

THE FREE COMMUNIST



For Social Revolution and Free Communism

ISSUE 1

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Hippies with Guns

In recent months anarchism has been hitting the media headlines around the world, from kneecapping a scientist in Italy, to railway signal cables being attacked in Bristol. For both these acts, a group calling itself the “Informal Anarchist Federation” claimed reasonability in communiques put out on various websites and in the press. While the Informal Anarchist Federation name first appeared in Italy, it has since been used across Europe and the wider world by miss-named “insurrectionary anarchists”. In Italy this has caused issues for groups like the Italian Anarchist Federation due to the same initials FAI. It’s also interesting to note that not long after the Anarchist Federation (UK) published a statement attacking these type of actions, the group carried out a number of attacks around the Bristol area, along with an article on “civil anarchism” that appeared on the 325 website, by somebody calling themselves “social control”. It should also be pointed out when we say group, in reality anyone can use the name and there is no real federation as that would imply organisation which most of these people often pour scorn on.

Capitalism is primarily a social relationship and therefore cannot be bombed out of existence by a few hippies with guns; smashing up cash machines, damaging traffic signals or shooting CEO’s, will not change the system. They write poetic statements about their actions which often include writing off the working class as being to ignorant, but it is the working class and only us together that can decide our own future.

The Free Communist is not a pacifist paper; we fully support the idea of insurrection and insurrectionist tactics, however these have to be part of the wider class struggle and not just elitist individualist or vanguardist tactics. We want a communist society, but this can only come about through the class struggle; workers taking control of their own lives.

Pensions Dispute: The Need to Break with Unions

While the unions have sabotaged the pension dispute. Unison being one of the main unions, PCS and Unite are playing at being a little more militant. Don’t be fooled the union bosses interests are never the same as workers. At best they want to mediate between us and the bosses for peanuts and at worst will actively sabotage the struggle.

The Trotskyist left as always are calling for the formation of rank and file initiatives to put pressure on the union bosses to take further action, like there calls for a general strike. However if workers are to advance their own interests, we need to go beyond rank and filism within the unions (that’s not to say we should leave the unions now or that some grass roots initiatives can’t give workers some confidence). However in reality until we take control of our own struggles, uniting both public and private sectors workers, the unions will lead us constantly down the path of defeat.

Only when we as a class start taking these struggles into our own hands can we really achieve victory, however this will mean more than simply defending the gains from past struggles, but fighting for something new, a world where there is no bosses, politicians, trade union leaders, a world without

states, classes, money and wages, where production will be undertaken for need not profit but to directly satisfy all human needs, for free communism.

Don’t be a Shop Steward!

Many radicals see the post of shop steward as a key one for gaining influence over their fellow workers and the working class in general. They see the steward as being too low in the union hierarchy to be overly ‘corrupted’ by it, and it is a post by which people can wield an ‘official’ influence over fellow workers. It is also a post from which you can influence other stewards and union officials, at Conferences for example. People who advocate becoming shop stewards for ‘revolutionary’ purposes obviously believe the lie that the union organisation can, if managed correctly, work in favour of a revolutionary working class.

Shop stewards are negotiators, and in spite of their best instincts have to play a similar role, albeit on a much lower key, as top union officials. The philosophy of unionism is one that accepts capitalism; accepts the justice of there being workers and bosses and even at its most extreme only argues for a left-wing implementation of capitalism. A shop steward has to actively work within this philosophy. If not at the instruction of the union and the bosses then at the behest of the members.

A steward who goes wild in the manager’s office, threatening to slit their throats every time they act ‘unfairly’ is no use to the people s/he is representing on the shop floor. Management will only listen to a steward if they think s/he can rely on the back-up of the workforce. A shopfloor will only want a steward who they think can defend them in everyday injustices.

A steward who is a revolutionary cannot last, either they will be drawn into the union apparatus through the day-to-day accommodation with management that they have to negotiate for – or they will ‘go too far’ for the members and lose the ability to do a good job as a steward.

Issue 2 of The Free Communist

Issue 2 will be out some time in September.

It will include a number of articles on Trade Unionism.

The Menace of Anti-Fascism.

Plus other stuff

Feel free to request copies at info@freecommunism.org

<http://www.freecommunism.org/>

WORKERS' AND PEASANTS' COLLECTIVES IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The following has been taken from Issue 18 of the Subversion Journal as part of our series of texts we plan to reproduce.

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Spanish Civil War, which began in July 1936 when General Franco led a fascist coup to replace the left-wing Republican government.

It was no coincidence that this happened at a time of intense class struggle in Spain. Limited concessions granted in the face of the struggle by the left wing of the ruling class - the 'Popular Front' government elected in February 1936 - had not succeeded in restoring the economic and social stability needed by capitalism. Strikes, demonstrations and political assassinations by the working class continued, as did land seizures and local insurrections in the countryside. The right wing of the ruling class recognised that strong-arm measures were needed, and acted accordingly.

Initially, across one half of Spain the right-wing coup was stalled by armed resistance from peasants and the working class, and only after three years of civil war was the fascist victory secured. But in one sense the revolt was an immediate success: the working class and peasants sacrificed the struggle for their own needs and demands and united with liberal and radical supporters of capitalism in a fight to defend one form of capitalist domination - democracy - against another - fascism.

However, that is not the aspect of the Spanish Civil War which we want to look at here. Instead, we want to focus on another important feature: the influence of anarchist ideas during the struggle in Spain.

ANARCHISM AND THE SPANISH 'REVOLUTION'

At the time of the Civil War, a popular idea amongst the Spanish working class and peasants was that each factory, area of land, etc., should be owned collectively by its workers, and that these 'collectives' should be linked with each other on a 'federal' basis - that is, without any superior central authority.

This basic idea had been propagated by anarchists in Spain for more than 50 years. When the Civil War began, peasants and working class people in those parts of the country which had not immediately fallen under fascist control seized the opportunity to turn anarchist ideal into reality.

Ever since then anarchists have regarded

the Spanish 'Revolution' as the finest achievement in the history of the revolutionary movement - as the closest capitalism anywhere has come to being completely overthrown and replaced by a totally different form of society.

'SELF-MANAGED' CAPITALISM

The 'revolution' in the countryside has usually been seen as superior to the 'revolution' in the towns and cities. Anarchist historian and eyewitness of the collectives, Gaston Leval, describes the industrial collectives as simply another form of capitalism, managed by the workers themselves:

"Workers in each undertaking took over the factory, the works, or the workshop, the machines, raw materials, and taking advantage of the continuation of the money system and normal capitalist commercial relations, organised production on their own account, selling for their own benefit the produce of their labour."

We would add that in many cases the workers didn't actually take over production; they simply worked under the direction of 'their own' union bureaucrats with the old bosses retained as advisors.

The reactionary consequences of the working class taking sides in the fight between democracy and fascism, instead of pursuing the struggle for their own needs, was particularly evident in the way the industrial collectives operated. For the sake of the 'war effort' workers frequently chose to intensify their own exploitation - usually with the encouragement of their anarchist leaders. In 1937, for example, the anarchist Government Minister in charge of the economy in Catalonia complained that the "state of tension and over-excitement" produced by the outbreak of the Civil War had "reduced to a dangerous degree the capacity and productivity of labour, increasing the costs of production so much that if this is not corrected rapidly and energetically we will be facing a dead-end street. For these reasons we must readjust the established work norms and increase the length of the working day." However, although some anarchists are prepared to criticise the 'Government Anarchists' and the industrial collectives, all anarchists are unanimous that the rural collectives succeeded in achieving 'genuine socialisation', or, as it was popularly termed, 'libertarian communism'.

ORGANISING THE RURAL COLLECTIVES

What typically happened in the peasant

villages was this. Once the fascist rebellion had been quelled locally, the inhabitants of the village got together in a big meeting. Anarchist militants took the initiative in proposing what to do. Everyone was invited to pool their land, livestock and tools in the collective: 'The concept 'yours and mine' will no longer exist...Everything will belong to everyone.' Property belonging to fascist landlords and the Church was also expropriated for the collective's use. A committee was elected to supervise the running of the collective. Work was parcelled out among groups of 10 or 15 people, and co-ordinated by meetings of delegates nominated by each group.

FREE ACCESS

A few collectives distributed their produce on the communist basis of free access - 'to each according to their needs'. A resident of Magdalena de Pulpis explained the system in his village:

"Everyone works and everyone has the right to what he needs free of charge. He simply goes to the store where provisions and all other necessities are supplied. Everything is distributed freely with only a notation of what he took."

For the first time in their lives people could help themselves to whatever they needed. And that's exactly what they did. Free access was not abused by 'greed' or 'gluttony'. Another of the collectives' eyewitnesses, Augustin Souchy, describes the situation in Muniesa:

"The bakery was open. Anyone can come for whatever bread he wants. 'Are there not abuses of this?' 'No,' answers the old man who gives out the bread. 'Everyone takes as much as they actually need.' Wine is also distributed freely, not rationed. 'Doesn't anyone get drunk?' 'Until now there has not been a single case of drunkenness.'" (This was also partly a reflection of an anarchist puritanism which in other places led them to ban tobacco and even coffee).

THE WAGES SYSTEM

However, distribution of goods on a communist basis (i.e. free access) was not the norm. In the vast majority of collectives the level of consumption was not governed by people's freely-chosen needs and desires, but, just as it is under capitalism, by the amount of money people had in their pockets. Only goods in abundant supply could be taken freely. Everything else had to be bought from wages paid by the collective to its members.

THE FAMILY WAGE AND THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN

The 'family wage' - which oppresses women by making them economically dependent on the male head of the household - was adopted by almost all the collectives. Each male collectivist received so much in wages per day for himself, plus a smaller amount for his wife and each child. For women in fact, the Spanish 'Revolution' could hardly have been less revolutionary.

It did not challenge the family as an economic unit of society, nor the sexual division of labour between men and women. "It is eleven o'clock in the morning. The gong sounds. Mass? It is to remind the women to prepare the midday meal." Women also remained regarded as inferior social beings, frowned on, for example, if they joined the men in the local cafe for a drink after work.

THE PROLIFERATION OF MONEY

The equal family wage was generally not paid in the national currency, which most collectives discarded for internal use. In its place the collectives substituted other means of exchange, issuing their own local currency in the form of vouchers, tokens, rationing booklets, certificates, coupons, etc. Far from being abolished, as money would be in a communist revolution, during the Spanish 'Revolution' money proliferated as never before!

But the creation of literally hundreds of different local currencies soon caused problems. Few collectives were self-sufficient, but trade among the collectives was hampered by the lack of a universally acceptable currency. In 1937 the Aragon Federation of Peasant Collectives had to reintroduce a standard currency in the form of a uniform rationing booklet for all the Aragon Collectives. It also established its own bank - run by the Bank Workers' Union of course!

THE EXCHANGE OF GOODS

Not all the transactions between collectives were effected by money. Central warehouses were set up where collectives exchanged their surplus produce among themselves for the goods they lacked. Under this system 'hard cash' was frequently absent. However, the relative proportions in which goods were bartered was still determined by monetary values. For example how many sacks of flour a collective could obtain in exchange for a ton of potatoes was worked out by calculating the value of both in monetary terms. Just as under capitalism, prices were "based on the cost of raw materials, the work involved, general expenses and the resources of the collectivists".

This was not a communist system of production for use and distribution according to need, but a capitalist system of rival enter-

prises trading their products according to their exchange value. No matter how desperately they needed them, collectives couldn't obtain the goods they required until they had produced enough to exchange for them, since they were not allowed to withdraw a sum of goods worth more than those they had deposited. This frequently led to great hardship among the less wealthy collectives.

MARKET COMPETITION

As well as trading among themselves, collectives also had to find markets for their goods in competition with non-collectivised enterprises. A common consequence of this system has always been that goods which cannot be sold profitably end up being stockpiled or destroyed, while elsewhere people have to do without those goods because they don't have the means to buy them. The consequences of the Spanish collectives' capitalist mode of operation conformed to this pattern; for example:

"The warehouses owned by the SICEP (Syndicate of the Footwear Industry in Elda and Petrel) in Elda, Valencia and Barcelona, as well as the factory warehouses, were full of unsold goods, valued at some 10 million pesetas."

Such spectacles would be eradicated for ever in a communist society, where goods would not be produced to be sold for profit via the market, but to directly satisfy people's needs.

THE END OF THE COLLECTIVES

The Spanish collectives were eventually destroyed by in-fighting among the anti-fascists and by the fascist victory itself. One can only speculate about how they might have developed had they survived the Civil War. Our guess is that their basically capitalist nature would have become even more obvious.

In the capitalist economy market competition forces every enterprise to try to produce its goods as cheaply as possible so as to undercut its rivals. The Spanish collectives, trading with each other and competing with non-collectivised enterprises, would inevitably have been subject to the same pressures. One of the ways in which capitalist enterprises try to cut costs is by increasing the exploitation of the workforce, for example by cutting wages, or increasing the intensity of work, or lengthening working hours.

Where this happens in enterprises owned and run by an individual boss or the state, workers can identify their enemy and fight against their exploitation. This is far less likely to happen where the entire workforce itself is the collective owner and manager of the enterprise, as was the case with the Spanish collectives. The workforce has a vested interest in the profitability of the capital which it collectively owns; it identifies with and willingly organises its own exploitation.

It has to, in fact, to keep itself in business.

THE END OF ANARCHISM

Many present-day anarchists still stand for the type of self-managed capitalism established by the industrial and agricultural collectives during the Spanish Civil War. Because of this, we oppose them as resolutely as we oppose supporters of any other pro-capitalist ideology.

From the point of view of working class people's needs, self-managed capitalism is a dead-end, just as reactionary as private or state capitalism. The communist society we are fighting for can only be established by the complete destruction of ALL property, money, wages and markets - whatever their form.

The information and quotes in this article come from *The Anarchist Collectives* by Sam Dolgoff, *Collectives In The Spanish Revolution* by Gaston Leval, *The Spanish Revolution* by Stanley Payne, and *With The Peasants Of Aragon* by Augustin Souchy.

Useful Websites

For Social Revolution and Free Communism
<http://www.freecomunism.org/>

A Voice for Libertarian Communism
<http://www.anarchist-theft.net/>

Anarchist Federation
<http://afed.org.uk/>

Libertarian Communist Resource
<http://libcom.org/>

Collective Action Notes
http://www.redemmas.org/collective_action_notes/

Communist Workers Organisation
<http://www.leftcom.org/en>

International Communist Current
<http://en.internationalism.org/>

Marxists Internet Archive
<http://www.marxists.org/>

Internationalist Perspective
<http://internationalist-perspective.org/>

Revolutionary Traditions – Council Communism

Reprinted from RECONSTRUCTION # 4 (Australia) By Steve Wright (1991)

Asked to characterise the significance of the October Revolution, John Maynard Keynes – always one of capital's most astute thinkers – once suggested that 1917 heralded the victory of 'the Party of Catastrophe'. For many of the revolutionaries who helped to establish the international communist movement, however, the simple, unambiguous demand for 'All Power to the Soviets' had seemed to encapsulate a new class politics finally able to surpass the disasters of war and betrayal. One of them, the poet Hermann Gorter, greeted Lenin at the time as 'the foremost vanguard fighter of the international proletariat', and the soviets themselves in the following terms:

The working class of the world has found in these Workers' Councils its organisation and its centralisation, its form and its expression, for the revolution and for the Socialist society (quoted in Shipway 1987: 105).

For most people on the far left, Gorter and his colleague Anton Pannekoek are remembered – if they are known at all – as two of the 'Lefts' castigated in Lenin's "Left-Wing" Communism, An Infantile Disorder. In 1917, however, both were prominent figures within the international revolutionary movement. To their mind, the participation of the social democratic parties and unions in the First World War demonstrated not only the moral turpitude of the Second International's leadership, but the very bankruptcy of forms of organisation which shifted 'the center of gravity... from the masses to the leaders' (Gorter). Against the craft unions of old, they counterposed factory committees and soviets; against the party-form of social democracy, they championed a 'new type' of political vanguard dedicated exclusively to the development of workers' self-organisation.

Within much of Western Europe – and Germany above all – such perspectives found a wide resonance between 1917 and 1923. Expelled in late 1919 from the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartakusbund) for their rejection of parliamentarianism and the old trade unions, the German 'left' communists formed a new party, the KAPD, which briefly overshadowed its 'official' rival in militancy and influence. Through their network of affiliated workplace organisations, the AAUD, the 'Lefts' for a time acquired an important presence within the German working class, particularly in the strategic regions of the Ruhr and Bremen. During the attempted rightist Kapp Putsch of early 1920, their activists played a leading role in the Red Armies which briefly domi-

nated the Ruhr.

Factional divisions, ongoing polemics with the majority of the Bolshevik leadership, and renewed competition at home from a communist party now fused with the left social democrats, all combined to weaken the 'Lefts' standing in the class after 1921. Perhaps the most serious of the KAPD's internal differences concerned the nature of the party. One wing, around Otto Rühle, held that since the 'Revolution is not a Party Matter' – the party-form being inherently bourgeois – the KAPD should dissolve itself into the new workplace organisations, which would instead be the proper vehicles of proletarian dictatorship. Against them, the majority expounded a 'theory of the offensive', wherein the cadre party ('hard as steel, clear as glass') sought to lead the proletariat by example – with less than happy results, as the disastrous 'March Action' of early 1921 made clear.

By the early twenties, when it became clear that the Soviets were such in name only, and the Comintern subordinate to Russian foreign policy, the left communists finally broke with the Bolsheviks. Within Europe, the relative stabilisation of class conflict after 1923 brought with it the loss of the tendency's remaining audience. Turned in upon themselves, the remaining left communists began slowly to reassess their political perspectives. Developing one of the first theories of state capitalism, they came to see the Bolshevik regime as the product of the last of 'the great bourgeois revolutions of Europe'. Like Rühle, many also began to question the appropriateness of the party-form for communist politics, arguing instead that, while groups of revolutionaries should do all they could 'to foster self-initiative and self-action' in the class, spontaneous actions of dissatisfied masses will, in the process of their rebellion, create their own organisations, and that these organisations, arising out of the social conditions, alone can end the present social arrangement (Mattick 1978: 85, 84).

During the thirties, a number of small but lively journals provided a forum for debate and discussion amongst the 'council' communists, as such 'Lefts' now called themselves. Perhaps the best-known of these was Paul Mattick's International Council Correspondence (later Living Marxism), to which Rühle, Pannekoek and Karl Korsch all contributed. While the theoretical work and political analysis advanced in these journals was often of a high standard, the council communists' isolation continued into the following decade; if anything, the climate of the Cold War would be even more inhospitable for those who saw the rival blocs as simply different forms of capitalist imperialism.

Like many other tendencies of the old communist movement, council communism would be 'rediscovered' by the radical politics of the sixties and seventies. Whilst never attracting the sorts of numbers who flocked to the leninist groups, the current nonetheless exerted a significant influence upon the outlook of the post-1968 libertarian left. Even here, however, its reach was largely indirect, via other groupings and thinkers – the situationists, Socialisme ou Barbarie, the Johnson-Forest Tendency – whose earlier break with leninism had brought them into contact with the surviving council communists during the fifties. In some cases the accidents of family history also played their part: Noam Chomsky, for example, would have his first encounter with radical politics courtesy of a council communist uncle in New York.

In many cases, this libertarian reinterpretation of council communism has taken the form of 'councilism', an ideology which celebrates the direct democracy of the councils whilst reducing the struggle for a classless society to the project of workers' self-management of production (see, for example, many of the arguments propounded in the British journal *Solidarity* during the seventies). Against this, a new generation of ultra-left thinkers has argued that 'Socialism is not the management, however "democratic" it may be, of capital, but its complete destruction' (Barrot and Martin 1974: 105).

Of course, there is also much to criticise about the politics of the original council communists themselves, and considerable debate to be had as to the degree to which such views are of relevance today. Certainly one of the damaging (if unintended) consequences of their efforts to defend a vision of working class autonomy from both capital and all self-proclaimed saviours has been an understanding of class composition that remains frozen in time. This deficiency has left some of their modern day descendants poorly equipped to deal with new working class demands and behaviours, and the questions of race and gender with which these are often entwined – although on this score, at least, they are hardly alone on the left. At the same time, given the parlous state of the labour movement, the council communists' insistence upon workers' self-organisation as the heart of class politics has lost none of its pertinence. Meanwhile, revolutionary workers' councils have continued to appear in many moments of intense social conflict over the past seventy years: from Hungary to Chile, from Poland to Iran. The most recent instance was just four years ago, during the 1991 rebellion in Kurdistan; it will not be the last.