

# The Anarchist Alternative to Leninism

## Socialism from Below?

The SWP/IST claim that they stand for “*socialism from below.*” It argues that it “*believes that the power to win real change comes from below. . . We offer a vision of a society based on workers’ control, a society with real democracy. Socialism requires the mass activity of millions of people.*”

Anarchists agree with this vision. Indeed, we have used the symbolism of “*from below*” much longer than Marxists. Proudhon in 1848 said he was a “*revolutionary from below*” and that every “*serious and lasting Revolution*” was “*made from below, by the people.*” Bakunin argued that “*future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and*

*finally in a great federation, international and universal.*”

If Bolshevism is “*socialism from below*” then why do anarchists reject it? Simply because its rhetoric hides an authoritarian reality. Marx dismissed Bakunin’s vision of revolution being “*the free organisation of the working masses from below upwards*” as “*nonsense.*” Lenin argued in 1905 that “*the principle, ‘only from below’ is an anarchist principle.*” He stressed that Marxism stood for “*From above as well as from below*” and that “*renunciation of pressure also from above is anarchism.*” As the history of the Russian Revolution proved, this signifies the destruction of workers’ power, democracy and freedom by party rule.

### Socialism from Above

Pressure “*from above*” meant “*pressure by the revolutionary government on the citi-*

A spectre is haunting the left - the spectre of anarchism. All the powers of the old left have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre: SWP and CP, New Labour and Fourth International, AWL and the Socialist Party.

Two things result from this fact:

I. Anarchism is already acknowledged by all the Left to be itself a power.

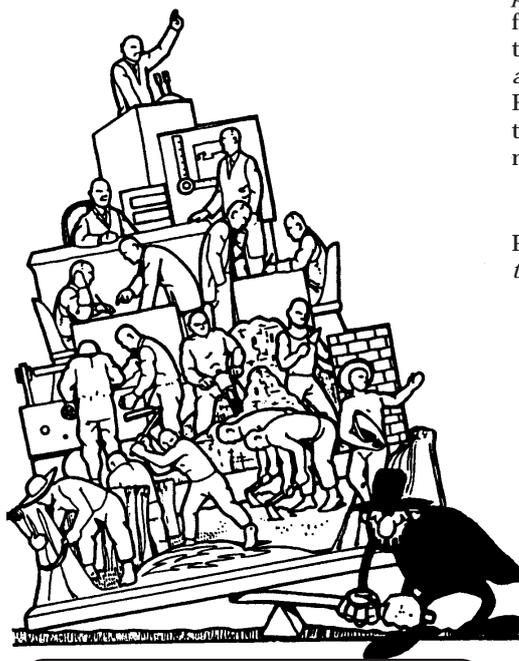
II. It is high time that Anarchists should explain their views, their aims, their tactics and meet this nursery tale of the spectre of anarchism with an explanation of the real differences between Anarchism and Leninism. This leaflet can be but an introduction to this task.

This text is from a leaflet distributed at Marxism 2001 in London, an annual Leninist conference organised by the SWP.

zens.” Once in power, Lenin argued that “*revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.*” The question of course arises — who decides what a “*wavering*” or “*unstable*” element is? Simple, the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” — but what is meant by that term?

Leninists point to Lenin’s **State and Revolution** for details. In it he explains that it is “*an immense expansion of democracy*” and the suppression “*by force*” of the “*exploiters and oppressors of the people.*”

Much that passes for ‘Marxism’ in State and Revolution is pure anarchism — for example, the substitution of revolutionary militias for professional armed bodies and the substitution of self-managed working class organs for parliamentary bodies can be found in Bakunin’s works. Both he and Proudhon had argued for mandated and recallable delegates years before it was applied in the Paris Commune and praised by Marx. What is authentically Marxist in Lenin’s pamphlet is the demand for “*strict centralism,*” its support for representative rather than delegate democracy and the



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### Rhetoric versus Reality

“*the Russian Soviet Republic. . . is the most highly centralized government that exists. It is also the most democratic government in history.*

*For all the organs of government are in constant touch with the working masses, and constantly sensitive to their will.*” Zinoviev to the IWW (1920)

“*soviet rule in Russia could not have been maintained for three years — not even three weeks — without the iron dictatorship of the Communist Party. Any class conscious worker must understand that the dictatorship of the working class can be achieved only by the dictatorship of its vanguard, i.e., by the Communist Party. . . . All questions . . . , on which the fate of the proletarian revolution depends absolutely, are decided . . . in the framework of the party organisations.*” Zinoviev in *Kommunistische Rundschau* (1920)

identification of the soviets with a state.

Moreover, nowhere in that work is there any mention of the use of coercion against the working class. He does state that the dictatorship of the proletariat was “*the organization of the vanguard of the oppressed as the ruling class.*” This “*vanguard*” is the party: “*By educating the workers’ party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power.*” So the vanguard of the oppressed would become the “*ruling class*”, **not** the oppressed. This is the key contradiction for Bolshevism — it confuses workers’ power with party power.

### **Bolsheviks and Proletarians**

According to Lenin and Trotsky there is no difference between party power and workers’ power. As Lenin put it in **Left-Wing Communism**, “*the very presentation of the question — ‘dictatorship of the Party or dictatorship of the class, dictatorship (Party) of the leaders or dictatorship (Party) of the masses?’ — is evidence of the most incredible and hopeless confusion of mind.*” He stressed that “*to go so far in this matter as to draw a contrast in general between the dictatorship of the masses and the dictatorship of the leaders, is ridiculously absurd and stupid.*”

This, by necessity, excludes democracy. In the same year, he argued that the transition from capitalism to communism could not come about via mass, democratic organization:

*“the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts... that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot direct exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard ... for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.”*

This conclusion was not applicable just for the terrible conditions in revolutionary Russia but was rather of a **general** nature. He re-iterated this “*lesson*” in 1921: “*after two and a half years of Communist rule we stood before the entire world and said at the Communist International that the dictatorship of the proletariat is impossible in any other way but through the dictatorship of the Communist Party.*”

Trotsky drew the same conclusion and repeated it the rest of his life. As he argued in 1937: “*The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is... an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities — the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory... The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution... Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the ‘dictatorship’ of the whole toil-*

*ing people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions.”*

Nowhere did they bother to explain how this was compatible with Lenin’s claims of 1917 that “*all officials, without exception,*” would be “*elected and subject to recall, at any time.*”

Lenin’s and Trotsky’s argument that party dictatorship was required due to political differences (“uneven development”) within the class had a long history in Bolshevism and existed well before the Russian Civil War. During the 1905 Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks had argued that “*only a strong party along class lines can guide the proletarian political movement and preserve the integrity of its program, rather than a political mixture of this kind, an indeterminate and vacillating political organisation such as the workers council represents and cannot help but represent.*” In other words, the soviets could not reflect workers’ interests because they were elected by the workers!

Thus “*revolutionary*” party reproduces the usual division of labour that exists in any class society — a few think and give the orders while the many obey. As Victor Serge, anarchist turned Bolshevik, put it in 1919, the party “*is in a sense the nervous system of the class*” and its “*consciousness.*” And the working class? Well, it is “*carrying out all the menial tasks required by the revolution*” while “*sympathising instinctively with the party.*”

Unsurprisingly, there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of workers’ control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921

### **Bolshevism in power**

Leninists point to the Russian Revolution as evidence for the democratic nature of their politics. Anarchists point to it as evidence of Leninism’s authoritarian nature. Both can do this because there is a substantial difference between Bolshevism **before** it took power and afterwards. While the Leninists ask you to judge them by their manifesto, anarchists say judge them by their record! So what was this record like?

### **Soviet Democracy**

Post-October, effective power in local soviets relentlessly gravitated to executive committees and plenary sessions became increasingly symbolic and ineffectual. Executive bodies usually controlled soviet congresses, though the party often disbanded congresses that opposed major aspects of current policy. Local soviets had little input into forming national policy. The highest soviet organ, the Central Executive Committee, was overshadowed by the Council of People’s Commissars. In the first year, only 68 of 480 decrees were actually submitted to it, and even fewer drafted by it.

The spring of 1918 saw the success of Menshevik-SR opposition in soviet elections

## *Spain, 1936*

***Marxists point to the Spanish Revolution as evidence that anarchism is flawed. However, they fail to consider the objective conditions faced by the Spanish Anarchists (CNT-FAI) and instead blame anarchist theory.***

On July 19th, Franco’s military coup was defeated in Barcelona by a mass uprising led by the CNT-FAI. On July 20th, the Catalan president offered them power but they refused and instead collaborated with other anti-fascists. The bourgeois parties and state used this collaboration to regain their strength, undermining and then destroying the spontaneous social revolution that broken out. Ultimately, Franco won, due, in part, to this betrayal.

The question is why did the CNT-FAI do this? Simply because the situation in the rest of Spain was unknown. To implement libertarian communism, it was argued, would have meant fighting both the fascists and the Republic. Such a war would only aid Franco (as it did when the Republican state attacked the revolution). While this was a terrible mistake, it was an understandable one. The CNT-FAI ignored one key aspect of anarchism, namely the destruction of the state. Instead of introducing anarchism, it was decided not to talk

about it until after Franco was defeated. Clearly the events in Catalonia indicate a failure of anarchists to apply their politics rather than the failure of those politics. Given this, it seems hard to blame anarchist theory for what happened but that is what Leninists do.

A sizeable minority always opposed the decision. Many in the CNT, FAI and Libertarian Youth and the Friends of Durruti group argued for a return to the principles of anarchism and the pre-war policy of the CNT — destruction of the state and the creation of a federation of workers’ councils to conduct and defend the revolution (“*the state cannot be retained in the face of the unions*” Friends of Durruti). They represented the revolutionary heart of anarchism.

In Aragon things were different. There the CNT-FAI remained true to anarchism and formed the Council of Aragon from a meeting of collectives and militia columns. Leninists usually fail to mention this application of libertarian principles. To do so would be to invalidate their basic thesis against anarchism and so it usually goes unmentioned, hoping this confirmation of anarchist politics in practice will go unnoticed.

in all provincial capitals in European Russia. The Bolshevik then disbanded the Menshevik-SR controlled soviets and repressed the subsequent wave of working class protests and revolts. These election victories threatened Bolshevik power. That is why in the course of the spring and summer of 1918, the soviet assemblies were disbanded. To stay in power, the Bolsheviks had to destroy the soviets. These steps generated a far-reaching transformation in the soviet system, which remained 'soviet' in name only.

### Workers' Control

Before the October Revolution, Lenin saw "workers' control" purely in terms of "universal, all-embracing workers' control over the capitalists." He did not see it in terms of workers' management of production itself (i.e. the abolition of wage labour) via federations of factory committees. Anarchists and the workers' factory committees did. On three occasions in the first months of Soviet power, the factory committees sought to bring their model into being. At each point the party leadership overruled them. The Bolshevik alternative was to vest both managerial and control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them. Workers' management from below was not an option. Lenin himself quickly supported "one-man management" invested with "dictatorial powers" after "control over the capitalists" failed in early 1918. By 1920, Trotsky was advocating the "militarisation of labour" and implemented his ideas on the railway workers.

### Democracy in the Armed Forces

The soldiers' committees and elected officers were abolished in March 1918 by Trotsky: "The principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree" Officers were appointed from above by the government. Ironically, Trotskyists like Felix Morrow argued in Spain that "the simple, concrete slogan of elected soldiers' committees was the only road for securing proletarian control of the army." Clearly, Trotsky abolished proletarian control of the Red Army in favour of bureaucratic control.

### Objective factors?

The experience of Bolshevism in power showed that a system based on "from below and from above" places real power "above," not "below." Rather than the working class seizing power in October 1917, it was the Bolshevik leaders who did so. As Lenin put it in May 1918, "power has been seized, retained and consolidated in the hands of a single party, the party of the proletariat." If the party has power, then the workers do not.

It is argued by Leninists that "objective" factors accounted for this degeneration of the Bolshevik state, not their ideology.

The Civil War is usually held as the main factor. Sadly for this argument the evidence is against it. The degeneration of the revolution

started **before** the outbreak of the Civil War in late May, 1918. The Civil War may have made things worse, but the destruction of workers' power and democracy had already started.

Aware of this, the SWP try to blur the issue. John Rees, for example, argues that "most historians treat the revolution and civil war as separate processes. In reality they were one." In other words, the Bolsheviks faced the problems of Civil War from the start and, therefore, cannot be blamed for their actions.

It seems strange that Leninists blame Civil War for the failure of the revolution. This is because Lenin explicitly argued that "revolution is the sharpest, most furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war."

Other "objective factors" are economic collapse and isolation. However, as Lenin argued, "those who believe that socialism will be built at a time of peace and tranquillity are profoundly mistaken: it will everywhere be built at a time of disruption, at a time of famine." Isolation and economic collapse always accompany a revolution and Russia was no exception.

Apparently, for the SWP, Bolshevism would have worked if only the capitalist class had given up and gone away! If Bolshevism cannot withstand the inevitable results of revolution, then it should be avoided at all costs.

Lastly, the common claim that the civil war decimated the working class is hard to argue when it is acknowledged that around 50% of the working class still existed in Russia. It is doubly hard to argue when this "atomised" working class was quite capable of going on strike all through the Civil War period and immediately afterward. In early 1921, for example, a spontaneous strike wave occurred in the industrial centres of Russia with 77% of medium and large enterprises taking part. In Petrograd there was a general strike. The Bolsheviks had to turn the city into an armed camp and use both troops and the secret police to break the strike and stop attempts by the strikers to organise themselves (the Kronstadt revolt occurred in solidarity with this strike). It took extensive repression to break the strike, a situation hard to understand if the working class was as atomised as Leninists like to claim. Simply put, the strikes had to be repressed and the Kronstadt revolt suppressed as the rebelling workers would not have voted for the Bolsheviks.

Objective factors cannot and do not explain the failure of Bolshevism. Its politics played a key role. To argue otherwise is to subscribe to the contradictory position that Bolshevik ideology was essential for the success of the revolution and yet played no role in its eventual outcome.

## Will the real Leninist please stand up?

"The whole experience of the workers' movement internationally teaches that only by regular elections, combined with the right of recall by shop-floor meetings can rank-and-file delegates be made really responsible to those who elect them." Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**

"They [the workers' opposition] have come out with dangerous slogans. They have made a fetish of democratic principles. They have 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 clashed with the passing moods of the workers' democracy! . . . The Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship . . . regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class . . . The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy." Trotsky, **10th Party Congress**, 1921.

"The essential points of a revolutionary program [are] all power to the working class, and democratic organs of the workers, peasants and combatants, as the expression of the workers' power." Felix Morrow, **Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain**

"The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves." Trotsky, **The Moralists and Sycophants**, 1939

"The [Stalinist] bureaucracy is characterised, like the private capitalist class in the West, by its control over the means of production." Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**

"Obedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers." Lenin, **Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government**, April/May 1918

"people who seriously believe that workers at the height of revolution need a police guard to stop them handing their factories over to capitalists certainly have no real faith in the possibilities of a socialist future." Chris Harman, **Bureaucracy and Revolution in Eastern Europe**

"the workers [on strike in Petrograd] wanted the special squads of armed Bolsheviks, who carried out a purely police function, withdrawn from the factories." Paul Avrich, **Kronstadt 1921**

# A real alternative

**For anarchists, the failure of Bolshevism came as no surprise.**

We have, from the beginning, argued that Marx made a grave mistake confusing workers' power with the state. This is because the state is the means by which the management of people's affairs is taken from them and placed into the hands of a few. It signifies delegated **power**. As such, the so-called "workers' state" is a contradiction in terms. Instead of signifying the power of the working class to manage society it, in fact, signifies the opposite, namely the handing over of that power to a few party leaders at the top of a centralised structure.

Leninists pay lip-service to working class self-activity and self-organisation as well as workers' councils (soviets), factory committees, workers' control, revocable and mandated delegates. They do so in order to ensure the election of their party into positions of power (i.e. into government). Faced with a conflict between workers' power and party power they will crush the former to ensure the latter — as the Russian Revolution showed repeatedly.

They justify this in terms of the "uneven" political development within the working class. In contrast, anarchists argue that precisely **because** of political differences we need the fullest possible democracy and freedom to discuss issues and reach agreements. Only by discussion and self-activity can the political perspectives of those in struggle develop and change. In other words, the fact Bolshevism uses to justify its support for party power is the strongest argument against it.

For anarchists, the idea of a revolutionary government is a contradiction. As Italian anarchist Malatesta put it, "*if you consider these worthy electors as unable to look after their own interests themselves, how is it that they will know how to choose for themselves the shepherds who must guide them? And how will they be able to solve this problem of social alchemy, of producing a genius from the votes of a mass of fools?*"

As such, anarchists think that power should be in the hands of the masses themselves. Only freedom or the struggle for freedom can be the school of freedom. That means that, to quote Bakunin, "*since it is the people which must make the revolution everywhere... the ultimate direction of it must at all times be vested in the people organised*

*into a free federation of agricultural and industrial organisations... organised from the bottom up through revolutionary delegation.*"

The soviets and factory committees of the Russian Revolution are examples of this kind of revolution (little wonder fellow Marxists argued Lenin sounded like Bakunin in 1917). This, incidentally, disproves Lenin's assertions that anarchists "*have absolutely no clear idea of what the proletariat will put in [the states] place.*" We always have — federations of workers' organisations created by the process of class struggle and revolution.

## Class Struggle

Some claim that anarchism rejects collective class struggle and organisation. Far from it. Revolutionary anarchism has always seen working class organisation and struggle as the means of changing society. To quote Bakunin, "*the workers' world... is left with but a single path, that of **emancipation through practical action**... It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means **trade-unions, organisation**... the International relies on the collective experience [the worker] gains in its bosom, especially on the progress of the collective struggle of the workers against the bosses.*"

For Malatesta, the "*struggle for immediate gains*" was essential as "*workers learn that the bosses interests are opposed to theirs and that they cannot improve their conditions, and much less emancipate themselves, except by uniting and becoming stronger than the bosses.*"

## The Anarchist Revolution

The anarchist revolution is marked by two key things: the abolition of capitalism **and** the state. As Bakunin put it, "*no revolution could succeed... today unless it was simultaneously a political and a social revolution*" The claims that anarchists just seek to destroy the state or seize industry while ignoring the state are simply false.

Concretely, the revolution, to quote Bakunin, must "*destroy the State*" and ensure the "*confiscation of all productive capital and means of production on behalf of workers' associations, who are to put them to collective use... the federative Alliance of all working men's associations... will constitute the Commune.*" The "*Revolutionary Communal Council*" will be composed of

delegates "*vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates.*" These communes will send delegates "*vested with similar mandates to constitute the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces... to organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction... the expansion and organisation of the revolution for the purpose of self-defence... will bring about the triumph of the revolution.*"

In other words, a federation of workers' councils which expropriate capital, placing it under workers' self-management, while destroying the capitalist state and organising the defence of the revolution.

## What really needs to be Done?

Such a revolution needs "*the development and organisation*" of the "*social power of the working classes*" (Bakunin). Kropotkin argued that anarchists "*have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to direct struggle against capital.*" The "*chief aim of anarchism*" is to "*awaken*" the "*constructive powers of the labouring masses.*"

We must organise where we have **real** power — in our workplaces and communities — using direct action and solidarity. We need to create not only the ideas but also the facts of a free society and use them to fight the current system! Anarchists argue that only by applying our ideas in the class struggle can we create the possibility of socialism. This is the basis of anarchism, the **authentic "socialism from below."**

Real socialism can only be worked from below, by the people of every village, town, and city. The problems facing the world cannot be solved by a few people at the top issuing decrees. They can only be solved by the active participation of the mass of working class people, the kind of participation centralism and government by their nature exclude.

Little wonder the Left is scared. More and more people are finding out about a real alternative to capitalism which does not involve just changing who is the boss. That alternative is anarchism.

## More about anarchism

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[www.infoshop.org](http://www.infoshop.org)  
[www.anarchismfaq.org](http://www.anarchismfaq.org)  
[www.ainfos.ca](http://www.ainfos.ca)  
[www.struggle.ws](http://www.struggle.ws)

***"As early as the 1860's and 1870's, the followers of Proudhon and Bakunin in the First International were proposing the formation of workers' councils designed both as a weapon of class struggle against capitalists and as the structural basis of the future libertarian society."***

Paul Avrich, The Russian Anarchists