that we make demands on the management of any capitalist firm. If we can demand that a business raise our wages, then we can demand that the state raise the minimum wage. If we can demand that a business cut hours of labor without lowering wages, then we can demand from the state a legally shorter work week without cuts in pay. This is the principle of a socialist-anarchist economy: all the work being divided among all the workers, and all the produced wealth divided among all the workers.

But anarchist workers must not get involved in managing the state (either this one or a new one) — any more than we should be involved in managing a capitalist business (unlike the union bureaucrats who sit on some boards of directors). We must not get entangled in electoral politics (referenda are different). When the workers of, say, Bolivia, demand that their natural resources be nationalized, taken out of the hands of foreign capitalists, we agree but say it

should be UNDER CONTROL OF THE WORKERS AND COMMUNITIES, not the state. When U.S. left liberals call for a single-payer health plan (“socialized medicine”), we should support it, but demand that it be run by health cooperatives and community organizations, not bureaucratic machines.

Reforms, Not Reformism

Supporting reforms does not necessarily mean supporting the strategy of liberalism or reformism. Liberals wish to use reforms to make capitalism clean up its act, to provide a better life for workers, stop discriminating against People of Color, and stop waging war on small nations (at least without allies). They would file down the rough edges of our chains. Historically, the category of socialist reformists (social democrats) were bolder, at least in imagination. They wanted to use reforms to gradually, incrementally, and peacefully turn capitalism into socialism. This was the goal of the Fabian Socialists of Britain, the Possibilists of France, and the Revisionists of Germany. Today the great “socialist” parties of Europe no longer claim to be for any new kind of society, ever. They are liberal, if not neo-liberal, the equivalent of the U.S. Democratic Party. The same is mostly true for the European Communist Parties.

As I have discussed elsewhere, there is a widespread reformist version of anarchism today. Following a program going back at least to Proudhon, it wishes to move from capitalism to socialist-anarchism by a gradual, incremental, and peaceful process. It hopes to do this by forming cooperatives, community centers, and other alternate institutions and activities, until these eventually overwhelm the old society. Presumably GM and United Steel would be replaced by producer cooperatives. The bourgeois state is not expected to notice these goings-on, and to permit itself and the class it serves to be replaced, without cracking down.

This is all a dangerous, if pleasant, fantasy. The bourgeois class did grow its “alternate institutions” (businesses) in the interstices of the feudal order, and yet it still had to fight the “Atlantic revolution” before it could establish capitalism. During the post-World War II prosperity, reforms were granted only minimally and under pressure; there was still plenty of poverty even in the imperialist countries; there was racial oppression and gender oppression; there were wars of aggression. In the “Third World” revolutionary struggles were met with counterrevolutionary terror in Central America, South America, and elsewhere. Even reformist programs, as in Allende’s Chile, were drowned in blood. Now the world is sinking into economic decline and crisis. How can we expect peaceful reform to transform existing societies without the violent resistance of the state? How? Why?

I am not criticizing coops or such as benefits, as a sort of “reform.” They are good in themselves and useful auxiliaries to the struggle. Alternate media, including internet sites, is extremely useful for getting the message out. But this is not the strategy for successfully overcoming capitalism and the state!

Revolution does not have to be violent. In the U.S., for example, 80% of the population is working class (in the sense of depending on employee pay). If they were mostly united around a revolutionary program, if they had won the support of the ranks of the armed forces (sons and daughters of the working class), and if they were determined to get their way, no matter what — then

the ruling class might be demoralized and give in fairly easily. This would be especially true if revolutions had already been won in other countries.

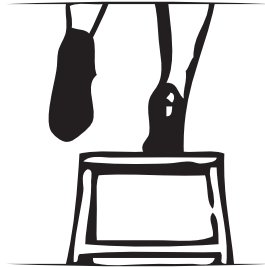
But there is no guarantee that this would happen. The U.S. capitalist class is ruthless and merciless, as can be seen right now in world politics. It has not scrupled to overturn democratic regimes and replace them with military dictatorships in other countries and it would do the same in the U.S. if it thought it was necessary. It is supported by a huge “middle class.” There are deep racist, sexist, and conservative-religious sentiments among vast sections of the middle and working classes. A revolutionary working class might be faced by a highly polarized, deeply divided, population. It may have to fight just to prevent fascist repression; it might bring in revolutionary forces from Mexico to support itself. All this depends on the capitalist class and its allies.

Fortunately, our class has something besides numbers and possible arms to defend itself with. Having our hands on the economic levers of industry, transportation, and services, we can stop society or start it up again on a different basis. This is the especial power of the proletariat. This does not mean that self-defense is not needed; police and fascist terror must be resisted. But it makes it possible to have a positive outcome.

Reformists argue that all revolutions have failed in the past. This is not true, in the sense that the people have won benefits from past revolutions, including the democracy and freedom of the capitalist countries, however limited. But we agree that no previous revolution has ended the rule of oppressive minorities. We cannot prove that a revolution would succeed now. However, reformism has not resulted in the end of capitalist rule either — neither the state socialist version of reformism nor the moderate anarchist version. This is a matter of reasoned analysis and then of faith and commitment.

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