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Lessons of the Israeli-Lebanese War

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Author's Note: The war between Israel and Hezbollah is temporarily over. The left has taken a range of positions on the Israeli-Lebanese war. Anarchists have opposed the U.S.-Israeli aggression, pointing out the reactionary nature of both sides in the war. However, many have tended to equate the two sides, to treat them as equally bad, and to call for opposing the war on both sides. While there is a good deal of confusion on this issue among anarchists, it is my impression that most have failed to support the oppressed against the oppressor in this war.

The Anarchist Debate About National Liberation

The war between Israel (with full backing by the U.S.) and Hezbollah (and the rest of Lebanon) is over — temporarily. “Temporarily” because no major issue has been settled, particularly Israel’s colonialist role in the Middle East. Meanwhile the war between the U.S. and Iraq has intensified, while the Iraqi sectarian civil war also increases. The U.S.-Afghanistan war continues. And there is good evidence that the Bush administration intends to attack Iran. Peace is not at hand.

The Left, such as it is, has taken a range of positions on the Israeli-Lebanese war, as part of its positions on the Middle Eastern wars in general. First, the liberals have continued to support the U.S. state as well as the Israeli state, but have wanted them to clean up their acts, to show smarter and more sophisticated behaviors. For years, the liberal wing of the U.S. antiwar movement has fought to keep the issue of Israel vs. the Palestinians out of antiwar protests. Now that they had to directly address U.S.-Israeli aggression, they claimed that, while Israel had the “right” to “defend itself,” it was being “excessive” and “disproportionate.” Instead, these pro-Israeli doves advocated a “cease-fire,” equating the two sides, the aggressor and the victim. They should both stop fighting. Mostly liberals supported the demand for Hezbollah to disarm (but not a call for Israel to disarm!). They cheer on the current (temporary) resolution of the war by which various imperialist powers and other states intervene as sheriffs to “keep the peace,” more or less.

Secondly, the radical Left mostly became a cheering squad for Hezbollah, as well as Hamas, as it had for the fundamentalist-led resistance in Iraq. (No one is cheering on the Taliban in Afghanistan; this would be too much even for most radical Leftists, I guess.) I am speaking of the Workers World Party and its fronts and splits, as well as the International Socialist Organization in the U.S. and its co-thinkers, the Socialist Workers Party in Britain — among others. They have focused on the undeniable evils of the Israeli attack and on the popular support for Hezbollah which has swept Lebanon and the rest of the Arab and Muslim world.

This has a somewhat odd effect. During the U.S.-Vietnam war, it was possible to portray the “Communist” side (Stalinist-totalitarian nationalists) as “socialists.” But there is no way to put a progressive spin on Hezbollah and like-minded forces. They are for theocratic dictatorships, with no rights for dissident religions, minority nationalities, workers, or women. In the absence of an alternative, they have become the leaders of movements for national defense against foreign occupations. This can and should be said. But for secular Leftists to uncritically hail them as though they were proletarian socialists is bizarre. For anarchists, the point is not just that we do not like such ideas, but that these programs will not liberate Lebanon and other countries from imperialism. Only the anarchist program can do that.

Thirdly, the anarchists have clearly opposed the U.S.-Israeli aggression. They have pointed out the reactionary nature of both sides in the war. However, many have tended to equate the two sides, to treat them as equally bad, and to call for opposing the war on both sides. While there is a good deal of confusion on this issue among anarchists, it is my impression that most have failed to support the oppressed against the oppressor in this war (and in the other Middle Eastern wars).

Instead, I propose a different anarchist approach: Revolutionary anarchists should, at the same time, (1) be in solidarity with the people of the oppressed nation against the oppressor (in this case Lebanon against the U.S.-Israel), while (2) politically opposing all bourgeois-statist (nationalist, Islamist, etc.) programs and leaderships (here Hezbollah, other nationalists, etc.) in favor of revolutionary, internationalist socialist-anarchism. By “solidarity” I mean being “on the side of” the people of the oppressed nation, supporting them against attacks from their oppressors. (Which does not prevent us from sympathy for Israeli — and U.S. — soldiers, but this is a sympathy due to their humanity and their working class background, not a solidarity with their being soldiers.)

It does NOT mean slogans such as “Victory to Hezbollah!” or “We are all Hezbollah!”, slogans which imply political agreement with Hezbollah. Recently a group of Gay anarchists in New York City called off a demonstration at the Iranian embassy against the persecution of Iranian Gays. They did not want to play into the hands of U.S. government preparations for war against Iran. I would have preferred that they demonstrated, with signs saying, “U.S. State, Hands Off Iran! Iranian State, Hands Off Gays!”

Class and Non-Class Oppressions

This issue is an aspect of a broader question: the relationship between class issues and specific nonclass issues when seeking liberation. The problem of oppression may be divided between class exploitation and other, nonclass, forms of oppression. Class exploitation refers to the way the capitalists pump surplus value out of the workers (and also to the exploitation of peasants by landlords and capitalists). Nonclass oppressions include the oppression of women (gender), of People of Color (race), of Gays and Lesbians (homophobia), of minority religions, of youth, etc., as well as national oppression. Working class oppression is specific to capitalism and its resolution requires socialist revolution. The other oppressions (even that of the peasants — who are still a large proportion of humanity) are often remnants from pre-capitalism. They are forms of oppression which capitalism, in its revolutionary youth, “promised” to abolish. This was the bourgeois-democratic program as raised in the great capitalist revolutions of England, the U.S., France, and Latin America.

Of course, the capitalists never lived up to their democratic program. They have rather integrated specific oppressions into their system as bulwarks of capitalist exploitation. Some of these oppressions may have been started by early capitalism or by pre-capitalist class exploitation (that is, by economic forces) — but they have taken on lives of their own and exist on their own inertia. All forms of oppression, including class, are intertwined, lean on each other, and prop up each other.

Historically, the class struggle tendency within anarchism (anarchist-syndicalism and most anarchist-communism) has focused on the workers’ class struggle against the capitalists. They have often treated nonclass oppressions as unimportant, as illusions created by the capitalists to trick the workers, to split and weaken the working class. Once this is pointed out to the workers, supposedly, they would see through this trick and unite against the bosses. This simplistic view is also raised in a crude version of Marxism.

In the radicalization of the 60s and 70s, there were upheavals by African-

Americans, women, Gays and Lesbians, and other oppressed people, including worldwide struggles by oppressed nations against imperialism. In our current period of radicalization, the vital importance of the working class has been recognized by many radicals. Only the workers, as workers, could stop all society in its tracks and start it up on a new, nonexploitative, basis. The working class overlaps with and includes all other oppressed groupings: women, most People of Color, and so on. To the extent that it is true that the working class is conservative, or at least nonrevolutionary, this is the same as saying that most of the population is nonrevolutionary. There is no other, nonclass, majority capable of overthrowing capitalism.

However, the true lessons of the sixties remain. It is impossible to ignore the importance of the special, nonclass, oppressions. For example, racism was created by early capitalism as a justification for African enslavement (that is, of exploitation of a form of labor). And it continues to have class advantages for the capitalists. But it has also taken on a life of its own. Racism is real. The prejudices, and even hatred, which many white workers hold for People of Color does not depend on rational causes and will not immediately vanish with good arguments about the value of class unity. We cannot call on African-Americans to stop fighting for their specific democratic rights until the white population gives up its racism.

An understanding of the reality of special oppressions does not deny the valid insights of historical materialism. It does not deny the importance of class analysis. To repeat, many oppressions were created by current or past material (class) factors. All of them interact with capitalism (that is, the capital-labor relationship). All are affected by capitalism, as they affect it in turn (dialectically, shall we say). For example, the oppression of women predates capitalism, and may even predate class society of any type (we really do not know). But it has been greatly modified by capitalism to fit the bourgeois family and the capitalist economy.

National Oppression and Liberation

Most anarchists today (with certain sectarian exceptions) accept the reality and importance of specific, nonclass, oppressions. Mostly anarchists are committed to the struggle for specific democratic rights by women, African-Americans, Native Americans, Gays and Lesbians, prisoners, and other oppressed groups.

But strangely enough, many anarchists who champion nonclass liberation struggles often refuse to support national liberation (here meaning the same as national self-determination: the right of a people to determine its own fate). National liberation is also not a direct class struggle, even though its connections to capitalism are pretty clear. That is, the big capitalists of the industrialized nations seek to expand their wealth by dominating the weaker, “underdeveloped,” nations. The international capitalists seek to super-exploit the workers of these nations (workers who accept lower wages), to sell goods to their states and populations, and to loot their natural resources — oil being the most important resource but not the only one. This is imperialism. Since the imperialist states no longer directly “own” colonies, this is its neocolonialist phase. The oppressed people of these nations are mostly workers, peasants, and small shopkeepers. But they also include “middle class” and upper class layers. These

either aspire to be the local agents of imperialism or to replace the imperialists as the new rulers (or both).

In reaction to foreign oppression, the people of these nations develop a desire for national freedom. First they want their “own” state, and then other measures of independence from the imperialists, such as not being invaded, as well as not being economically dominated. In the absence of an alternative they turn to nationalism. Nationalism is not just a love of one’s country and a desire for its freedom. As a developed program, it means the unity of all sectors of a country, the rich and poor, capitalists and workers, landlords and peasants, patriarchal men and women, the dominant nation and minorities, all “united” against other nations, including THEIR workers, peasants, women, and national/racial minorities. The aim is an independent national state, with its own army, secret police, flag, and postage stamps, and its own national rulers. Meanwhile the capitalists of the imperialist countries encourage nationalism (or patriotism) among their workers, to maintain their rule and use the workers as soldiers against the oppressed nations.

As a program in oppressed nations, nationalism may win some benefits for the people, and even more benefits for its aspiring new rulers. But it cannot free any nation from the world market or the power politics of great states. It cannot achieve real independence. As can be seen from the fate of China and Vietnam, as well as India and the African states, nationalism has resulted in new oppressions. Franz Fanon wrote penetratingly about this. The worst example of the way the nationalism of an oppressed people has resulted in new oppression, is Zionist Israel. Only an international revolution by the working class and all the oppressed can free the oppressed nations. (I am asserting this here, not arguing for it.)

But nationalism is not the same as national liberation. Similarly, bourgeois varieties of feminism are not the same as women’s liberation. Black liberation is not the same as liberal integrationism or Farakhan’s nationalism. It is possible to be for national liberation without being for the program of nationalism. An example of a national liberation struggle being waged with a non-nationalist program was that of Nestor Makhno’s anarchist-led effort in the Ukraine from 1917 to 1921. This was fueled by the Ukrainians’ hatred of foreign occupation by German-Austrian imperialism, Russian Bolshevism, and Polish aggression. Makhno’s anarchist biographer calls it “*a savage war of national liberation*.” (Skirda, 2004, p. 44). But Makhno never ceased to raise class issues (domination by the capitalists and landlords) and to advocate socialist-anarchist internationalism.

The Makhnovist movement declared (in October 1919), “*Each national group has a natural and indisputable entitlement to . . . maintain and develop its national culture in every sphere. It is clear that this . . . has nothing to do with narrow nationalism of the ‘separatist’ variety. . . We proclaim the right of the Ukrainian people (and every other nation) to self-determination, not in the narrow nationalist sense of a Petliura, but in the sense of the toilers’ right to self-determination.*” (in Skirda, 2004, pp. 377–378)

Arguments Against National Liberation

Most anarchist arguments against supporting national liberation are based in anarchism's well-founded opposition to nationalism. Anarchists do not believe that founding new states will free oppressed people. Class struggle anarchists emphasize the centrality of the class struggle, and also point out the other (nonclass) conflicts within each nation. Anarchists oppose the politics and organization of bourgeois-statist erstwhile rulers, whether they call themselves Ayatollahs or socialists or Little Brothers of the Poor. All this is absolutely correct.

But it does not mean that anarchists must oppose national liberation or be neutral when an imperialist or colonialist state attacks an oppressed ("Third World") nation. Anarchists must be on the side of the oppressed. Once again: there is no contradiction between solidarity with the oppressed people under attack and being in political opposition to the misleaders of that people. Similarly, we can support a workers' strike and stand in solidarity with the workers and their union, while being the bitterest foes of the union bureaucracy. If anarchists can do this, then they can do the same with national wars by oppressed nations.

Some anarchists have made the argument that they should not support oppressed nations because... there are no such thing as nations. Nations do not exist! As if France and Argentina are not real. It is true that nations are social constructions — that is, they are created by people as opposed to being biological categories. It is true that the boundaries of nations are often unclear: is Quebec a nation? If so, then is Canada a nation? Is India a nation or a conglomeration of many nations? These points are valid but apply also to other categories. Classes are social constructions. The boundaries between classes are unclear. Are the unemployed part of the working class or are they "lumpen proletarians"? Is the "middle class" a class? The same is true of other categories. Even gender, biologically based as it is, is socially constructed in how society interprets that biological given. This does not mean that class or gender is an illusion any more than nations are illusions.

People believe they are in nations and act on that belief. An institution is nothing else than a pattern of mass behavior. Michael Bakunin wrote, "*Nationality, like individuality, is a natural fact. It denotes the inalienable right of individuals, groups, associations, and regions to their own way of life. And this way of life is the product of a long historical development [a confluence of human beings with a common history, language, and a common cultural background]. And this is why I will always champion the cause of oppressed nationalities struggling to liberate themselves from the domination of the state.*" (Dolgoft, 1980, p. 401) By "*nationality... is a natural fact,*" he means, not that nationality is a biological fact, but that it is created mostly by unplanned, unpurposive, social history.

Another argument is that national self-determination (liberation) is a democratic right, and anarchists should not be for democratic rights or for democracy. Democracy and its rights were, after all, raised by the capitalist class as a weapon against the feudal lords. It has served, and continues to serve, as a cover for capitalist rule. It has also been raised by Leninists (Trotskyists and Stalinists alike) as a cover for their state-capitalist rule. Again, these points are true.

It would be disastrous for anarchists to position themselves as antidemocratic. Anarchism should be presented as the most radical, thorough-going, and consistent form of democracy. Democracy did not begin with capitalism. The very term comes from classical Greece. It goes back to tribal councils of early humanity. It includes the struggles for freedom of the bourgeois-democratic revolutions, including the later struggles of the abolitionists. It includes the hope of workers' democracy.

The problem with capitalism (and Leninism) is not democracy but a lack of democracy and of democratic rights. Capitalism has betrayed its own democratic promises. Anarchists will make good those promises: free speech and association; no racial, national, or gender discrimination; land to the peasants; popular control of all institutions; and self-determination for all nations — among others.

Internationalism is Our Goal

Internationalists say “Workers have no country!” and “Workers of the world, unite!” But international working class unity is not yet a reality. It is a potentiality, something which can happen. And it is a goal, something we wish to happen. How shall we get there? Do we ask the oppressed to downplay their interests for the sake of a false unity? Do we ask People of Color or women or oppressed nationalities really to subordinate themselves to the better-off layers of the working class (the “labor aristocracy”) of the imperialist countries? Or do we seek to build working class unity by the better-off expressing solidarity with the most-oppressed? It is not the Lebanese Shiites who should give up their fight but the Israeli oppressors to whom we place the demand to give up their national privileges. Let the workers of Israel give up their support for national superiority and a “Jewish state” — then the workers and peasants of southern Lebanon can justly give up their need to defend themselves from the Zionist aggressors.

The differences between the world-spanning power of U.S. imperialism and its junior partners and the weak, poorer, oppressed nations of the Middle East and elsewhere has been made clear for all the world to see. It can be seen in the smashed cities and villages of Lebanon, as in the war-torn streets of Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. It is absurd to treat a war between the U.S.-Israel and Arab peoples as the same as a war between France and Germany, two imperialisms. In the last case, workers should oppose both sides equally. Many anarchists misuse the slogan, “No war but class war!” This applies to wars among imperialist states (as in World Wars I and II) but not to wars between an imperialist state and an oppressed people. I would say, “No war but the just wars of the workers and oppressed!”

As Peter Kropotkin wrote, “*True internationalism will never be obtained except by the independence of each nationality, little or large, compact or disunited — just as [the essence of] anarchy is in the independence of each individual. If we say, no government of man over man [Note], how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?*” (quoted in Miller, 1976, p. 231)

As we are in solidarity with a strike while opposing the union bureaucracy, so we should be in solidarity with the people of oppressed nations while opposing

their nationalist leaders. The world is a complex place, with much interconnection and overlapping of systems of oppression. We need concrete analyses of each situation (for example, the situation in Quebec is quite different from that of Iraq). Slogans are not enough. We need a sophisticated effort to express our politics.

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