

# The SWP's very peculiar 'Anarchism'

A Workers Solidarity supplement  
Nov. 2000 <http://surf.to/anarchism>

**The response of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) to the emergence of the new anti-capitalist movement has been on the one hand to attempt to belittle many of the organisational features of that movement and on the other to engage in a desperate bid to become its leader. However one major barrier stands in their way, the majority of us do not want any organisation to become our leaders.**

The SWP dare not argue directly against the democratic decision making structures the anti-capitalist movement has created. Instead over the last year they have published a series of crude slanders aimed at undermining one of the theoretical pillars of these structures, that of anarchism. While its probably true that only a minority of the movement currently define themselves as anarchists, the structures of mass assemblies and delegate based democracy are precisely what separate anarchism from Leninism.

The most recent of these attacks is Pat Stack's "*Anarchy in the UK?*" article (issue no. 246 of Socialist Review, the magazine of the British SWP).

The article contains so many inaccuracies that we can only assume that Stack either knows nothing about anarchism or is deliberately lying. This is because anyone with even a small understanding of anarchist theory and history will instantly know that Stack's "analysis" of anarchism is so flawed as to be laughable. But Stack has been a member of the British SWP for many years - we might expect he would therefore be aware of the actual history of anarchism and what it stands for.

Rather than replying to every mistake in the article here, we will concentrate on a few of the more glaring ones in order to give a taste of the level of inaccuracy it contains. Hopefully this demonstration will lead you to seek out further information for yourself and make you wary of taking such articles from the SWP at face value.

The most amazing assertion of all is that anarchists like Kropotkin and Bakunin did not see "class conflict" as "the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means." Perhaps Pat Stack has never actually read any of Bakunin's and Kropotkin's work? Kropotkin's *The Great French Revolution* was written explicitly to show "the part played by the people of the country and town in the [French] Revolution." Far from denying the importance of collective class struggle, he actually stressed it. As he wrote, "to make the revolution, the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this." Kropotkin could not have been clearer.

He consistently stressed that "the Anarchists have always advised taking an active

part in those workers' organisations which carry on the **direct** struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector, the State." Such struggle, "better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange with-



out the intervention of the capitalist and the State."

Similarly, Bakunin argued "the natural organisation of the masses . . . is organisation based on the various ways that their various types of work define their day-to-day life; it is organisation by trade association." He thought that the **International Workers Association** should become "an earnest organisation of workers associations from all countries, capable of replacing this departing world of States and bourgeoisie." In other words, the "future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association of workers, first in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal."



He stresses this vision in his last work *Statism and Anarchy* where he wrote that the "proletariat . . . must enter the International [Workers' Association] en masse, form[ing] factory, artisan, and agrarian sections, and unite them into local federations" as "a social revolution . . . is by nature an international revolution." This makes a mockery of Stack's claim that Bakunin did not see "skilled artisans and organised factory workers" as "the source of the destruction of capitalism" and "agents for change."

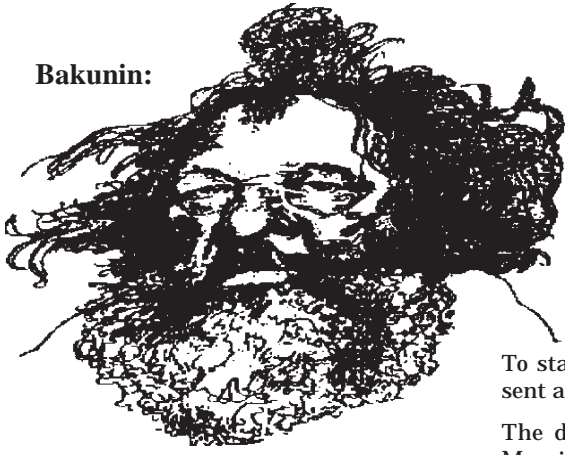
Bakunin, like Kropotkin, saw a socialist society as being based on "the collective ownership of producers' associations, freely organised and federated in the communes, and by the equally spontaneous federation of these communes." Thus "the land, the instruments of work and all other capital [will] become the collective property of the whole of society and be utilised only by the workers, in other words by the agricultural and industrial associations." The link between present and future would be labour unions (workers' associations). These played the key role in Bakunin's politics, both as the means to abolish capitalism and the state and as the framework of a socialist society (this support for workers' councils predates Marxist support by five decades).

Bakunin, like Kropotkin, saw the strike as "the beginnings of the social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie. . . Strikes are a valuable instrument from two points of view. Firstly, they electrify the masses . . . awaken in them the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie. . . secondly they help immensely to provoke and establish between the workers of all trades, localities and countries the consciousness and very fact of solidarity: a twofold action, both negative and positive, which tends to constitute directly the new world of the proletariat, opposing it almost in an absolute way to the bourgeois world." This would accumulate in "a general strike" which could "only lead to a cataclysm which would make society start a new life after shedding its old skin." This would be combined with "an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward."

You do not have to read Bakunin to find this out, you can read Marx and Engels. Marx attacked Bakunin for thinking that the "working class . . . must only organise themselves by trades-unions." Engels had a go at the anarchists because they aimed to



## Bakunin:



*“dispose all the authorities, abolish the state and replace it with the organisation of the International.”*

The claim that Kropotkin or Bakunin, or anarchists in general, ignored the class struggle and collective working class struggle is either a lie or indicates ignorance.

All this indicates that Stack's claim that *“the huge advantage”* anarcho-syndicalists have *“over other anarchists was their understanding of the power of the working class, the centrality of the point of production (the workplace) and the need for collective action”* is simply nonsense. Bakunin and Kropotkin, as can be seen, already understood all this. Little wonder that all serious historians see the obvious similarities between syndicalism and Bakunin's anarchism. As Kropotkin put it: *“Syndicalism is nothing other than the rebirth of the International — federalist, worker, Latin.”*

A more general point here is that anarchists, unlike Marxists, do not believe that some prophet wrote down the scriptures in the last century and if only we could reach a correct understanding of these writing today we would see the way forward. Anarchists today don't call themselves Bakunists or Kropotkinists. At each period in history anarchism advanced in its understanding of the world, the anarchism of Bakunin was a development of that of Proudhon, these ideas were again developed by the syndicalists of the 1890's, by the Italian Malatesta, the Mexican Magon and many other individuals and movements. Today we stand on their shoulders, not at their feet.

Kropotkin's comments on the state as the *“protector”* of capitalism indicates the false nature of Stack's claim that *“the idea that dominates anarchist thought”* is that *“the state is the main enemy, rather than identifying the state as one aspect of a class society that has to be destroyed.”* Anarchists are well aware that the state exists to defend capitalism. Kropotkin wrote elsewhere, that the *“State is there to protect exploitation, speculation and private property; it is itself the by-product of the rapine of the people. The proletarian must reply on his own hands; he can expect nothing of the State. It is nothing more than an organisation devised to hinder emancipation at all costs.”*

Bakunin argued that the state *“is authority, domination, and force, organised by the*

*property-owning and so-called enlightened classes against the masses.”* He saw the task of the social revolution as *“to overturn the State's domination, and that of the privileged classes whom it solely represents.”* Thus the state and capitalism must be destroyed at the same time. In the words of Bakunin, *“no revolution could succeed . . . today unless it was simultaneously a political and a social revolution”*

To state otherwise is to simply misrepresent anarchist theory.

The difference between anarchists and Marxists on the issue of the state is that we recognise that the state bureaucracy has interests of its own **due** to its hierarchical nature. This means that any state-like organisation will develop a bureaucracy with interests separate and opposed to the people it claims to represent. Kropotkin explained that anarchists *“maintain that the State organisation, having been the force to which minorities resorted for establishing and organising their power over the masses, cannot be the force which will serve to destroy these privileges.”* The so-called *“workers' state”* is no exception to this as it is based on the same principles of delegation of power into the hands of the few every state is based on.

Stack's discussion of Kropotkin's idea of Mutual Aid is simply rubbish. Stack's so called examples of *“mutual aid”* were, in fact, examples used by Kropotkin to show that people could organise themselves and social life without the government and without capitalist economic values. He used these as evidence that libertarian communism was not utopian but rather expressed the logical outcome of certain tendencies in social life towards anarchy and communism (see his **Anarchist Communism** for details).

As far as mutual aid goes, Kropotkin simply argues that it *is* *“a factor of evolution.”* **Mutual Aid** was written to refute capitalist claims (based on 'Social Darwinism') that competition was natural and the only key to change. Kropotkin argued that mutual aid (i.e. solidarity or co-operation) was an evolutionary response to difficulties faced by animals and humans to survive in a hostile world. Unsurprisingly, when he talked about mutual aid in modern society he discussed labour unions and strikes. He stressed that (trade) unionism is an *“expression”* of *“the workers' need of mutual support.”* In other words, the realities of capitalism, of exploitation and oppression by the boss and by the state, forced workers to practice mutual aid (i.e. solidarity) and take collective action (strikes) to survive. Mutual aid (or co-operation) was the outcome of class conflict in Kropotkin's eyes and definitely not its replacement as a means of social change. He wrote *“the strike develops the sentiment of solidarity.”*

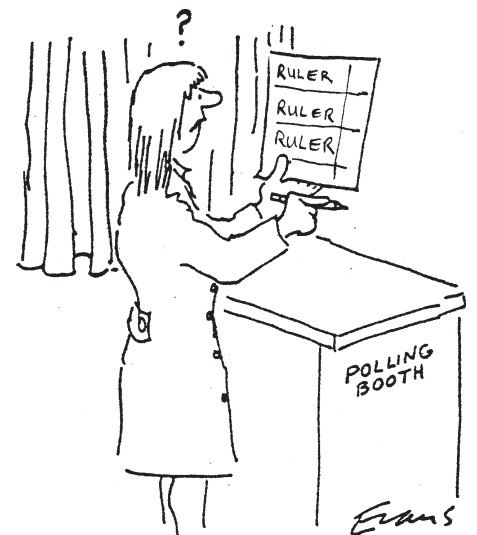
As for anarchists or anarcho-syndicalists rejecting *“political action,”* well this is not true. They reject **bourgeois** political action — the standing of socialists in elections. As

Rudolf Rocker noted in his classic work **Anarcho-Syndicalism**, *“the point of attack in the political struggle lies, not in the legislative bodies, but in the people”* and so anarcho-syndicalists, like other anarchists, think that it *“must take the form of direct action”*, using *“instruments of economic power.”* Why do anarchists reject electioneering? To quote Bakunin, the *“worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois . . . For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.”* This analysis was confirmed in 1914 when the Social Democratic parties voted for the First World War. A modern day example is the support of the German Greens in government for NATO's war in Kosovo and Serbia.

Moreover, Marxist support for electioneering is at odds with their claims of being in favour of collective, mass action. There is nothing more isolated, atomised and individualistic than the act of voting in a parliamentary election. It is the act of one person in a closet by themselves. It is the total opposite of collective struggle. The individual is alone before, during and after the act of voting. Indeed, unlike direct action, which, by its very nature, throws up new forms of organisation in order to manage and co-ordinate the struggle, voting creates no alternative organs of working class self-management. Nor can it. Neither is it based on nor does it create collective action or organisation. It simply empowers an individual (the elected representative) to act on behalf of a collection of other individuals (the voters). Such delegation will hinder collective organisation and action as the voters expect their representative to act and fight for them - if they did not, they would not vote for them in the first place!

Given that Marxists usually slander anarchists as *“individualists”* the irony is delicious!

Stack revives the old Marxist myth that anarchism *“yearns for what has gone.”* This is not true. Anarchists have always based their ideas on the study of current developments and have always looked forward, not backwards. This is obvious from even a





quick reading of Proudhon, Bakunin or Kropotkin. Proudhon, for example, argued for "the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers' associations . . . We want these associations to be models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic social Republic." He stressed that workers' associations would manage production and while under capitalism "large industry . . . come to us by big monopoly and big property: it is necessary in the future to make them rise from the association."

The author claims that Bakunin "industrialisation was an evil." Actually Bakunin argued that "to destroy. . . all the instruments of labour [i.e. technology]. . . would be to condemn all humanity — which is infinity too numerous today to exist. . . on the simple gifts of nature. . . — to. . . death by starvation . . . Only when workers "obtain not individual but **collective** property in capital" and capital is no longer "concentrated in the hands of a separate, exploiting class" will they be able "to smash the tyranny of capital." Bakunin considered one of the first acts of the revolution would be workers' associations taking over the means of production and turning them into collective property managed by the workers themselves. Hence Daniel Guerin's comment:

"Proudhon and Bakunin were 'collectivists,' which is to say they declared themselves without equivocation in favour of the common exploitation, not by the State but by associated workers of the large-scale means of production and of the public services. Proudhon has been quite wrongly presented as an exclusive enthusiast of private property

With a similar disregard of facts (and logic) Stack asserts that Kropotkin's "ideal society would be based on small autonomous communities, devoted to small scale production. He had witnessed such communities among Siberian peasants and watchmakers in the Swiss mountains." Firstly, if Kropotkin actually saw these communities at the time he was writing then how could they be "what has gone"? Secondly, Kropotkin based his classic work **Field, Factories and Workshops** on detailed analysis of current developments in the economy and came to the conclusion that industry would spread across the globe (which has happened) and that small industries will continue to exist side by side with large ones (which also has been confirmed). From these facts he argued that a socialist society would aim to decentralise production, combining agriculture with industry and both using modern technology to the fullest. As Kropotkin argued, the "scattering of industries over the country — so as to bring the factory amidst the fields . . . agriculture . . . combined with industry . . . to produce a combination of industrial with agricultural work — is surely the next step to be made, as soon as a reorganisation of our present conditions is possible." He did not argue for "small-scale production" (he

still saw the need for factories, for example) but rather the transformation of capitalism into a society human beings could live full and meaningful lives in.

Thirdly, the obvious implication of Stack's comments is that the SWP think that a socialist society will basically be the same as capitalism, using the technology, industrial structure and industry developed under class society without change. After all, did Lenin not argue that "Socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly **made to benefit the whole people**"? Needless to say, capitalist industry has not developed neutrally. Rather it has been distorted by the twin requirements to maintain capitalist profits and power. As Kropotkin stressed, the concentration of capital Marxists base their arguments for socialism on is simply "an amalgamation of capitalists for the purpose of **dominating the market**, not for cheapening the technical process."

The first task of the revolution will be to transform the industrial structure, not keep it as it is. Anarchists have long argued that that capitalist methods cannot be used for socialist ends. In our battle to democratise the workplace, in our awareness of the importance of collective initiatives by the direct producers in transforming the work situation, we show that factories are not merely sites of production, but also of reproduction — the reproduction of a certain structure of social relations based on the division between those who give orders and those who take them, between those who direct and those who execute. Kropotkin's vision of a decentralised, federated communal society was one in which "the workers" were "the real managers of industries."

A further aspect of this is that many of the struggles today, from the Zapatistas in Chiapas to those against GM food and nuclear power are precisely based on the understanding that capitalist 'progress' can not be uncritically accepted. To resist the expulsion of people from the land in the name of progress or the introduction of terminator seeds is not to look back to "what has gone", although this is also precisely what the proponents of capitalist globalisation often accuse us of. It is to put 'people before profit'.

The *real* differences between anarchism and Marxism can be seen from the discussion on Kronstadt. The Kronstadt revolt was an attempt to re-introduce the soviet democracy and power abolished by the Bolsheviks, a process they started before the start of the Russian Civil War in May 1918. The Bolshevik suppression of Kronstadt was the end point of a series of actions by the Bolsheviks which began with them abolishing soviets which elected non-Bolshevik majorities, abolishing the election of officers in the Red Army by the rank and file and replacing workers' self-management of production by state-appointed managers with "dictatorial" powers

The "central demand" of the uprising was, essentially, "all power to the soviets". The first three points of the Kronstadt program read

"1. In view of the fact that the present Soviets do not express the will of the workers and peasants, to immediately hold new elections to the Soviets by secret ballot, with freedom of pre-election agitation for all workers and peasants.

2. Freedom of speech and press for workers and peasants, anarchists and left socialist parties.

3. Freedom of assembly of both trade unions and peasant associations."

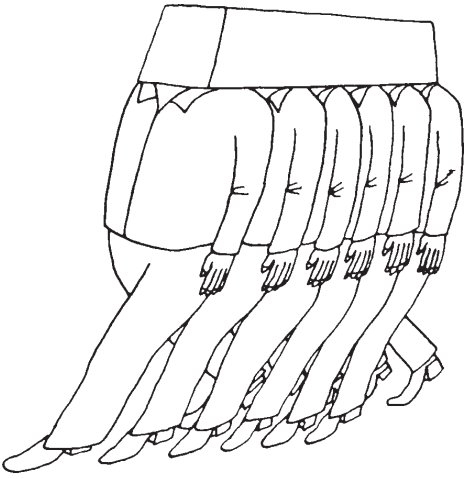
Paul Avrich noted, "Soviets without Communists" was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan." Rather the rebels rejected the idea that soviet power equalled party power. The Kronstadt revolt is an important event in showing the anti-working class nature of Bolshevism but it is far from the only one. The activities of the Bolsheviks before the start of the Russian Civil War indicates well Kropotkin's argument that "revolutionary government" is a contradiction in terms.

Therefore, it seems somewhat strange for Stack to blame all the repressive acts of the Bolsheviks on the Civil War. Many started before it and Trotsky wrote in 1920 that "I consider that if the civil war had not plundered our economic organs of all that was strongest, most independent, most endowed with initiative, we should undoubtedly have entered the path of one-man management in the sphere of economic administration much sooner and much less painfully". Moreover, Lenin had argued in 1917 that "revolution is the sharpest, most furious, desperate class war and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has escaped civil war". If Bolshevism cannot survive the inevitable then it is hardly a model to follow.

Stack argues that the Russian working



More on Kronstadt:  
Read the 14 papers published by the rebels at:  
[http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/russia/izvestiia\\_krons1921.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/russia/izvestiia_krons1921.html)  
Anarchist eyewitness accounts and articles at  
<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/russia.html>



class had been “decimated” by 1921. While there is no denying that the urban working class had been greatly reduced in number, it cannot be said to have disappeared. Nor had its ability for collective action (and so collective decision making) been destroyed. After all, the Kronstadt uprising was provoked by a wave of strikes, protest meetings and demonstrations (and Bolshevik repression of them) in Petrograd. Similar events occurred in Moscow. As Bakunin argued, strikes “indicate a certain collective strength” and, after all, it was a similar spontaneous wave of protest which had created the soviets and factory committees in 1917.

This indicates that Stack’s argument is flawed. Rather than objective factors eliminating soviet democracy, we can point to Bolshevik politics and actions as contributing to its destruction. After all, the Russian workers were strong enough to strike, to take collective action, in the face of terrible objective conditions. Why could they not collectively manage society in their soviets? Perhaps because the Bolsheviks would not let them, as the workers would not have voted for the policies of the “workers” party?

Similarly, Stack argues that the Bolsheviks could not allow workers to vote freely after the end of the Civil War as this would inevitably result in White victory, a victory Stack argues the working class “would have paid a huge price.” Yes, by repressing Kronstadt Lenin and Trotsky saved the revolution - saved it for Stalin. The ramifications of suppressing Kronstadt and the arguments used to justify the “revolutionary” Bolshevik dictatorship was part of the introduction of ‘Stalinism’, but the SWP appear incapable of seeing this.

After Kronstadt what was left to defend? Not only had all other left parties and papers been banned but factions were even banned in the Bolshevik party itself. Tens of thousands of anarchists had been executed or placed in gulags, as had ordinary workers who dared to go on strike. Workers self-management had been abolished and the trade unions robbed of any independence, Lenin had told them their role was to be a “transmission belt” to convey party policy to the workers.

Ultimately, Stack’s comments show that the SWP’s commitment to workers’ power and

democracy is non-existent. If the party leaders decide a decision by the masses is incorrect, then the masses are overridden (and repressed). What is there left of workers’ self-emancipation, power or democracy when “the workers state” turns on the workers for trying to practice these essential features of any real form of socialism? As Trotsky put it in 1921: *As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!*” He continued by stating 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.”

In this he followed Lenin. While the SWP like to say they are for “socialism from below,” Lenin argued in 1905 that “the principle, ‘only from below’ is an **anarchist** principle.” For Lenin, Marxists must be in favour of “From above as well as from below” and “renunciation of pressure also from above is **anarchism**” According to Lenin, “pressure from below is pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government. Pressure from above is pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.” Needless to say, having the monopoly of weapons and armed forces makes the “pressure” of the “revolutionary” government much stronger than the pressure of the citizens (as the Russian workers soon discovered). In 1920, Lenin was arguing that “revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.” Who is such an element? Anyone who does not do what the party decrees.

It is the experience of Bolshevism in power that best refutes the Marxist claim that the workers’ state “will be democratic and participatory.” Rather than the workers’ taking power in Russia, it was the Bolshevik party which took power (Trotsky, letting the cat out of the bag, noted, “the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard.”) Rather than the working class as a whole “seizing power”, it is the “vanguard” which takes power — “a revolutionary party, even after seizing power . . . is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.” (Trotsky) Which is, of course, true. There are still organs of working class self-management (such as factory committees, workers councils, trade unions, soldier committees) through which working people can still exercise their sovereignty. Let us not forget that it was precisely these organs which the Bolsheviks came into conflict with and abolished or undermined in favour of party/state power.

Anarchists are well aware that there is an “uneven consciousness” within the working class. That is why we organise into groups and federations to influence the class struggle as equals within working class organisations. However, the Leninist solution to this problem (party power) creates minority rule as the party in power uses its so-called advanced ideas to repress workers who refuse to accept them. A revolution will

solve social problems in the interests of the working class only if working class people solve them themselves. For this to happen it requires working class people to manage their own affairs directly and that implies self-managed organising from the bottom up (i.e. anarchism) rather than delegating power to a minority at the top, to a “revolutionary” party or government. This applies economically, socially and politically. As Bakunin argued, the “revolution should not only be made for the people’s sake; it should also be made by the people.” Bolshevism in theory and in practice justifies the repression of workers in their “objective” interests (as determined by the party). Little wonder the Bolshevik tradition is being rejected by a new generation of activists.

There are many of the SWP slanders that we don’t address here but those that we do should be enough to make you realise you need to talk to anarchists and read anarchist material if you are to make an honest judgement. If your interested in finding out what anarchism **really** stands for as well as an anarchist discussion on the Spanish Revolution we would suggest you visit this webpage: [www.anarchistfaq.org](http://www.anarchistfaq.org). There are also links to various documents on the Russian revolution and other aspects of anarchist history there.

This text is based on a letter sent for publication to *Socialist Review* by Iain McKay, the main contributor to the Anarchist FAQ. The FAQ is a modern explanation of the ideas of anarchism which can be found on the internet at [www.anarchistfaq.org](http://www.anarchistfaq.org)

#### Other useful URL's

Anarchism in the Spanish revolution  
<http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/spaindx.html>

Reply to errors and distortions in David McNally's pamphlet "Socialism from Below"  
<http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/1931/append31.html>

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Dublin 8, Ireland  
<http://surf.to/anarchism>  
[wsm\\_ireland@yahoo.com](mailto:wsm_ireland@yahoo.com)

