

Debate with the International Socialist Organization Continued

By Tom Wetzel

The piece below is part of a debate that was prompted by Eric Kerl's article "[Contemporary anarchism](#)" in the July-August issue of *International Socialist Review*. In the September-October issue of the ISO's journal the debate was continued with three short pieces, by myself (a [longer version](#) first appeared in *ideas & action* on July 3rd), Sebastian Lamb of the New Socialist Group in Canada, and Eric Kerl. The piece below is a rejoinder to Eric Kerl's response.

1. Marxism, Leninism, Syndicalism

Kerl and the ISO want to frame the debate in such a way that those of us who disagree with the ISO from the libertarian socialist left are seen as "against Marxism." But ISO's "anarchism versus Marxism" theme is a false way of framing the disagreement. Workers Solidarity Alliance is not an "anti-Marxist" organization. A number of our members find value in various aspects of Marxism as I do.

Our beef with the ISO is over their Leninism.

(Continued on page 2)

Working in Nonprofit Organizations

By David Mueller

Working For The Revolution?

I don't remember when this was, sometime around 2000 or 2001. I remember deciding and telling my partner something along the lines of "we all have to have jobs in this society. Well, I want to get jobs that will develop abilities that might be more useful for the revolution."

Incidentally, I didn't realize it then but this is a sort of individualized version of an old orthodox Marxist view, that capitalism creates new revolutionary potentials in the working class – this is the source of Marx's view that capitalism creates and trains its own gravediggers: the proletariat. I figured working in nonprofit organizations that focus on social justice would give me certain skills, let me make the world a somewhat better place on the clock, and keep the evils of capitalism fresh on my mind all the time so I wouldn't sell out. I guess I thought I should look for jobs that would help me in what I took to be my calling, digging a grave for capitalism.

All of that did happen, sort of – so I guess you could say my plan worked – though technically since we haven't had the revolution it's not clear what is and isn't useful to the revolution.

(Continued on page 6)

Liberating Thought: Toward an Independent Mass Media

By Steven Fake

The present effectiveness of the United States propaganda system may well be without historical parallel. Its ability to shape public perceptions of events and issues and to garner support for ideologies that undergird the political and economic structures of society has been amply [documented](#).

The Tea Party phenomenon is driven to a substantial degree by a consensus among [media across the political spectrum](#) to devote [considerable](#) coverage to it, far outside of what is warranted simply on the basis of its size. Yet far larger protest movements on the political left are routinely [ignored](#).

The effect of this disproportionate coverage is to set the agenda for discussion in the country, even, to some extent, on the radical left. As the anti-war movement can attest, it is difficult to overstate the demoralizing impact of attending massive demonstrations, only to find that the



Workers Solidarity
Alliance/Alianza Solidaridad
Obrera (USA/Canada)
339 Lafayette Street, Suite 202
New York, NY 10012 USA
wsany@hotmail.com

To read [Where We Stand](#) and
more about the WSA:
workersolidarity.org

media, and by extension the
country, barely noticed.

(Continued on page 8)

The Tactical Utility of VIOLENCE, Part 2

By Mike Kolhoff

After the Great Uprising

Although the great uprising of 1877 failed to achieve working class emancipation, it did demonstrate the potential of armed workers to challenge the power of the capitalist state. The seriousness with which the capitalists took this threat can be seen today in the form

(Continued on page 9)

About

ideas & action is the publication of Workers Solidarity Alliance, an anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian organization of activists who believe that working people can build a new society and a better world based on the principles of solidarity and self-management. For a much more in-depth look at our politics and ideas, please read "Where We Stand." The current online format was launched on May 1st, 2010.

The Current Editorial Committee is composed of: Henry Barnaby (Southern California), Steve Fake (coordinator; Boston), Mike Harris (New York Metro Area), N. Ludd (Southern California), Don Smith (Hartford), Tom Wetzel (Bay Area).

History

ideas & action was created in July, 1981 as an independent anarcho-syndicalist semi-annual [print magazine](#). After Workers Solidarity Alliance was founded in November, 1984, *ideas & action* became the magazine of WSA (with issue #5), and continuing through the publication of issue #17 in 1997.

Contact

Please contact us at [info \(at\) workersolidarity.org](mailto:info@workersolidarity.org). We welcome unsolicited submissions. Please review our Editorial Policy before submitting. Our Editorial Policy can be found at (ideasandaction.info/contact/).

Articles published by *ideas & action* reflect the views of the author and not necessarily those of Workers Solidarity Alliance. Published articles are approved by the editorial committee based on their information, insights or contribution to debate.

("Debate with ISO," continued from page 1)

Why is this important? The problem is that the writings of Lenin and the politics and practice of Bolshevism in the Russian revolution provide precedents and justifications for a political practice that, in our view, is likely to lead to the emergence of a society dominated by a bureaucratic class...with the workers continuing as a subordinated and exploited class. This is why we reject Leninism.

Kerl claims that "the heart of Marxism is working-class self-emancipation." He also claims that socialism is to be achieved through "mass struggle from below." Thus far, we're in agreement. Revolutionary syndicalism is indeed a strategy to achieve a self-managed socialist society through "mass struggle from below." However, as Sebastian Lamb of the New Socialist Group points out in his contribution to this debate, "Not all supporters of socialism from below have been Marxists...[and] most Marxists have not been supporters of socialism from below."

From a libertarian socialist point of view, the "self-emancipation of the working class" can't happen unless the working class builds organized mass movements that they control, such as labor organizations. This is the fundamental basis of syndicalism as a revolutionary strategy. Kerl doesn't talk about self-managed mass organizations as the basis for achieving worker power. If it isn't the working class-based mass social movements that are to achieve the change in society, then how can the ISO claim that they see this change as occurring through "mass struggle from below"?

Although Kerl talks about the Leninist party's "leadership" growing "organically" out of working class struggles and movements, he doesn't say anything about the need for rank and file control of mass organizations, the importance of direct democracy, or the role of the mass organizations in a revolutionary transition. Although the Bolshevik Party in the Russian revolution did amass a large membership through recruiting rank-and-file leaders and activists in the factory committees, unions and soldier committees, this did not prevent them from conceiving of "worker power" as their party controlling a state.

2. Leninism as Partyist

I have characterized the Leninist strategy as *partyist*, that is, a strategy of a political party capturing state power, and then implementing its program top-down through the hierarchies of the state.

Kerl says this is "Cold War mythology." That's a rather odd response. Why would Cold War defenders of "capitalist democracy," as they call it, be opposed to political parties "implementing their programs through the hierarchies of the state"? After all, liberals and conservatives who talk about our supposed "capitalist democracy" tend to identify "democracy" with elections of politicians — political party leaders...who then implement their decisions through the top-down hierarchies of the state. Cold Warriors don't propose to do away with the hierarchical state machine.

It's fairly easy to show that the actual strategy of the Bolshevik Party in the Russian revolution was partyist.

Central Government Rules by Decree

In October 1917 the Congress of Worker and Soldier Soviets agreed to take power and disband the unelected "provisional government" of Alexander Kerensky. This was a decision supported by the majority of the Left in Russia — syndicalists, the majority of the Menshevik Party (moderate socialists), the Left Social Revolutionary Party (the party with the largest support among the Russian peasantry), and most anarchists. Although the libertarian Left had criticisms of the top-down way local soviets were often structured, they were willing to give "critical support" to this change because they assumed they could continue to organize in workplaces, unions and soviets for their viewpoint.

Therefore, it is incorrect to describe this as a "coup d'etat," as Cold Warriors do. When a social-democratic opposition walked out, the Bolshevik party attained a temporary majority of the remaining delegates. They used this to push through a proposal of Lenin to give government authority to a small committee, the Council of People's Commissars. The Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Congress was to continue in session as the country's nominal parliament.

But the Bolsheviks worked to pack the Central Executive Committee with dozens of trade union bureaucrats and other officials loyal to the Bolshevik Party...in violation of the soviet principle of direct election. Within some months after October, the Bolshevik government was treating the nominal parliament as a mere rubber stamp. Soon they were ruling by decree, not even submitting proposed laws to the nominal legislature.

How were ordinary workers and peasants in Russia supposed to participate in the making of decisions about the future of the country or the running of the economy?

Top-Down Local Soviets

Also, the major soviets (councils of worker and soldier deputies) in St. Petersburg (Petrograd), Moscow and other cities were structured in a top-down way. These soviets had initially been set up by the social-democratic Menshevik party at the time of the collapse of Tsarism in March, 1917. Power was centralized in executive committees which mainly consisted of members of the political party

“intelligentsia.” In the Moscow and St. Petersburg soviets, power was further concentrated into the hands of an even smaller group, the Presidium. According to eye-witness accounts, the executive committees tended to treat the plenaries of delegates as mere rubber stamps. The plenary meetings soon evolved into simply a place where a delegate could go to publicize particular issues or struggles, but as a place where decisions were made.¹

There were exceptions to this, such as the Kronstadt soviet — a soviet of workers and sailors at the main navy base of the Russian Baltic fleet. In *Kronstadt, 1917-1921*, Israel Getzler gives a concrete description of the workings of the soviet in Kronstadt. Here it is clear that the ordinary working class delegates were the people who debated and made the actual decisions themselves. But neither of the main Marxist parties (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) were dominant in Kronstadt. Two libertarian socialist organizations — the Union of Socialist Revolutionaries-Maximalists (usually called “Maximalists”) and the anarcho-syndicalists — had the most political support.

In addition, there were also weekly assemblies in all the workplaces and among the crews of the ships in the Baltic fleet. These assemblies and workplace committees kept a close eye on their soviet delegates and were an important example of direct participation by the rank and file in the decision-making process.

But this kind of direct democracy was not advocated or emphasized by the Bolshevik party. After the Bolsheviks consolidated their hold in Kronstadt during the Russian civil war, they did away with the workplace and ship assemblies.

And what happened to the local soviets in other places? The first new elections of delegates to the local soviets in Russian cities after October, 1917 took place in the spring of 1918. In many of these cities the Bolsheviks were defeated...receiving only a minority of the vote in the elections. The Bolshevik Party responded to this situation by using armed force to stay in office or overthrow the soviet, replacing it with a Military Revolutionary Committee controlled by their party. It was around this time that Lenin began to talk about “the dictatorship of the party.”²

Even before the Bolshevik Party moved to abrogate soviet democracy, the only participation of rank-and-file workers they emphasized was voting for representatives, not participating in assemblies to make decisions themselves.

Top-down Central Planning

Within a few weeks after the creation of the Council of People’s Commissars, the Bolsheviks created another important institution — the Supreme Council of National Economy. This body was appointed from above and consisted of various experts, trade union officials and various Bolshevik Party members. It was given authority to devise — from above — an economic plan for the whole national economy. This body eventually became the Soviet central planning agency Gosplan in the ’20s. When various regional and industry councils were created under this body, Lenin insisted that workers could not elect more than a third of the representatives.³

There were alternatives to this. At the First All-Russian Trade Union Congress in January 1918, the syndicalist delegates (with the support of their maximalist allies) proposed a national congress of the factory committee movement to create a national economic plan and control coordination between workplaces — “from below.” But the combined vote of Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates defeated this proposal.

Top-down local soviets, a central government ruling by decree, a hierarchical army run by ex-Tsarist officers, a top-down central planning apparatus, appointment of bosses from above to control workers in industry — these are all examples of top-down, hierarchical structures that were well-adapted to rule from above. They were not accountable to workplace assemblies, worker congresses or soviet plenaries.

Thus it seems to be quite accurate to describe Leninism as a strategy of a party gaining control of a state and then implementing its program top-down through the hierarchies of the state. This is in fact what the Bolshevik party did.

3. Workers Self-management or Leninist “Worker’s Control”?

After the creation of the Council of People’s Commissars in October 1917, Lenin did issue a law authorizing “workers control.” However, Lenin uses a very weak concept of “control” where this allots to workers only the power to “check” management, have a veto on hiring and firing, and demand that management “open the books,” as part of their surveillance and checking of management. Moreover, this merely legalized gains the workers committee movement in Russia had already achieved through class fights during 1917.

In the fall of 1917, Lenin assumed that capitalist management of factories would continue for some time. Thus he saw the “checking” of management by workers as a way to keep them from sabotaging the revolution.

After Lenin’s “worker control” law was passed, a syndicalist group in the factory committee movement in St. Petersburg issued a “manual of workers control” that advocated going beyond mere “control” to expropriation of capitalists and collective worker management of production. To oppose this, the central government issued a statement on November 14, 1917 which said:

“The right to issue orders relating to management, running and functioning of enterprises remains in the hands of the owner.”⁴

In *Kronstadt 1917-1921*, Israel Getzler describes a proposal in Kronstadt in January 1918 to expropriate all land and businesses and all housing. This motion was proposed in the Kronstadt soviet by Efim Yarchuk — a member of the executive committee of the Russian anarcho-syndicalist federation. This measure passed by majority vote in the Kronstadt soviet — despite the fact that the Bolshevik and Menshevik delegates voted “No.”

Like many pre-World War I Marxist social-democrats, Lenin envisioned socialism as retaining the hierarchical managerial systems created by capitalism. He believed this hierarchical structure could be wielded by the working class through a “workers state.” This idea is expressed in the following passage in *The State and Revolution*:

“A witty German Social-Democrat of the last century called the *postal service* an example of the socialist economic system. This is very true. At the present the postal service is a business organized on the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. Imperialism is gradually transforming all trusts into organizations of a similar type, in which, standing over the “common” people, who are overworked and starved, one has the bourgeois democracy. But the mechanism of social management is here already to hand. Once we have overthrown the capitalists, crushed the resistance of these exploiters with the iron hand of the armed workers, and smashed the bureaucratic machine of the modern state, we shall have a splendidly-equipped mechanism, from from the “parasite,” a mechanism which can very well be set going by the united workers themselves, who will hire technicians, foremen and accountants, and pay them all, as indeed all state officials in general, workmen’s wages....To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service...all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat — that is our immediate aim.”⁵

Lenin and the main Bolshevik leaders had a fixation on top-down centralization. Thus Lenin often insisted that the economy, revolutionary army and the soviet state should be “subordinated to a single will.” For example in March 1918 he wrote:

“Large-scale machine industry — which is...the foundation of socialism — calls for absolute and strict *unity of will*, which directs the joint labors of hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of people. The technical, economic and historic necessity of this is obvious...But how can strict unity of will be ensured? By thousands subordinating their will to the will of one.”⁶

If workers do not directly manage the workplaces, who will? A bureaucratic hierarchy of one-man managers, assisted by “foremen, accountants and experts”? This provides a real material basis for a bureaucratic class-dominated economy. Their class power would make all talk of “equal wages” null because they would be in a position to ensure privileges for themselves over time.

Kerl responds on this point as follows:

“As for Lenin’s opposition to workers’ self-management, suffice it to say that Wetzel’s criticism leaves out context. The fledgling workers’ state existed in conditions of encirclement by Western armies, well-funded by counterrevolutionary White armies, economic chaos and collapse, and the dissolution of the working class (by as early as April 1918, the workforce of Petrograd had declined to 40 percent of its January 1917 level, and the number of metalworkers in the capital declined by almost 75 percent...). The shift toward top-down centralization and away from self-management was...a product of...the centrifugal collapse of Russian’s industrial system in the midst of civil war. It is this that explains Lenin’s shift from support for workers’ control toward more centralized forms of economic management.”

In reply:

First, Kerl’s last sentence is disingenuous. Kerl is here supposing that Lenin’s “workers control” is the same thing as workers self-management. And this is simply false. To say that Lenin “moved away from self-management” implies that at one time he supported or advocated it. But in fact he never did.

Direct participation by ordinary workers through assemblies and direct self-management of workplaces by workers were never a feature of Bolshevik practice in the Russian revolution nor were they characteristic of Bolshevik Party politics. As Marxist sociologist Sam Farber writes:

“After October...Lenin’s perspective [on workers’ role] in Russian factories never went beyond his...usual emphasis on accounting and inspection [that is, Lenin’s concept of “workers control”]....The underlying cause here was not, as some have claimed that Lenin and the party leaders were cynically manipulating the factory committees and that once the party leaders ‘got power’ they had no more use for them....The key problem was that Lenin and the mainstream of the Bolshevik Party, or for that matter the Mensheviks, paid little if any attention to the need for a transformation and democratization of the daily life of the working class on the shopfloor and community...For Lenin the central problem and concern continued to be the revolutionary transformation of the central state.”

Farber also points out that “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...referred to those losses as a retreat.”⁷ If Lenin and the Bolsheviks had advocated workers’ self-management or thought it was important, why was there no expression of regret? When Lenin and the Bolsheviks retreated from the state-run economy of War Communism and implemented free trade under the New Economic Policy in 1921, Lenin did declare this to be a retreat...but not so with absence of worker power of decision-making in production.

Second, Kerl’s claim about the “dissolution of the working class” is an exaggeration, to say the least. St. Petersburg’s population before World War 1 was about a million. This had swelled to 2 million during the war because a large part of war production for the Russian army during World War 1 was centered there. After Russia pulled out of the war, war production collapsed. But the decline of the urban population was less severe in other Russian cities.

Moreover, the mass strikes in protest to Communist policy in St. Petersburg and Moscow was dramatic evidence that the working class still existed and was capable of collective self-activity. The Communist government responded to the St. Petersburg general strike in February 1921 with violent repression and martial law. This is the event that triggered the rebellion of the workers and sailors of Kronstadt, which was actually a solidarity strike.

Third, the civil war in Russia didn’t get underway until the summer of 1918. But top-down state planning began with the creation of the Supreme Council of National Economy in the fall of 1917. And Lenin was already beating the drum for one-man management (bosses appointed from above) and Taylorist piece-rates (a technique of pitting workers against each other in competition to increase productivity) by April of 1918. The defeat of the syndicalist proposal for a national congress of factory committees and planning “from below” occurred in January 1918. The civil war can’t be blamed for actions and policies that began before the civil war.

Lenin had been aware that economic disruption, violent clashes and potentially

civil war are characteristics of a period of revolutionary transition. If Lenin and the Bolshevik party leaders quickly tossed out democratic worker militias, worker management of workplaces and the right to free election of soviet delegates, doesn't this tell us they did not see these things as crucial? If Kerl agrees with this reasoning, what does this tell us about the likely actions of the ISO if they were the dominant "leadership" in such a situation?

Nor can civil war explain opposition to workers management. In the Spanish revolution, the onset of civil war in July 1936 was the occasion for a deepening of the revolution through widespread worker expropriation of industry and farm land. The direct worker power in agriculture and industry was itself important to the ability of the workers' movement to create and sustain a large worker militia — hundreds of factories were converted to war production through the initiative of the workers. These revolutionary conquests motivated workers to produce and fight. Self-management strengthened the revolution.

The Spanish Communist Party did denounce the worker self-management of industry as "inopportune" "utopian experiments," and they opposed them for this reason. It's ironic, then, that Kerl is agreeing with the rationale of the Spanish Communist Party for opposing workers' management — a type of Marxist organization the ISO usually denounces as "Stalinist."

"Workers State" or Social Self-management?

Kerl writes:

"Wetzel incorrectly paraphrases Engels on the state — as 'an apparatus that is separated off from effective popular control' rather than a coercive instrument of class rule..."

According to Engels, the state

"is the product of society at a particular stage of development...cleft into irreconcilable antagonisms...classes with conflicting interests."

This leads to a "public power" emerging that places "itself above society and increasingly alienated from it."⁸ Now, why is the state "alienated from" the populace it rules over? If we look at the state, we see various

bureaucratic structures where decision-making authority and key kinds of expertise are concentrated in the hands of a few, that is, forming a hierarchy, with a chain of command structure. This top-down character of the state apparatus indicates the class character of the state in two ways. First, public workers are themselves subordinate to a bureaucratic class. And, second, the state is structured this way to make it more feasible for it to act to defend the interests of a dominating, exploiting class.

A state is indeed "a coercive instrument of class rule" but it is an instrument of a dominating, exploiting class. Thus it is not possible for the working class to wield a state as the basis of its own collective self-management of society. This is why a "workers state" is a contradiction in terms.

In our "Where We Stand" statement, WSA says:

"The working class can liberate itself through the development of self-managed mass movements that develop through the class struggle. We thus advocate a strategy for social change from below, based on mass participation, direct democracy, collective direct action and self-managed mass organizations...."

To liberate itself from subordination to dominating classes, the working class must dismantle the hierarchical structures of the corporations and the state. The working class, through its own united action, must seize and manage directly the entire system of production, distribution and services.

Self-management must not be limited to the workplaces but must be extended throughout the society and to governance of public affairs. Self-management means that people control the decisions that affect them. The basic building blocks of a self-managed society would be assemblies of workers in workplaces and of residents in neighborhoods."

In my *ISR* piece I described the structure of social self-management this way:

"A self-managing society needs a governance structure through which the people make and enforce the basic rules of the society and defend their social order. Thus we think there would be a central role for regional and national congresses of

delegates elected by the base assemblies. To ensure accountability to the base and direct participation by the rank and file, we favor a rule that allows controversial decisions of congresses to be forced back to the base assemblies for debate and decision."

The working class-based organized mass movement that creates this structure of industrial and social self-management would also create its own people's militia, accountable directly to them. This would be necessary for self-defense of the revolutionary movement against external or internal attempts by armed organizations to re-create a capitalist regime.

My essay in *ISR* already provided the answer to questions Kerl raises: "Wetzel proposes an armed body...Will this militia exist indefinitely? What is the basis for its dissolution?" The mass working class-based movement that creates the structures of social and workplace self-management also creates the militia. The popular power this movement creates is the basis for the control of this militia.

The idea that the working class mass organizations are the source of "the authority" of the militia is a long-standing syndicalist principle. Thus the principles of the syndicalist International Workers Association say:

"Revolutionary unionism advocates...the replacement of standing armies, which are only the instruments of counter-revolution at the service of the capitalism, by workers' militias, which, during the revolution, will be controlled by the workers' unions."⁹

Thus syndicalism is opposed to party armies, like the party-army that the Chinese Communist Party used to put itself in power in China. Party armies are embryonic states.

Kerl responds to my description of a governance structure based on assemblies, delegate congresses and a people's militia as a "workers state" under another name. But, then, a few sentences later he contradicts himself:

"Wetzel...misunderstands the workers' state..." He says I "ignore the purpose of a militia — organized coercion." But if I say that the governance structure proposed by libertarian socialists must have the means to "enforce" its decisions (including a militia),

how am I ignoring the existence of “organized coercion”?

Moreover, the ability of a society’s governance system to exercise “organized coercion” does not make it a state. In early tribal societies that lacked a division into classes and lacked the bureaucratic structure of a state, their ability to govern their affairs still entailed occasional ability to use “organized coercion”...as when one tribe went to war against another in a fight over land. An armed band fighting to exclude another tribe from their lands is a form of “organized coercion.”

Kerl’s reply in *ISR* fails to engage with libertarian socialism in any meaningful way but relies on hackneyed phrases and misconstruals. Leninist state socialism in the 20th century was a monumental failure...a failure that contributed to discrediting socialism itself in the eyes of many. It’s not plausible to propose to simply go back to Lenin and the Bolsheviks of 1917 as if their politics had nothing to do with the emergence of dismal bureaucratic class-dominated regimes.

Notes

1. Peter Rachleff, “Soviets and Factory Committees in the Russian Revolution” (<http://libcom.org/library/soviets-factory-committees-russian-revolution-peter-rachleff>) [↪]
2. The refusal of the Bolsheviks to accept the results of soviet elections in the spring of 1918 is discussed in Vladimir Brovkin, *The Mensheviks After October*. See also Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p 22 ff. [↪]
3. Maurice Brinton, “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control” in *For Workers Power*, p. 293 ff. [↪]
4. Brinton, p. 327. [↪]
5. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25, p. 426 ff. [↪]
6. V.I. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government”, *Collected Works*, Vol. 27, p. 268. [↪]
7. Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism*, p. 72. [↪]
8. “Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, p. 229. [↪]

9. <http://www.iwa-ait.org/?q=statutes> [↪]

Published: November 11th, 2010

+++++

(“*Working In Nonprofits*,” continued from page 1)

Second Thoughts

At the same time, I could have gotten the same results in another way. My friend M, for instance, has been organizing on the job as a bike messenger for several years now. His skills and class anger are at least as sharp as mine – sharper, really – and he’s made more of a difference than I ever did when I was full time staff.

The other thing is that I didn’t really think this stuff through. I didn’t realize what I was getting into and I didn’t have clarity on what these places were that I’d be working for. I figured before going into these jobs that these places still operated on a capitalist logic. I was right about my expectations, and yet at the same time I was surprised when they acted like I expected them to. I suppose I wasn’t emotionally ready for my intellectual expectations to be true. Despite my ideas, I got wrapped up in how these jobs were different. Sure, they were capitalist but they were differently capitalist, I thought, I mean it’s not like they were a regular job, after all I was accomplishing important, even radical things at my job. That’s what tied me into the job, my belief that the job was different – uniquely different – from all other job types. I thought my jobs made an important difference and helped me advance my political ideals.

To make sense of this, I want to use a distinction drawn by Ella Baker, who I read about in a great book on her by Barbara Ransby. (Incidentally, Baker would probably disagree with me here.) Baker distinguished between making a living and making a life. The first is how you pay the bills. The second is why you bother. As far as I’m concerned, the first is a major obstacle to the second: it’s hard to make a life when we have to sell so much of our time and energy to make a living. Doing something about that – pushing back and eventually eliminating the capitalist class – is one of the most important projects there is. Period.

Here’s a brief story that helps illustrate this point about making a living and making a life. I’m not religious and my wife’s not religious. My mother-in-law is religious. A few years ago my wife found out her mom had been an agnostic for 10 or 15 years or so. She kept wrestling with it because her father – my wife’s grandfather – had been a pastor. She said that she felt like if she didn’t make her religion work then her father’s life and work had been in vain. Personally, I don’t feel this. On the one hand, I feel like a lot of people’s lives are lived in vain, because we live in a society that steals our lives away. Marx compared capitalism to a vampire; our lives feed a brutal monster of a social order. And this happens through work – work that’s useless or worse. On the other hand, and this is what my wife said, the value of my wife’s grandfather is not in how he made a living, his job as a pastor, it’s in his life, what he did.

The Job Takes Over

I mention this story because one of the reasons some people end up working in nonprofit organizations is that they want to find their day job satisfying and meaningful. That’s understandable. Who doesn’t want a satisfying job, given how much of our lives is spent on the job? But it’s important to make Baker’s distinction, between making a living and making a life. Many people who end up working in the nonprofit industry don’t just want a decent job, they want their job to make a difference. That is, they want to get paid for doing something really important to the world. That’s also understandable. It’s seductive.

People who try to make a living in the arts want to get paid for doing something they want to do and would do anyway. Art is how some people make their life. Trying to make your living in art means trying to get paid for the thing, the art things, you do in making you life. There’s an aspect of this in many nonprofit organizations as well – at least in the so-called social justice organizations, especially if you come from an activist background - but it’s not the same.

In my experience, a lot of the time the nonprofit world works the other way. Instead of making their living by making their life like people live off the arts, people who work for a long time in the nonprofit

industry end up making their life out of making their living. Not unlike people in corporate jobs. The job becomes your life.

Depending on where you work in the nonprofit industry, the job will be your life. Think about that for a minute. What's involved in any job? A paycheck (the making a living part again). And that implies someone who signs the paycheck. A boss. If your life is your job, your boss has even more control over you than a regular boss who just controls your paycheck.

I had a job at one point, one of my jobs making a difference. We worked 50, 60, 70, 80 hours a week. I loved it. And I was good at it. I was really good at it actually. I'd been good at things before but this was the first thing I'd ever done where I felt like I had extra special talent. That made me love it even more. And I loved the people I was around. I loved the people I was working with – making a difference with, or making a difference for, maybe. I'll come back to that, “with” and “for.” I loved my coworkers too. We were soldiers for the good fight – which is an addictive feeling, “I make a difference in a way that others only talk about, I'm important and special” – and everyone was smart, funny, well informed, left-leaning... the kind of people I like to be around. Which was lucky, because they were the only people I was ever around. The job became my whole life. So there was no room left in my life for anything else. I dropped off the face of the earth as far as a lot of my friends were concerned. And as far as my partner was concerned.

Eventually I stopped loving it so much. I got tired. Physically, because I wasn't sleeping anywhere near enough. I developed insomnia around this time in a way I hadn't really had before and which I still sometimes have. I didn't have time to take care of myself. I gained some weight. My hair started thinning. I grew some white and grey chest hairs, got sick a lot. And I was emotionally tired. I missed my friends. I missed my partner, missed talking instead of being angry at each other or being sad about how we didn't spend any time together. I also got tired of taking orders from the bosses. Not just orders about how long we worked and how hard, but orders about what we did and how. Sometimes I got orders I didn't think were a good idea, and sometimes I had ideas that I thought we might try. So did my other co-workers. We were the ones going door to door talking to

people, building relationships with people. We were the ones who cared about those people, not our bosses. To our bosses those people were just pawns. To us they were people we cared about and sometimes we had to fight for them against our bosses. We were also losing staff because no one could sustain the pace of our lifestyle. In about 10 months we had 23 staff come and go, which is not conducive to the long term struggle to make a difference.

In the face of that stuff, we decided to form a union. The boss fought us, and beat us. It was pretty shitty. They did most of the evil stuff in the union busting bible. In addition to all that, they took our people away from us. They swapped us around so we worked with different co-workers. They changed which doors we knocked on. They didn't let us keep working with the people we had relationships with. All of that was really awful. It was my life and they took it away.

After that union drive ended, I ended up working at another place with progressive values a few months later. The hours were better and the pay was worse. That also turned into a union drive which we also lost, though it worked better than the first time around.

The point is very simple here. Pretty much anywhere you make a living you will have a boss. Your boss has a large measure of control over how you make your living. If you make your life out of how you make your living, then you give your boss that much more control over you. Simple.

Of course, to some degree you can't get over this. You're alive while you're at work. It's like you will have co-workers and relationships with your co-workers. You may become quite close to your co-workers so that your co-workers become part of how you make your life. In that case, your boss has the same power over you, right? Yes and no.

It makes sense to try to make it so that making your living is part of how you make your life. Do that, by all means, and I hope you succeed. But there's an important difference. On the one hand there's trying to make a life while you're making a living, during the same time, carving out life time during work time and trying to limit how work time impacts the rest of your life. On the other hand there's making your life out

of the way you make a living, making your life out of the how of your job, what you do. Of course these aren't absolute distinctions, and it's easy to slip from the first to the second. But it's the second that really typifies making a living and a life in the nonprofit industry. And other places as well, like in the university for many people.

If your life is what you do for a living, as it is for many people in nonprofits, that's the special power of the nonprofit boss. I've worked as an organizer sometimes, and I love it. It's like a drug. It becomes who I am. It consumes me, it becomes my whole life and my whole world so that there's no room for anyone else and if I can I will look for energy from others to plug into organizing. That's what happened in the story I told before where I pretty much dropped out of some of my relationships. In that case, since I got paid for doing organizing, I was making my life out of the thing I got paid to do.

When I lost those jobs, I was no longer able to do that organizing. That part of how I make my life is taken from me. Of course, you could say “why didn't you stay involved?” Well, in part because they took the information from me, I didn't have all of it. In part because I didn't want to involve the people I was organizing by telling them what was going on – I thought it would be a distraction from the issues I was organizing around, and a distraction at a critical time can really hurt someone – and if I had stuck around my boss would have told them, my boss was willing to hurt those people. Also, after losing those jobs I had to find other ones, which left a lot less time to plug into the old organizing in the way I was used to, on a full time basis and as someone on the outside somewhat, the position of the staff member.

Nonprofit work – differences and similarities

I want to make one other comment, on the phrase “nonprofit organization.” First off, the nonprofits I worked at were all really disorganized. That's true of the for profit joints I've worked too, though. The world's a jumbled place and it seems miraculous that anything works at all sometimes. And “nonprofit” is a misleading term. Here's how I understand profit. When you work someplace, your employer wants you to make more money – or make more of

whatever it is you make, do more of whatever it is you do that can be exchanged for money – more money than it costs your employer to pay you. It's simple really. If it costs a place more money to keep you on than the fire you, the odds are pretty good that you'll be fired unless there's something atypical going on (like the boss is your parent, or you're blackmailing them or something).

The difference between the value of what you make for the place you work at and what you get paid, Marx called that difference surplus value. Surplus value is present in the nonprofit world too, and in that sense nonprofits aren't nonprofit. Nonprofit employers operate according to the same principles as for profit employers. They tend to increase the hours of work and/or the intensity of work. They fight unionization attempts. They tend to fight anything that's not exactly that they have in mind.

This is because the pay isn't just monetary in nonprofits. You get paid money as part of your making a living, but people in that industry tend to also make nonprofits a part of how they make a life, which is like saying people get paid in perks like a sense of satisfaction, a self-image of one's self as someone who makes a difference. If you rock the boat at a nonprofit then you're threatening not just how your boss makes a living, as in any job, but also how your boss makes a life. And since the nonprofit workplace tends to appeal to higher values, they'll appeal to those higher values against you, like when Bush invoked freedom to justify bombing and theft.

A lot of nonprofit bosses have put a ton of time into their work. I've worked under a lot of bosses who have absolutely no life outside of the job, outside of making a living in a nonprofit. They've given up a ton and as a result they're tremendously protective of what they have. Since all they have is the job, that means they react in a big way to problems at work, including problems like employees expressing their needs. A lot of nonprofit bosses have Louis the 14th syndrome. King Louis said "I am the State!" as in, what's good for him is good for France and vice versa. The president of General Motors once said "What's good for General Motors is good for America," which is a similar idea. Nonprofit bosses, especially in smaller social justice organizations, often have a hard time telling

the difference between themselves and the organization. If there's any criticism or disagreement of how things could be done differently around the organization, they take it as a personal attack. And they take whatever they want and need as being good for the organization, which means any personal disagreement with them is likely to be mapped onto and fought about in terms of – conflict over the organization.

In conclusion, I'm not arguing that no one should work in nonprofit organizations. If people want to work in jobs that provide some satisfaction and flexibility, nonprofits jobs can be good for a while. They're also a way to learn some skills. Don't have illusions about nonprofit organizations. A job in a nonprofit organization is still a job. A nonprofit job is not a good way to make a contribution to revolutionary change and it's often not a very good contribution even to smaller scale reformist change. In general, working in a nonprofit organization may be a good thing for individual people, though few people find them satisfying over the long term. I say all this because I was naïve about working nonprofit organizations. Even though I had some kind of analysis, I found the environment seductive in a way that blunted by my critical faculties.

NOTE:

Since writing this, I have run into some writings that criticize "the nonprofit industrial complex." For more about this idea, see <http://www.incite-national.org/index.php?s=100> or just do an internet search for the term.

Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: a Radical Democratic Vision (University of North Carolina Press, 2003)

Published: November 11th, 2010

++++
 ("Liberating Thought," continued from page 1)

It is far from the only example. Immigrant parents recently conducted a [43 day occupation](#) of a Chicago elementary school's property and successfully [compelled the school](#) to commit to building a library. It was a significant expansion of the occupation tactic beyond the workplace to public school issues. Yet the national media scarcely covered the story. The

coverage blackout belies the purported objectivity of the media, revealing the interests which dictate what is deemed newsworthy.

Prospects for democracy are dependent upon the growth of an independent media with wide exposure in the general population comparable to that of the corporate press.

Little imagination is required to comprehend the impact of a mass circulation newspaper (or radio station; television would be a more substantial challenge) reporting daily on social movements and labor struggles, doing follow-up reports, not to mention investigative reportage. A large, independent media would have influence far beyond its regular consumers, compelling more extended coverage (even if negative in tone) from its corporate competitors.¹

Certainly, there is precedent. The [19th century labor press](#) was vibrant, diverse, and had considerable reach into the populace. The Labor Press Project at the University of Washington [informs](#) us that, "By the end of the 19th century, working-class newspapers proliferated in cities across the country. Between 1880-1940, thousands of labor and radical publications circulated, constituting a golden age for working-class newspapers." The most successful of these papers had, at its peak, 750,000 subscribers. To put this in perspective, despite the nation's much larger size the Washington Post currently only has some [665,000 subscribers](#), while the Boston Globe's weekly circulation [stands at 368,000](#).

Today, almost all remnants of the labor press have been wiped out. One of the last, the [Racine Labor Paper](#), based in the city of Racine south of Milwaukee, folded in 2001.

Perhaps the most successful contemporary independent media program, [Democracy Now!](#), is of uncertain utility as a replicable model. The program appears to be predominantly reliant upon funding by large donors. Whether such donations would expand to support an array of other sizable journalistic endeavors is doubtful.²

Many proposals have endorsed a public funding model to replace the severely contracted corporate newspaper industry. However, while this would likely be a positive step, it is evident from the records of [National Public Radio](#) and the [Public](#)

[Broadcasting Service](#) that public control, as well as funding, would be crucial in ensuring a modicum of independence from special interests connected to wealth and power.

One avenue, as yet moribund and long forgotten, would be to revive the once thriving labor press. The principle hurdle is that it would require the participation of at least one major labor union. American labor unions, dominated by conservative, bureaucratic tendencies for many decades, have shown no interest in such an idea.

Yet the financial wherewithal is there. When the New York Times Co. was desperately trying to sell the Boston Globe, the bidding prices were in the neighborhood of [\\$35 million](#), plus \$59 million in pension liabilities. In Philadelphia, the city's two major dailies, the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Daily News tabloid, were recently [sold for \\$139 million](#). For comparison, a single union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), [spent \\$91 million](#) on the mid-term Congressional elections this fall.

Rather than funding Democratic Party politicians across the board, regardless of their support for labor, why not use that money to purchase and subsidize a labor newspaper? Admittedly, the established unions are currently neither independent from the Democrats, nor much to their left. Yet precisely the sort of leftward social dynamics that would make it likely for unions to actually revive the labor press would also facilitate a shift in union politics further to the left, hopefully opening up spaces for views independent of the Democrats. One of the values vital to any mass community media is a big tent philosophy that encourages the airing of a wide array of views from within the left. No mass-circulation left media can really develop without a sustained uptick in social struggle. Part of what we on the left must build in preparation for and during rising popular struggle is the groundwork for this mass media.

Of course, a newspaper operating without advertising would run on very different business model, and many factors would impact the feasibility of a union purchase of a newspaper. Independent media, accountable to consumers rather than advertisers, must, by definition, be

financially dependent upon their subscribers or cooperative members.

One option might entail partnering with the staff of a newspaper to purchase the property and run the paper with a lower profit margin, as was [suggested](#) in the case of the Seattle Post-Intelligencer. Much of the crisis in the U.S. newspaper industry results from requirements by media conglomerates like Hearst that newspapers increase their profits to new heights. Papers with [merely respectable profits](#) are shuttered.

Revitalizing the labor movement – radicalizing and democratizing it as well as expanding membership – must be a crucial component of any successful social movement for a more civilized society. The creation of an independent, mass circulation community and labor press should go hand-in-hand with that goal. The freedom and independence of the population from ideological domination by elite interests is dependent upon it.

Steven Fake is coauthor of "[Scramble for Africa: Darfur – Intervention and the USA](#)" (Black Rose Books) and a member of [Workers Solidarity Alliance](#).

1. It may also compel a shift in the spectrum of political debate in the media, much as Fox News has successfully shifted discussion to the right. [[↵](#)]
2. Incidentally, there are also deviations from the preferred organizational structure. Employee self-management within the workplace should be seen as a sine qua non for building a prefigurative movement. [[↵](#)]

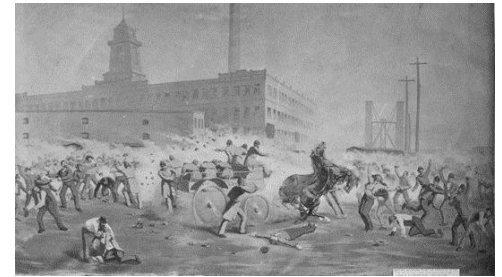
Published: November 10th, 2010

+++++

("Tactical Utility of Violence," continued from page 1)

of the many fortified armories in the downtowns of older American cities. These were built by, or at the behest of, frightened capitalists who wanted no repeat of the worker victories of 1877. The local militias, which had proven unreliable or downright mutinous during the uprising, were placed under tighter control, and would eventually

(at the turn of the century), be transformed into the Army National Guard.



As terrified as the capitalists and their minions were, working class advocates were energized. The most obvious beneficiary of the Great Uprising was the Knights of Labor. By the mid-1880s K of L membership had risen to 700,000 workers. The Knights openly advocated for the replacement of the capitalist system with a Cooperative Commonwealth, a socialist system based on economic and social equality. Breaking with the exclusiveness of the craft unions of the past, the Knights welcomed both women and African Americans as members of their local assemblies, sometimes in mixed organizations, sometimes in separate affiliated assemblies. This in itself was revolutionary, as segregation based on race and gender was the norm, and would remain so for many years after the passing of the Knights of Labor.

The Workingmen's Party changed its name to the Socialist Labor Party after the Great Uprising. It promptly split in 1878 over the issue of political action versus organizing workers, with one half continuing to call itself the SLP, and the other forming the International Labor Union. By the end of the decade, the SLP had 2600 members.

In 1881, the SLP split yet again, this time social anarchists formed the Revolutionary Socialist Labor Party, which made its headquarters in Chicago. In 1883 the RSLP merged with other anarchist groups to form the U.S. Section of the International Working People's Association, the anarchist international. While the SLP withered, the IWPA thrived. By 1886 the SLP had shrunk to less than 2000 members, while the IWPA had grown to more than 6000.

Both radical workers and capitalists seemed certain that the events of 1877 were only a prelude to what would become a general workers revolution. Unfortunately, events

and circumstances would combine against this outcome.

Immigration to the US had been increasing steadily since 1825, and by the latter decades of the 19th century thousands of immigrants were entering the United States every week. Between 1880 and 1890 5.2 million immigrants arrived, almost 800,000 in 1882 alone. These new Americans came primarily from southern and eastern Europe, and unlike previous waves of immigration, a large number were Catholic, and a good many were Jewish. These immigrants faced an even harsher welcome than did the immigrants of the period prior to the Civil War. Most could neither speak English nor write in their native languages. They crammed into the cities of the Northeast and Chicago in the Midwest, where they formed small ethnic communities that allowed them to maintain the traditions of their homelands. They took low-paying jobs in construction, the factories, mills and mines, sometimes being used as strikebreakers by the capitalists.

At the same time as immigration from Europe was rising toward its peak, African Americans in the south began their exodus from Jim Crow oppression in earnest. Congressional Reconstruction of the south had officially ended in 1877 with the final withdrawal of federal troops. In May 1879, African American leaders from fourteen states gathered in Nashville, Tennessee, and proclaimed that “colored people should emigrate to those states and territories where they can enjoy all the rights which are guaranteed by the laws and Constitution of the United States.” Black leaders such as Benjamin “Pap” Singleton and Ida B. Wells supported the declaration and called upon their followers to leave the south. As a result, thousands of black people “quit the South” and headed north and west.

1877 also saw the end of the Black Hills War between the Sioux Nation and their allies against the US government, with the surrender of Crazy Horse on May 5th of that year. This opened vast tracts of land to exploitation and safe settlement, and began a massive westward migration larger than anything beforehand. By 1880 railroads could carry pilgrims into Wyoming, the Dakota Territory and Montana, plus all the western stops on the transcontinental line (Nebraska, Colorado, Utah, Nevada and California). Hundreds of thousands of working people headed west, all seeking

realization of their version of the American Dream. What they mostly found was wage labor in the mines and on the farms of the Great Plains. When they actually were able to homestead a patch of land (usually so remote and barren no politically connected capitalist wanted it), they found themselves scratching out a subsistence living that made the slums of Chicago look attractive. This combination of increased immigration from Europe and internal migration (from the south to the north and from the east to the west) must have created an atmosphere of a world in motion. It was like the dawn of a new era.

By the 1880s all major strikes saw the intervention of state or federal troops. Fortified gun emplacements manned by soldiers with bayonets at the ready guarded the capitalists’ factories, mines and rail yards. These soldiers, unlike the citizen militias of 1877, had absolutely no problem firing into groups of striking workers. Supported by local police and mercenaries, they made every economic struggle a life-or-death fight. The workers formed their own militias, such as the Lehr und Weir Verein in Chicago. The militia groups practiced marksmanship and marching, and prepared for the coming class war. They knew it was just a matter of time before the events of 1877 were repeated on a grander, more successful scale.

In fact, the number and size of strikes increased progressively between 1881 and 1886,¹ and half of these strikes occurred without the approval of, or against the wishes of, the national organizations of the craft unions or the Knights of Labor. They were organized and led by local workers of the Knights, the RSLP/SLP or the craft unions, sometimes all together.

1881 also saw the founding of the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, championing the “new unionism” of Samuel Gompers. Gompers, as leader of the Cigar Makers Union, had restructured that organization in 1879 to “run like a business”. The new unionism promoted by FOTLU was pure business unionism, wherein the workers organization would weigh the cost-benefit of each action it would take, making the continued prosperity of the Union its primary concern. They were not particularly successful. By 1883 membership in FOTLU hovered around 25,000 workers.

Conflict between the Knights and FOTLU escalated quickly. The Knights raided FOTLU locals and denounced FOTLU organizing drives. This conflict reached its crisis point in 1886, in Chicago, where the Knights sponsored a break-away faction of the Cigar Makers Union, the Progressive Cigar Makers, which advocated the overthrow of the capitalist system. Gompers was enraged.

Haymarket and the first Red Scare

May 1st 1886 had been set as the date for a nationwide General Strike for the eight hour day. This date was set by FOTLU at their 1884 convention. Foolishly, the national leadership of the Knights refused to endorse the strike. When the date came, there was certainty among the capitalists that it would be a replay of 1877. In sheer numbers of workers involved, it certainly was. Over 300,000 workers struck nationwide, 40,000 in Chicago alone.

On May 3rd a demonstration at the McCormick Harvester Works, where molders had been locked out since February, was fired on by police and mercenaries, killing six workers. A speaker at the demonstration was August Spies, a leader of the IWPA.

On May 4th a rally and demonstration on behalf of the murdered McCormick strikers was to be held at Haymarket Square. Early flyers announcing the rally called on workers to arm themselves and gather at Haymarket. These were quickly replaced by a less inflammatory version, but clearly there were some who saw the McCormick murders as the spark that would light the fires of a new insurrection.

What happened next varies based on who does the telling. The most popular version has Chicago cops moving in to disrupt a peaceful demonstration. At some point a bomb was tossed among the cops, exploding and killing one. The rest of the cops then began shooting wildly, killing 5 more of their own and an unknown number of demonstrators. Who tossed the bomb and why is, for many leftists, a matter of passionate dispute.

Whoever threw the bomb, whether it was a Pinkerton agent or an individual anarchist, the results are well known and undeniable. All of the key figures in the Chicago social

anarchist movement were arrested. Ten men were indicted, eight went to trial, and all eight were convicted of conspiracy. Seven were sentenced to hang, one to fifteen years in prison. Their trial was conducted in the national press, which portrayed them as “fiends”, “cutthroats” and “bloody monsters”, this despite no clear evidence that they had any connection whatsoever to the bomb or bomb thrower. They were convicted for advocating the overthrow of capitalism and its replacement by a socialist system. They were convicted of being anarchists.

What followed was the first of several “red scares” in the United States. Knights of Labor leaders who had radical political beliefs were arrested in several cities. In fact only two of the convicted anarchists had any association with the Knights (most were associated with the anarchist Central Labor Union of Chicago). The Chicago Knights had even issued an angry denunciation of the anarchists immediately in the wake of the bombing, claiming that they should receive “no more consideration than wild beasts.” Once the nature of the trial became clear, they changed their tune and joined in calling for the freeing of the Haymarket anarchists.

Any advocate of social revolution was caught in the red scare, whether they considered themselves anarchists or not. It’s questionable even if there was significant distinction between those who we today would call “Marxists” and those who we’d call “anarchists”. Certainly there was nothing like the distinction between modern Leninists and anarchists. The real distinction was between those who sought to overthrow capitalism by the ballot box and those who advocated armed revolution, and there doesn’t seem to be anything close to the animosity between those divergent positions that there is now. In any case, revolutionaries of every type were effectively purged from the labor movement after Haymarket.

The success of the capitalist press in portraying anarchists as “bomb-throwers” was at least in part because of the accuracy of the description in relation to “some anarchists”. The idea of the individual act of violence against the ruling class was gaining popularity. Johann Most, who became leader of the International Working Peoples Association, was a strong advocate of “propaganda of the deed”. Bombings and

assassinations were supposed to inspire “the masses” to revolt against the oppressors. This was a particularly attractive prospect for individualists and egoists, since it removed the discomfort of working with others, and the danger of compromising their individual autonomy to the group will. Nevertheless, most anarchists denounced all forms of terrorism:

“Anarchists who rebel against every sort of oppression and struggle for the integral liberty of each and who ought thus to shrink instinctively from all acts of violence which cease to be mere resistance to oppression and become oppressive in their turn are also liable to fall into the abyss of brutal force. ... The excitement caused by some recent explosions and the admiration for the courage with which the bomb-throwers faced death, suffices to cause many anarchists to forget their program, and to enter on a path which is the most absolute negation of all anarchist ideas and sentiments.”²

Malatesta was not writing about the Haymarket bombing in particular (he wrote this nine years afterwards) but about acts of terror in the more recent past, including the 1894 bombing of the Café Terminus in Paris (which killed one patron and injured twenty others) by anarchist Emile Henry,³ and the bombings by Ravachol who was executed in 1892 and became the hero of those who advocated terrorism.

Human society produces a number of different kinds of violence, but fundamentally they can be broken down into two distinct categories: collective violence and individual violence. Collective violence has to involve at least two perpetrators and involve at least minimal coordination among the people involved.⁴ Individual violence is one person acting on their own. Both are subject to determination of their social acceptability in the popular imagination. In our current social system, collective violence is usually acceptable only if authorized by the state; individual violence (if we exclude self-defense) is never socially acceptable. This was absolutely not the case in 1886.

In the late 19th century the use of collective violence by capitalists to “defend their property” was considered perfectly acceptable by most of the middle class. Private armies were hired by capitalists like

Jay Gould and Henry Clay Frick to brutalize and/or kill any workers that dared endanger their right to profit from the toil of others. Likewise, among some in the middle class and a very great number of workers, it was considered the right of workers to use collective violence to defend their own right to be treated fairly and not be bullied by robber barons. Armed violence in the defense of liberty was still a tradition at that time. That’s why most of the working class was anything but appalled by the actions of 1877; many were in fact inspired by this bold assertion of class combativeness. It made them proud to be workers. Even the collective actions of the Molly Maguire’s had been seen as an acceptable assertion of workers’ rights to collective self-defense; this despite the fact that many of the acts were carried out by individuals. So why was the force of public opinion, including much worker opinion, turned so quickly against the bombing at Haymarket, and why was it not seen as an acceptable act of retaliation for the killing of the McCormick workers?

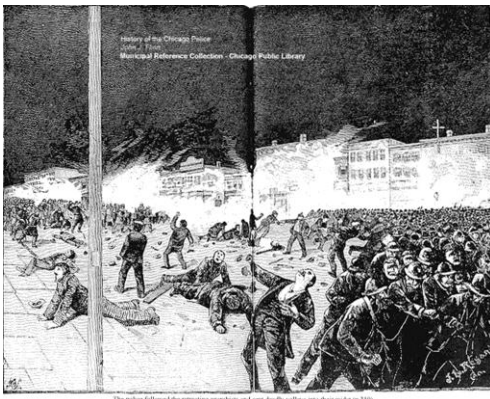
Though the range of collective violence might have been more open in 1886, the range of individual violence was almost as limited as it is today. A man was allowed to beat his children and his wife, “within reason”, as this was a family matter. He certainly couldn’t kill them, or anybody else, without justification or he would face serious consequences. Then, as today, an act of self-defense was justifiable. The difference between the assassinations carried out by the Molly Maguires and the bomb thrown at Haymarket was both the failure to meet the criteria of self-defense, and the failure to meet the criteria of acceptable collective violence. The witness reports from Haymarket are wildly conflicting, but if, as some witness testified, the police were firing into the crowd of demonstrators prior to the bombing, then the bomber was probably justified. But the majority of the testimony indicated that the demonstrators were already dispersing (the speakers had finished) and the cops were “hurrying them along” with clubs, kicks, punches, etc; the normal fare for 1886, when the bomb was thrown. If the bomber was pro-worker, it was an act of idiotic madness; if the bomber was anti-worker, it was an act of evil genius.

Asserting that the bomb was thrown by an “agent provocateur” is understandable; it would be hard to come up with an act that better served the interests of the bosses. But it was just an idea. No evidence of such a

terrible conspiracy has ever surfaced, and given the quality of mercenary employed by the bosses, it probably would have. Both Johann Most and Lucy Parsons admitted that there was probably no basis for the Agent Provocateur idea. And years afterward, Voltairine de Cleyre, a prominent individualist anarchist, hinted that she knew who the bomber was.

De Cleyres initial reaction to news reports of the bombing is revealing: "Fifteen years ago today, when the echoes of the Haymarket bomb rolled through the little Michigan village where I lived, I, like the rest of the credulous and brutal, read one lying newspaper headline, "Anarchists throw a bomb in the Haymarket in Chicago," and immediately cried out, "They ought to be hung." This, though I'd never believed in capital punishment for ordinary criminals."⁵

Even someone already involved in the anarchist movement was immediately captured by this presentation of the events in Chicago. The response was a reflexive outcry against an inexcusable horror. I think it's safe to say that her reaction was shared with a very large number of people who had no connection with any kind of revolutionary movement or organization; in other words the vast majority of the population.



The Aftermath

To say that the Haymarket bomb singlehandedly destroyed the hopes of the workers movement in the United States is certainly an exaggeration. To say that it was an important part of a series of events that mark 1886 as a turning point for the American working class is absolutely correct. To say that it discredited and destroyed the ability of anarchists to lead the

workers movement at that time is accurate, and this most certainly had a negative effect on the political prospects of the working class in the U.S.

1886 marked the beginning of the decline of the Knights of Labor, and the founding of the American Federation of Labor (FOTLU under a new name). The loss of the Great Southwest Railroad Strike in 1886 probably had more to do with the decline of the Knights than anything else. The strike involved over 200,000 workers in Arkansas, Missouri, Illinois, Kansas and Texas. It should be noted that there was far more violence involved in this strike than in anything that happened in Chicago. This is the strike where robber baron Jay Gould claimed: "I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half." The army of Pinkerton mercenaries he hired was supplemented by cops, state troops and eventually federal troops.

As violence escalated, the workers fought back. Station houses and mechanic shops were burned, train cars were uncoupled; shots were exchanged. Begun in March of 1886, it was over by June, with a disastrous loss for the workers. Public opinion had turned hard against the workers, which can be attributed directly to the Haymarket events presented in the press. The workers found themselves fighting not only the cops, gun thugs and troops, but also the leadership of the Knights, who wanted desperately to end the strike before violence spread, and to make themselves seem more respectable in the process. The loss of this strike in this way meant the end of the Knight's influence among railroad workers.

The internal purging of radicals within the Knights is described in detail in "Knights Unhorsed: Internal Conflict in a Gilded Age Labor Movement" by Robert Weir. Conservative Knights Grand Master Terrance Powderly made it his personal mission to eliminate the influence of radicals, especially anarchists, in the organization. Anarchist union leader Joe Buchanan had been instrumental in winning some of the biggest strikes the Knights had been involved with. In 1885 he was perhaps the single leader most responsible for the DEFEAT of Jay Gould in the first southwest railroad strike. This victory was the major impetus behind the phenomenal growth of the Knights, which increased from approximately 120,000 members in 1884 to over 700,000 by 1886!

Despite this he was removed from the executive board of the Knights and exiled from any responsible position in the organization: "Buchanan tried his best to don the ideologue mantle and explain the differences between his socialist anarchism and that of the Black International, but his lesson was lost on Powderly."⁶

This highlights the two different anarchist positions regarding the workers movement in the 1880s. Socialist anarchists like Buchanan considered themselves socialists first (Buchanan was and remained a member of the 2nd International) and saw anarchism as providing a vocabulary to describe the kind of socialist world they wanted. To them the struggle for workers self-emancipation WAS the revolution. They viewed the workers movement as the beginnings of a new self-managed socialist society, a view that became the essence of anarcho-syndicalism.

The majority of the IWPA anarchists saw the workers movement as a recruiting ground for anarchists, and as a weapon to use against the power of the capitalist state. The destruction of the state was the primary objective. The workers struggle was a conveyer belt that turned militant workers into anarchist revolutionaries. Men like Johann Most (despite being a former social democratic legislative deputy) considered themselves anarchists first and socialists second, if at all; he advocated assassination and bombing as a means of inspiring the masses to revolt and revolution. In this he and his followers were similar to the ultra-left groups of the 1970s and 1980s (Red Army Faction, Weather Underground, Symbionese Liberation Army, etc). But the masses, far from being inspired, were appalled and frightened. Instead of revolting, they were revolted. The people rejected the violence of the 19th and early 20th century anarchists in the same way they rejected the violence of the ultra-left terrorists decades later. I would guess that this had almost nothing to do with the ideologies involved, and was instead based on the perception that these acts of violence were individual acts, without social context and unconnected to any collectivity, and as such unacceptable and inexcusable.

Acceptable Violence?

"Real individual neighbors are not necessarily loved, but they are loved or

*hated for concrete, not abstract reasons. And especially they are not hated en masse. On the contrary in order to apply group violence to the neighbor as belonging to a category, the concrete individual's face has to be erased: the person must become an abstraction."*²

In order for violence to mean something beyond individual expression, it must be connected to a legitimate social collectivity, some body of people which can be considered as a whole. This places it beyond the limits of the state's monopoly of violence to the degree that it "seriously" challenges that monopoly, and by "serious" I would say: with some realistic hope of success, which means that the act has something more than a symbolic impact. Historically the collectivity could be based on ethnicity, economic class, nationality, or any of the other ways human beings decide to divide ourselves. It has to be violence coming from, and for, this collectivity. Outside agencies, however sympathetic, do not meet these criteria, whatever the make-up of the actors involved. Only the mass organizations of the collectivity, their remnants, or their accepted agents can meet these criteria for legitimate violence.

Self-appointed revolutionary vanguards do not meet the criteria, unless they can somehow successfully attach themselves to that collectivity, which would be impossible in all but the most disordered, chaotic of circumstances. Even then it would require equal parts ruthlessness, opportunism and good luck to make this (artificial) connection. It can happen, as in Russia, Italy and Germany in the first half of the 20th century, but the results were so monstrous as to be almost unbelievable.

If we consider the utility value of violence, as in the ethical principle of act utilitarianism,⁸ where the correct action is that which produces the greatest utility (usefulness=happiness, satisfaction, pleasure, etc.) for the greatest number of people, it is even easier to evaluate. The utility value of the Haymarket bomb was zero. In fact, it had a negative value. It destroyed sympathy for the workers movement and destroyed the ability of anarchists in the workers movement to lead.

In the end, utility value might be the most objective criteria for judging this or any

other act of violence. Is it useful? Does it further a greater purpose? Does it do more good than harm? If these questions can't be answered with satisfaction, then it's most likely a bad idea.

(Part 1, published May 1, 2010 at ideasandaction.info)

1. Montgomery, *Workers Control in America*, p. 18 [[↵](#)]
2. Errico Malatesta, *Violence as a Social Factor*, 1895, in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas, Vol. 1*, Robert Graham editor, Black Rose Books, 2005 [[↵](#)]
3. "Our dead are many; but you have not been able to destroy anarchy. Its roots go deep: its spouts from the bosom of a rotten society that is falling apart; it is a violent backlash against the established order; it stands for the aspirations to equality and liberty which have entered the lists against the current authoritarianism. It is everywhere. That is what makes it indomitable, and it will end by defeating you and killing you." [[↵](#)]
4. Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 3 [[↵](#)]
5. *From Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre*, SUNY Press, 2005, p. 289 [[↵](#)]
6. Robert Weir, *Knights Unhorsed*, Wayne State University Press, 2000, P.81 [[↵](#)]
7. Roberto Toscano, "The Face of the Other: Ethics and Intergroup Conflict," in *The Handbook of Interethnic Coexistence*, ed. Eugene Weiner, (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1998), p 68 [[↵](#)]
8. *Act utilitarianism states that the value of the consequences of a particular action determines whether it is right or not. Obviously this can be interpreted negatively, as in: the ends justify the means. Human judgment is as paramount in this as in any other ethical consideration.* [[↵](#)]

Published: November 8th, 2010

+++++