Don't Vote, Organise!

Don't Vote, *Organise!*

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Kropotkin argued against the first wave of municipal socialists. He argued that *"a new species of so-called socialists has been formed which retains only the name of the old party."* He continues:

> *"'Let us prepare,' they say, 'the ground, not to expropriate the land but to take over the governmental machine, as the means by which we shall ameliorate the lot of the workers later, little by little. Let us prepare the next revolution, not the conquest of factories, but the conquest of municipalities!'*
>
> *"As if the bourgeoisie, remaining in control of capital, could let them make experiments of socialism even when they succeeded in taking power! As if the conquest of the municipalities was possible without the conquest of factories."*

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Caroline Cahm,
**Kropotkin and the Rise of
Revolutionary Anarchism**

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Bakunin argued along the same lines, saying that the political and social revolution must occur at the same time. Instead of the Social Democratic (and Libertarian Municipalist) strategy of using elections to gain power in order to use it to dissolve the state, Bakunin argued in favour of working outside of bourgeois politics by creating libertarian trade unions which would fight for reforms by direct action and solidarity. This would create, to use Bakunin's words, the *"facts of the future"* within the present, accustom us to making our own decisions and acting for ourselves as well as counterposing the politics and organisation of the working class to the politics of the state.

Anarchists favour direct action for a reason. History has confirmed our theory - using bourgeois methods simply results in bourgeois ends.

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Back to Bakunin?

Bookchin and Biehl like to quote Bakunin to defend their rejection of anarchist principles and tactics. Biehl argues that "*Bakunin himself favoured anarchists' undertaking local political activity, because he saw that municipal politics is basic to people's political lives.*" Firstly, just because Bakunin said something does not make it right. Secondly, it is hard to justify this interpretation of his argument. Bookchin and Biehl quote Bakunin's comments that the people:

> "*have a healthy, practical common sense when it comes to communal affairs. They are fairly well informed and know how to select from their midst the most capable officials. Under such circumstances, effective control is quite possible, because the public business is conducted under the watchful eyes of the citizens and vitally and directly concerns their daily lives. This is why municipal elections always best reflect the real attitude and will of the people.*"

Bakunin on Anarchism

However, they fail to mention that this is probably Bakunin's only favourable comment on elections. Nor do they mention that he also argued that the "*men in charge of local and regional governments live in a different environment, far removed from the people, who know very little about them… popular control over regional and local affairs is exceedingly difficult.*" [*Ibid.*] Perhaps Bookchin will argue that by local and municipal Bakunin meant different things. Bakunin ends his critique of representative government by arguing that anarchists "*maintain… that universal suffrage, considered in itself and applied in a society based on economic and social inequality, will be nothing but a swindle and snare for the people; nothing but an odious lie of the bourgeois democrats, the surest way to consolidate… the permanent domination of the people by the owning classes, to the detriment of popular liberty. We deny that universal suffrage could be used by the people for the conquest of economic and social equality. It must always and necessarily be an instrument hostile to the people, who which supports the de facto dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.*" [*Op. Cit.*] He did not make a distinction between local and parliamentary elections. Such a position is consistent with his other arguments against using elections and so Bookchin and Biehl quote Bakunin out of context and misrepresent the general thrust of his argument.

It seems amazing that after over 100 years of electioneering, the Left still thinks that standing for elections is a good thing. It is even more amazing that certain anarchist thinkers are arguing along similar lines. Recent developments within the left and the US anarchist scene make it worthwhile to present the anarchist case against standing for elections.

The relative successes of the Scottish Socialist Party (what used to be Militant) in getting Tommy Sheridan elected as a MSP has seen many left groups turn towards the ballot box. The Socialist Alliance (a collection of Trotskyists joining together to present a common electoral front) stood candidates in the recent elections for the London Major with little success. In this it followed a long tradition of Marxist parties gaining a few votes here and there (and almost always loosing their deposits). Murray Bookchin, an anarchist theorist who is usually sensible, argues that anarchists should take part in local elections as a means of creating directly democratic community assemblies and, ultimately, a libertarian counter-power to the state based on confederations of these self-managed assemblies.

Before discussing Bookchin's arguments, we will go over the basic anarchist arguments against standing for election and voting. One thing we can state outright is that it seems that few, if any, among the "scientific" socialists desire to apply scientific analysis to their tactics. If they did then they would soon come to the conclusion that anarchist analysis, unlike Marxist, has been confirmed again and again. After all, it was Bakunin who predicted in 1869 (three years before Marx fostered his Parliamentarianism onto the First International) that when "*the workers… send common workers… to Legislative Assemblies… 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.*" [*The Basic Bakunin*] Similarly, Kropotkin argued that "*in proportion as the socialists become a power in the present bourgeois society*

and State, their socialism must die out." [*Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*] History has proven the anarchists correct - unfortunately it appears that most Marxists consider history as an irrelevancy to their politics.

What is the State?

The first question to ask when evaluating using elections as a means of promoting socialist ideas is "what is the state?" Is it some sort of neutral body which can be used by all classes in society or is it, rather, an instrument of class rule, a machine which exists to protect the wealth and power of the capitalist class and enforce their property rights and authority? Anarchists argue that it is the latter. Most Marxists agree, although they reject the anarchist conclusion that we should not participate in it. Rather, like Lenin, they consider it is essential *"that the proletariat be prepared for revolution by utilising the present state"* by running candidates in elections and aiming to get them elected. In other words, we agree on what the state does but not on whether to use it to prepare for revolution.

This argument is exceedingly old. It dates back to the late 1860s and early 1870s when the question of "political action" was discussed in the First International. Marx argued for the formation of independent workers parties who would, to use his 1880 words, transform the franchise from a means of deception, which it had been before, into an instrument of emancipation. By 1895, Engels was arguing that history had proven Marx right - *"The Communist Manifesto had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat… our workers immediately took it in earnest… And from that day on, they have used the franchise in such a way which has paid them a thousandfold and has served as a model to the workers of all countries. The franchise has been… transformed by them from a means of deception… into an instrument of emancipation."* The use of elections also allowed the Marxists to reach the masses, break the Anti-Socialist Law, forced other parties to defend their views and actions before all the population and to measure their strength. Indeed, Engels argued that with *"the successful utilisation of universal suffrage… an entirely new method of proletarian struggle came into operation"* and that *"the state institutions, in which the rule of the bourgeoisie is organised, offer the working class still further opportunities to fight these very state institutions"* and so workers *"contested with the bourgeoisie every post"* during elections. [*The Marx-Engels Reader*]

are far more effective and remain true to anarchist politics. These examples indicate another problem with Libertarian Municipalism - it misunderstands the dynamics of social change and so anarchists question the whole process on which Libertarian Muncipalism bases itself on. The idea of communes is a key one of anarchism and so strategies to create them in the here and now are important. However, to think that using alienated, representative institutions to abolish these institutions is mad. As the Italian activists (who organised a neighbourhood assembly by non-electoral means) argue, *"[t]o accept power and to say that the others were acting in bad faith and that we would be better, would **force** non-anarchists towards direct democracy. We reject this logic and believe that organisations must come from the grassroots."* [*"Community Organising in Southern Italy", Black Flag*, no. 210]

Thus Libertarian Municipalism reverses the process by which community assemblies will be created. Instead of anarchists using elections to build such bodies, they must work in their communities directly to create them. Using the catalyst of specific issues of local interest, anarchists could propose the creation of a community assembly to discuss the issues in question and organise action to solve them. Instead of a *"confederal municipalist movement run[ning] candidates for municipal councils with demands for the institution of public assemblies"* [Murray Bookchin, *Op. Cit.*] anarchists should encourage people to create these institutions themselves and empower themselves by collective self-activity. As Kropotkin argued, *"Laws can only **follow** the accomplished facts; and even if they do honestly follow them - which is usually **not** the case - a law remains a dead letter so long as there are not on the spot the living forces required for making the **tendencies** expressed in the law an accomplished **fact**."* [*Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*] Most anarchists, therefore, think it is far more important to create the *"living forces"* within our communities directly than waste energy in electioneering and the passing of laws creating or "legalising" community assemblies. In other words, community assemblies can only be created from the bottom up, by non-electoral means, a process which Libertarian Muncipalism confuses with electioneering.

So, while Libertarian Municipalism **does** raise many important issues and correctly stresses the importance of community activity and self-management, its emphasis on electoral activity undercuts its liberatory promise. For most anarchists, community assemblies can only be created from below, by direct action, and (because of its electoral strategy) a Libertarian Municipalist movement will end up being transformed into a copy of the system it aims to abolish.

will almost certainly try to block any effort to establish effective citizens' assemblies."

The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism

Thus Bookchin's and Biehl's arguments against using Parliamentary elections are equally applicable to local elections, even ignoring the fact that most, if not all, local councils are limited in their powers by central government. Indeed, this acknowledgement makes a mockery of her latter argument that there is a *"clear distinction must be made between parliamentarism and electoralism. Electoral activity in a municipality can be qualitatively different from statecraft, since the city and the state themselves are potentially qualitatively different from each other and even have a history of antagonism and even conflict."* What is missing here is the understanding that parliamentarism and electoralism are the same thing, that the tactics used are identical, as are the structures involved. The end result of using local elections will be the same as using parliamentary elections.

Perhaps it could be argued that even if there is no chance of such candidates being elected, their standing for elections would serve a valuable educational function. The answer to this is: perhaps, but would it be more valuable than direct action? And would its educational value, if any, outweigh the disadvantages of electioneering mentioned above, such as the fact that voting ratifies the current system and places the focal point of struggle onto leaders? Let us not forget that the German Social Democrats initially used elections just for educational purposes. Also, given the ability of major media to marginalise alternative candidates, we doubt that such campaigns would have enough educational value to outweigh these disadvantages. Moreover, being an anarchist does not make one immune to the corrupting effects of electioneering. History is littered with radical, politically aware movements using elections and ending up becoming part of the system they aimed to transform. Most anarchists doubt that Libertarian Municipalism will be any different - after all, it is the circumstances the parties find themselves in which are decisive, not the theory they hold (the social relations they face will transform the theory, not vice versa, in other words).

Biehl argues that given the statist problems she notes with municipal councils that a *"libertarian municipalist group may do two things,"* either *"take the initiative to create assemblies ourselves on an extralegal basis"* or *"to advance the creation of assemblies on a legal basis, our group may run candidates for local elective office."* As can be seen from the examples in Italy and Spain, the extralegal means

This perspective is reflected in the modern followers of Marx and Engels. The SWP, after lamenting the decisions of other left-wing groups to split the socialist vote in the London elections by standing independently of the London Socialist Alliance, argued *[h]ad the left vote been united, the LSA's Paul Foot would now be a member of the assembly."* They continue by arguing that he *"could have been a voice against any concession to tube privatisation, a challenge to the millionaires at the top of the administration, a person to focus attention on all sorts of struggles and campaigns."* They argue *that "many trade unionists and activists will demand that next time there must be no such disunity."* They also point to the results of Socialist Party candidates outside London as *"good signs."* [*Socialist Worker*, 13th May] Things have certainly changed from the days when standing socialist candidates would split the Labour vote and let the Tories in!

With the mass of "traditional" labour votes obviously forsaken by their party and a good many Labour activists disillusioned by the activities of Blair and New Labour, the SWP and other Trotskyist groups see a potential opening (and potential members). It is a good bet to say that they will be using the argument that standing for election will **complement** direct action and that we must use every means open to us to win improvements and see our influence and organisations grow under capitalism, including standing for elections.

The strange thing is that every party which has decided to "complement" direct action with elections have become increasingly bureaucratic and reformist, forsaking direct action in favour of continued and larger success in elections (indeed, winning elections soon became the be-all and end-all of their activity). This happened to the German Social Democratic party and the German Greens - parties separated by decades but united by their tactics. Therefore, a short overview of the relevant history seems appropriate.

History Repeats Itself?

Marx once stated that events in world history occur twice - first time as tragedy, second time as farce. To see why anarchists reject the notion of socialists using elections to further their case we have to look into previous examples of socialists and radicals using that tactic. To do so is informative.

George Plekhanov, the father of Russian Marxism, argued against the anarchist critique of electioneering in his 1895 work *Anarchism and Socialism* as follows:

> *"The corrupting influence of the Parliamentary environment on working-class representatives is what the Anarchists have up to*

the present considered the strongest argument in their criticism of the political activity of Social-Democracy. We have seen what its theoretical value amounts to. And even a slight knowledge of the history of the German Socialist party will sufficiently show how in practical life the Anarchist apprehensions are answered."

The ironies of history constantly amaze. The anarchists are now the ones who can point to the political activity of German Social-Democracy as evidence for their politics. As Murray Bookchin correctly argues, the SPD supporting the First World War in 1914 did not spring out of nowhere. Rather, it was the end product of years of activity within bourgeois institutions:

> *"During the 1890s in southern Germany, where Bismark's repressive measures had been less severe, social democratic deputies to state legislatures were already making opportunistic compromises with their liberal colleagues and trying to tone down the revolutionary rhetoric of the national party leaders.*
>
> *"Among the social democrats Reichstag deputies, too, an explicit right wing began to appear... By the 1890s, the party was becoming excessively successful, by promoting cosmetic reforms entirely within the framework of the Reich...*
>
> *"Eventually, the contradiction between the party's rhetorical adherence to Marxism and its growing opportunistic pragmatism came out in the open in a theoretical debate, which raged furiously from about 1898 to 1904, between... Revisionism and the upholders of... revolutionism."*

The Third Revolution

Nor can the failure of Social Democracy be blamed on organisational problems which will be solved via Lenin's "democratic centralism." The SPD, contrary to conventional myth, *"was a highly centralised party whose congresses enforced strict discipline when necessary... This discipline was especially within the Reichstag Fraktion, where on any given issue the delegates were obliged to vote in favour of the policy adopted by the caucus 's majority, whether they personally agreed with it or not... the centralism and the discipline of the party structure served to restrict members' involvement in making important decisions, as witness the leaderships' backroom concessions to the unions and the enormous power accrued by the party bureaucracy."* [*Op. Cit.*]

Thus we have a highly centralised, Marxist party utilising bourgeois elections as Marx and Engels recommended and as the SWP (and others) urge today.

Elsewhere in Europe, the long, hard work of the C.N.T. in Spain has also resulted in mass village assemblies being created in the Puerto Real area, near Cadiz. These community assemblies came about to support an industrial struggle by shipyard workers. As one C.N.T. member explains, *"[e]very Thursday of every week, in the towns and villages in the area, we had all-village assemblies where anyone connected with the particular issue [of the rationalisation of the shipyards], whether they were actually workers in the shipyard itself, or women or children or grandparents, could go along... and actually vote and take part in the decision making process of what was going to take place."* [*Anarcho-Syndicalism in Puerto Real: from shipyard resistance to direct democracy and community control*]

With such popular input and support, the shipyard workers won their struggle. However, the assembly continued after the strike and *"managed to link together twelve different organisations within the local area that are all interested in fighting... various aspects [of capitalism]"* including health, taxation, economic, ecological and cultural issues. Moreover, the struggle *"created a structure which was very different from the kind of structure of political parties, where the decisions are made at the top and they filter down. What we managed to do in Puerto Real was make decisions at the base and take them upwards."* [*Ibid.*]

However, almost all anarchists reject the idea that using elections are a viable means of *"struggle toward creating new civic institutions out of old ones (or replacing the old ones altogether)."* [*From Urbanisation to Cities*]

The most serious problem has to do with whether politics in most cities has already become too centralised, bureaucratic, inhumanly scaled, and dominated by capitalist interests to have any possibility of being taken over by anarchists running on platforms of participatory democratisation. Merely to pose the question seems enough to answer it. There is no such possibility in the vast majority of cities, and hence it would be a waste of time and energy for anarchists to support libertarian municipalist candidates in local elections - time and energy that could be more profitably spent in direct action. If the central governments are too bureaucratic and unresponsive to be used by Libertarian Municipalists, the same can be said of local ones too. Indeed, the Libertarian Municipalist Janet Biehl acknowledges this:

> *It is highly unlikely, of course, that existing municipal governments would yield easily and willingly to this demand, that they would voluntarily surrender their powers to citizens' assemblies. After all, in all too many respects current municipal institutions resemble miniature nation-states themselves. Indeed, existing city councils*

In evaluating Bookchin's proposal, several points come to mind.

Firstly, it is clear that Libertarian Municipalism's arguments in favour of community assemblies is important and cannot be ignored. Bookchin is right to note that, in the past, many anarchists placed far too much stress on workplace struggles and workers' councils as the framework of a free society. Many of the really important issues that affect us cannot be reduced to workplace organisations, which by their very nature disenfranchise those who do not work in industry (such as housewives, the old, and so on). And, of course, there is far more to life than work and so any future society organised purely around workplace organisations is reproducing capitalism's insane glorification of economic activity, at least to some degree. So, in this sense, Libertarian Municipalism has a very valid point - a free society will be created and maintained within the community as well as in the workplace.

Secondly, Bookchin and other Libertarian Municipalists are totally correct to argue that anarchists should work in their local communities. However, this is hardly a new idea. Many anarchists have done and are doing just that and are being very successful as well. The CNT organised rent strikes, for example, during the early 1930s in Barcelona was well as having defence committees in various working class communities to organise and co-ordinate struggles and insurrections. Today, in Italy, anarchists have organised a very successful *Municipal Federation of the Base* (FMB) in Spezzano Albanese (in the South of that country). This organisation is *"an alternative to the power of the town hall"* and provides a *"glimpse of what a future libertarian society could be"* (in the words of one activist). The aim of the Federation is *"the bringing together of all interests within the district. In intervening at a municipal level, we become involved not only in the world of work but also the life of the community... the FMB make counter proposals [to Town Hall decisions], which aren't presented to the Council but proposed for discussion in the area to raise people's level of consciousness. Whether they like it or not the Town Hall is obliged to take account of these proposals."* [*"Community Organising in Southern Italy"*, *Black Flag*, no. 210]

In this way, local people take part in deciding what effects them and their community and create a self-managed "dual power" to the local, and national, state. They also, by taking part in self-managed community assemblies, develop their ability to participate and manage their own affairs, so showing that the state is unnecessary and harmful to their interests. In addition, the FMB also supports co-operatives within it, so creating a communalised, self-managed economic sector within capitalism.

What was the net effect? A slow and slippery decent into reformism, hidden begin radical rhetoric. In every large and successful Social Democratic Party, revolutionaries of the word were making political compromises that amounted to *de facto* acceptance of reformism and revisionism. As one of the most distinguished historians of this period put it, the *"distinction between the contenders remained largely a subjective one, a difference of ideas in the evaluation of reality rather than a difference in the realm of action."* [C. Schorske, *German Social Democracy*]

Rather than look to the causes of such behaviour in the tactics and activity of the Social Democrats and the nature of the capitalist state, Lenin blamed them on Imperialism. It was this that encouraged opportunism, as the *"high monopoly profits... makes it economically possible for them [the bourgeoisie] to corrupt individual sections of the working class"* (indeed, a *"section of the British proletariat becomes bourgeois"*). A useful analysis as it whitewashes Marxist politics for any blame in what happened.

Greens are good for you?

Trotskyists like the SWP are well aware of the events associated with the degeneration of Social Democracy however they would like to claim to have learned the lessons of history. In the 1980s, another radical party, the German Greens, also followed the same path as the German Social Democrats. Claiming to an "anti-party party" they argued for a combination of direct action politics and standing for elections as the means of spreading the message of ecology and providing a focus and extra-clout for the various anti-parliamentary struggles and activities occurring in the grassroots of society. Unfortunately for them, history repeated itself. From only using parliament as a means of spreading their message, the parties involved end up considering votes as more important than the message.

Janet Biehl sums up the effects on the German Green Party of trying to combine radical electioneering with direct action:

> *"the German Greens, once a flagship for the Green movement worldwide, should now be considered stink normal, as their de facto boss himself declares. Now a repository of careerists, the Greens stand out only for the rapidity with which the old cadre of careerism, party politics, and business-as-usual once again played itself out in their saga of compromise and betrayal of principle. Under the superficial veil of their old values - a very thin veil indeed, now - they*

*can seek positions and make compromises to their heart's content...
They have become 'practical,' 'realistic' and 'power-orientated.' This
former New Left ages badly, not only in Germany but everywhere
else. But then, it happened with the S.P.D. in August 1914, then why
not with Die Grunen in 1991? So it did."*

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"Party or Movement?",
Greenline
</div>

This, sadly, is the end result of all such attempts. Ultimately, supporters of using political action can only appeal to the good intentions and character of their candidates. Anarchists, however, present an analysis of the structures and other influences that will determine how the character of the successful candidates and political parties will change. In other words, in contrast to Marxists and other radicals, anarchists present a materialist, scientific analysis of the dynamics of electioneering and its effects on radicals. And like most forms of idealism, the arguments of Marxists and other radicals flounder on the rocks of reality as their theory *"inevitably draws and enmeshes its partisans, under the pretext of political tactics, into ceaseless compromises with governments and political parties; that is, it pushes them toward downright reaction."* [Bakunin, *Op. Cit.*]

Better Leaders?

As can be seen, while there are apparently convincing arguments in favour of radicals using elections, they ultimately fail to take into account the nature of the state and the corrupting effect it has on radicals. If history is anything to go by, the net effect of radicals using elections is that by the time they are elected to office the radicals will happily do what they claimed the right-wing would have done. Many blame the individuals elected to office for these betrayals, arguing that we need to elect **better** politicians, select **better** leaders. For anarchists nothing could be more wrong as it is the means used, not the individuals involved, which is the problem.

At it's most basic, electioneering results in the party using it becoming more moderate and reformist - indeed the party often becomes the victim of its own success. In order to gain votes, the party must appear "moderate" and "practical" and that means working within the system. This has meant that (to use Rudolf Rocker words):

*"Participation in the politics of the bourgeois States has not brought
the labour movement a hair's-breadth nearer to Socialism, but*

build community assemblies and build the "commune of communes" which will counter and then destroy the state.

Bookchin argues that Libertarian Municipalism:

*"depends upon libertarian leftists running candidates at the local
level, calling for the division of municipalities into wards, where
popular assemblies can be created that bring people into full
and direct participation in political life... municipalities would
[then] confederate into a dual power to oppose the nation-state
and ultimately dispense with it and with the economic forces that
underpin statism as such."*

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Democracy and Nature, no. 9
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This would be part of a social wide transformation, whose:

*"[m]inimal steps... include initiating Left Green municipalist
movements that propose neighbourhood and town assemblies - even
if they have only moral functions at first - and electing town and
city councillors that advance the cause of these assemblies and other
popular institutions. These minimal steps can lead step-by-step to
the formation of confederal bodies... Civic banks to fund municipal
enterprises and land purchases; the fostering of new ecologically-
orientated enterprises that are owned by the community..."*

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From Urbanisation to Cities
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Thus Bookchin sees Libertarian Municipalism as a process by which the state can be undermined by using elections as the means of creating popular assemblies. Part of this process, he argues, would be the *"municipalisation of property"* which would *"bring the economy **as a whole** into the orbit of the public sphere, where economic policy could be formulated by the **entire** community."* [*Op. Cit.*]

Bookchin considers Libertarian Municipalism as the key means of creating an anarchist society, and argues that those anarchists who disagree with it are failing to take their politics seriously. *"It is curious,"* he notes, *"that many anarchists who celebrate the existence of a 'collectivised' industrial enterprise, here and there, with considerable enthusiasm despite its emergence within a thoroughly bourgeois economic framework, can view a municipal politics that entails 'elections' of any kind with repugnance, even if such a politics is structured around neighbourhood assemblies, recallable deputies, radically democratic forms of accountability, and deeply rooted localist networks."* [*"Theses on Libertarian Municipalism"*]

Moreover, given that the lesser-evil will also attack us, it is debatable whether they will, in practice, be the "lesser-evil." Given that Blair, for example, has made Britain safe for Thatcherism, can we really say that abstaining is not a viable option?

Why Bother?

Given that it is the bureaucracy which has real power in the state, the results of elections are relatively unimportant. We have seen nominally left-wing governments imposing the same policies as right-wing ones, using troops to break strikes, attacking the unemployed, single-mothers and so on. Given this, surely it if it is irrelevant who we vote for, then surely it is irrelevant if we don't vote?

Such an argument fails to take into account the political and psychological impact of voting. Election times are useful in so far as more people take an interest in politics and, therefore, anarchists can raise their politics and present an alternative to voting and the current system. A "Don't Vote" campaign is a useful focus for presenting anarchist ideas.

Also, voting signifies that the voter recognises that they are incapable of resisting state power themselves. By voting for "better" politicians, they acknowledge that they are in no position to actually resist the state by direct action and are dependent on others to act for them or, better, not to act in certain ways.

Vote Anarchist?

If you reject hierarchy and government then participating in a system by which you elect those who will govern you is almost like adding insult to injury! And as Luigi Galleani points out, *"[b]ut whoever has the political competence to choose his own rulers is, by implication, also competent to do without them."* [*The End of Anarchism?*] However, amazing as it seems, some anarchists are arguing that we should take part in local elections. What is even stranger is that this perspective (usually termed "Libertarian Municipalism") has been put forward by Murray Bookchin and Janet Biehl, both of whom we have quoted above on the corrupting effects of electioneering. The difference is, according to the Libertarian Municipalists, that **local** elections are different, that there is a conflict between the city and the state, that it is possible to use local elections to

thanks to this method, Socialism has almost been completely crushed and condemned to insignificance... Participation in parliamentary politics has affected the Socialist Labour movement like an insidious poison. It destroyed the belief in the necessity of constructive Socialist activity, and, worse of all, the impulse to self-help, by inoculating people with the ruinous delusion that salvation always comes from above."

Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice

This corruption does not happen overnight. Alexander Berkman indicates how it slowly develops when he wrote:

> *"[At the start, the Socialist Parties] claimed that they meant to use politics only for the purpose of propaganda... and took part in elections on order to have an opportunity to advocate Socialism*
>
> *"It may seem a harmless thing but it proved the undoing of Socialism. Because nothing is truer than the means you use to attain your object soon themselves become your object... [so] There is a deeper reason for this constant and regular betrayal [than individual scoundrels being elected]... no man turns scoundrel or traitor overnight.*
>
> *"It is **power** which corrupts... Moreover, even with the best intentions Socialists [who get elected]... find themselves entirely powerless to accomplishing anything of a socialistic nature... The demoralisation and vitiation [this brings about] take place little by little, so gradually that one hardly notices it himself... [The elected Socialist] perceives that he is regarded as a laughing stock [by the other politicians]... and finds more and more difficulty in securing the floor... he knows that neither by his talk nor by his vote can he influence the proceedings... His speeches don't even reach the public... [and so] He appeals to the voters to elect more comrades... Years pass... [and a] number... are elected. Each of them goes through the same experience... [and] quickly come to the conclusion... [that] They must show that they are practical men... that they are doing something for their constituency... In this manner the situation compels them to take a 'practical' part in the proceedings, to 'talk business,' to fall in line with the matters actually dealt with in the legislative body... Spending years in that atmosphere, enjoying good jobs and pay, the elected Socialists have themselves become part and parcel of the political machinery... With growing success in elections and securing political power they turn more and more conservative and content*

with existing conditions. Removal from the life and suffering of the working class, living in the atmosphere of the bourgeoisie... they have become what they call 'practical'... Power and position have gradually stifled their conscience and they have not the strength and honesty to swim against the current... They have become the strongest bulwark of capitalism."

What is Communist Anarchism?

And so the *"political power which they had wanted to conquer had gradually conquered their Socialism until there was scarcely anything left of it."* [Rudolf Rocker, *Op. Cit.*] This was in spite of the revolutionary ideas that inspired them. Indeed, they were sucked into "practical" matters almost from the start. In the words of Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of the original leaders of German Social Democracy:

"In the early stages, when we had few adherents, we used to go to the Reichstag [the German Parliament] and used it exclusively or almost exclusively for the propagation of our ideas. But very soon we found ourselves involved in practical matters."

However, many radicals refuse to learn this lesson of history and keep trying to create a new party which will not repeat the saga of compromise and betrayal which all other radical parties have suffered. And they say that anarchists are utopian! In other words, its truly utopian to think that *"You cannot dive into a swamp and remain clean."* [Alexander Berkman, *Op. Cit.*] Such is the result of rejecting (or "supplementing" with electioneering) direct action as the means to change things, for any social movement *"to ever surrender their commitment to direct action for 'working within the system' is to destroy their personality as socially innovative movements. It is to dissolve back into the hopeless morass of 'mass organisations' that seek respectability rather than change."* [Murray Bookchin, *Toward an Ecological Society*]

Bad Leaders or Bad System?

The SWP bemoan the fact that the successful Livingstone *"immediately made huge concessions to forces to the right of him."* Rather than place this action in an institutional context, the forces placed on the elected person by the state machinery and pressures from big business, the SWP portray these decisions are the failings of an individual. They argue we *"need to keep up the pressure to demand Livingstone listens to ordinary Londoners, not to business."*

idea that the USA is closer to anarchy because around 50% of people do not vote is nonsense. Abstentionism in this case is the product of apathy and cynicism, not political ideas. So anarchists recognise that apathetic abstentionism is **not** revolutionary or an indication of anarchist sympathies. It is produced by apathy and a general level of cynicism at **all** forms of political ideas and the possibility of change.

Not voting is **not** enough, and anarchists urge people to **organise** and **resist** as well. Abstentionism must be the political counterpart of class struggle, self-activity and self-management in order to be effective - otherwise it is as pointless as voting is.

Fear of the Right

But abstaining will help the right-wing win the election. Possibly. However anarchists don't just say *"don't vote"*, we say *"organise"* as well. Apathy is something anarchists have no interest in encouraging. This means that if the anarchists could persuade half the electorate to abstain from voting this would, from an electoral point of view, contribute to the victory of the Right. But it would be a hollow victory, for what government could rule when half the electorate by not voting had expressed its lack of confidence in all governments?

In other words, whichever party was in office would have to rule over a country in which a sizeable minority, even a majority, had rejected government as such. This would mean that the politicians would be subjected to real pressures from people who believed in their own power and acted accordingly. So anarchists call on people **not** to vote, but instead organise themselves and be conscious of their own power both as individuals and as part of a union with others.

Unlike politicians, the mass of the population cannot be bought off and if they are willing and able to resist then they can become a power second to none. Only by organising, fighting back and practicing solidarity where we live and work can we **really** change things. That is where **our** power lies, that is where we can create a **real** alternative. By creating a network of self-managed, pro-active community and workplace organisations we can impose by direct action that which politicians can never give us from Parliament. And only such a movement can stop the attacks upon us by whoever gets into office. A government (left or right) which faces a mass movement based upon direct action and solidarity will always think twice before proposing cuts or introducing authoritarian laws.

concessions from the government. Our mission is to impose from the streets and workplaces that which ministers and deputies are incapable of realising in parliament. In the words of an anarchist member of the Jura Federation writing in 1875:

> *"Instead of begging the State for a law compelling employers to make them work only so many hours, the trade associations directly impose this reform on the employers; in this way, instead of a legal text which remains a dead letter, a real economic change is effected by the direct initiative of the workers... if the workers devoted all their activity and energy to the organisation of their trades into societies of resistance, trade federations, local and regional, if, by meetings, lectures, study circles, papers and pamphlets, they kept up a permanent socialist and revolutionary agitation; if by linking practice to theory, they realised directly, without any bourgeois and governmental intervention, all immediately possible reforms, reforms advantageous not to a few workers but to the labouring mass - certainly then the cause of labour would be better served than... legal agitation."*

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Caroline Cahm,
**Kropotkin and the Rise of
Revolutionary Anarchism**

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Anarchists insist that we learn to think and act for ourselves by joining together in organisations in which our experience, our perception and our activity can guide and make the change. Knowledge does not precede experience, it flows from it. People learn to be free only by exercising freedom. As one Spanish Anarchist put it *'We are not going to find ourselves... with people ready-made for the future... Without continued exercise of their faculties, there will be no free people... The external revolution and the internal revolution presuppose one another, and they must be simultaneous in order to be successful."* [Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*]

In other words, anarchists reject the view that society is static and that people's consciousness, values, ideas and ideals cannot be changed. Far from it and anarchists support direct action **because** it actively encourages the transformation of those who use it. Direct action is the means of creating a new consciousness, a means of self-liberation from the chains placed around our minds, emotions and spirits by hierarchy and oppression.

Therefore, anarchists urge abstentionism in order to **encourage** activity, not apathy. The reasons **why** people abstain is more important than the act. The

As well as economic pressures from capitalists resulting from capital flight, withdrawal of support, and so on, representatives also face pressures within the state itself due to the bureaucracy that comes with centralism. There is a difference between the state and government. The state is the permanent collection of institutions that have entrenched power structures and interests. The government is made up of various politicians. It is the institutions that have power in the state due to their permanence, not the representatives who come and go. We cannot expect different politicians to act in different ways to the same pressures. However, this is all ignored by the SWP in favour of wishing Ken Livingstone was more a socialist and could ignore the demands of the dominant class in society while in charge of one part of **its** protector and creature, the state!

They also argue that the low level of turn out in the elections indicate *"a sign of deep alienation that millions of people feel from the whole political system, one which does not reflect their views or give them a voice."* Presumably, the SWP seek to give these people *"a voice,"* to involve them in the political system by getting them to vote for the various Socialist Alliances. They can only do that by overcoming the alienation people feel towards the capitalist system by ensuring that it **does** *"reflect their views."* If that is the case then surely this implies that the SWP will be working within the capitalist system, trying to influence it from within and, by necessity, subject to the same institutional pressures that generated reformist tendencies in the Social Democrats and Greens. Unless, of course, the SWP argue that it is the **ideas** of the party leaders that are the decisive factor rather than the social environment in which they operate?

That this may be the case can be seen from William Gallacher's *Last Memoirs*. Gallacher was an active syndicalist before the First World War in Glasgow and a leading light in the Clyde Workers' Committee. Post-war he was a leading anti-Parliamentarian Communist and Lenin argued against his ideas in *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Gallacher visited Moscow and argued that all working class representatives would be corrupted by Parliament. Lenin asked Gallacher whether he would be corrupted if he was elected to Parliament. He answered, *"No, I'm sure that under no circumstances could the bourgeoisie corrupt me"* and so ended his anti-parliamentarian politics! Needless to say, the will-power of most "revolutionary" parliamentarians have not reached Gallacher's fine levels. What **is** significant, however, than Lenin's arguments were fundamentally idealist in nature, looking to the intentions and will-power of the individuals involved rather than a materialist analysis based on the nature of the capitalist state, the way it is structured to protect and enforce bourgeois

rule, the influences and pressures of the permanent state apparatus on the elected representatives, the economic pressure exerted by capital, and so on.

Parties and Power

The use of electioneering has a centralising effect on the movements that use it. Political actions become considered as parliamentary activities made **for** the population by their representatives, with the 'rank and file' left with no other role than that of passive support. Only the leaders are actively involved and the main emphasis falls upon the leaders. It soon becomes taken for granted that they should determine policy (even ignoring conference decisions when required - how many times have politicians turned round and done the exact opposite of what they promised or introduced the exact opposite of party policy?). In the end, party conferences become simply like parliamentary elections, with party members supporting this leader against another.

Soon the party reflects the division between manual and mental labour so necessary for the capitalist system. Instead of working class self-activity and self-determination, there is a substitution and a non-working class leadership acting **for** people replaces self-management in social struggle and within the party itself takes shape. Electioneering strengthens the leaders dominance over the party and the party over the people it claims to represent. And, of course, the real causes and solutions to the problems we face are mystified by the leadership and rarely discussed in order to concentrate on the popular issues that will get them elected.

Working in the state ensures a statist perspective becomes dominant. Everything is seen in terms of state intervention, following the decisions of the leaders and quickly results in radicals *"instead of weakening the false and enslaving belief in law and government... actually work[ing] to* strengthen *the people's faith in forcible authority and government."* [A. Berkman, *Op. Cit.*] Which has always proved deadly to encouraging a spirit of revolt, self-management and self-help - the very keys to creating change in a society.

Thus the 1870 resolution of the Spanish section of the *First International* seems to have been proven to be totally correct:

> *"Any participation of the working class in the middle class political government would merely consolidate the present state of affairs and necessarily paralyse the socialist revolutionary action of the proletariat. The Federation [of unions making up the Spanish*

one which bases itself on a "cannot be bothered," cynical attitude and little else. This form of abstentionism easily leads to rejecting all forms of struggle and politics, including direct action and anarchism. Anarchists are against this just as much as any socialist voter.

Rather, anarchists see abstentionism as a positive statement, a means of turning the natural negative reaction to an unjust system into positive activity (i.e. direct action, solidarity, self-activity and self-organisation). So, anarchist opposition to electioneering has deep political implications which Luigi Galleani addressed when he wrote:

> *"anarchists' electoral abstentionism implies not only a conception that is opposed to the principle of representation (which is totally rejected by anarchism), it implies above all an absolute lack of confidence in the State... Furthermore, anarchist abstentionism has consequences which are much less superficial than the inert apathy ascribed to it by the sneering careerists of 'scientific socialism' [i.e. Marxism]. It strips the State of the constitutional fraud with which it presents itself to the gullible as the true representative of the whole nation, and, in so doing, exposes its essential character as representative, procurer and policeman of the ruling classes.*

> *"Distrust off reforms, of public power and of delegated authority, can lead to direct action [in the class struggle]... It can determine the revolutionary character of this... action; and, accordingly, anarchists regard it as the best available means for preparing the masses to manage their own personal and collective interests; and, besides, anarchists feel that even now the working people are fully capable of handling their own political and administrative interests."*

The End of Anarchism?

Therefore abstentionism stresses the importance of self-activity and self-libertarian through struggle as well as having an important educational effect in highlighting that the state is not neutral, but serves to protect class rule, and that meaningful change only comes from below, by direct action. For the dominant ideas within any class society reflect the opinion of the ruling elite of that society and so any campaign at election times which argues for abstentionism and indicates why voting is a farce will obviously challenge these ideas. In other words, abstentionism combined with direct action and the building of socialist alternatives is a very effective means of changing people's ideas and encouraging a process of self-education and, ultimately, self-liberation. Thus not voting is not enough, we need to organise and fight. We must not ask for any

struggle changes. Rather than direct struggle against the state and the boss, this is no longer needed as the elected representatives will act or people will think they will act and so not act themselves. They have elected someone to fight for them and so do not need to fight themselves.

Rudolf Rocker points to this when he noted that *"frequently happened that in just those sections of the country where the Socialist parties were strongest the wages of the workers were lowest and the conditions of labour worst. That was the case, for example, in the northern industrial districts of France, where Socialists were in the majority in numerous city administrations, and in Saxony and Silesia, where throughout its existence German Social Democracy had been able to show a large following."* [*Anarcho-Syndicalism*] The Social Democrats were elected to fight for people; can we be surprised if people do not act themselves?

Individualism

Moreover, Marxist support for electioneering is somewhat at odds with their claims of being in favour of collective, mass action. There is nothing more isolated, atomised and individualistic than voting. 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!

Not voting? Not Enough!

As part and parcel of anarchist support on direct action is abstentionism. This signifies the rejection of voting. However, there is more than one kind of abstentionism. There is passive and active abstentionism. Passive abstentionism is that associated with alienation, apathy and a-politicism. The

section of the International] is the true representative of labour, and should work outside the political system."

Jose Pierats,
Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution

Instead of trying to gain control of the state, for whatever reasons, anarchists try to promote a culture of resistance within society that makes the state subject to pressure from without. Or, to quote Proudhon, we see the *"problem before the labouring classes... [as] consist[ing of] not in capturing, but in subduing both power and monopoly, - that is, in generating from the bowels of the people, from the depths of labour, a greater authority, a more potent fact, which shall envelop capital and the state and subjugate them."* For, *"to combat and reduce power, to put it in its proper place in society, it is of no use to change the holders of power or introduce some variation into its workings: an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave."* [*System of Economical Contradictions*] Direct action is the key way of doing this and the means of creating such a "combination."

State and Structure

The simple fact is that the bourgeois state has been developed to enforce minority rule. Its structure is no more an accident than the structure of a bird's wing. The wing has evolved to enable flight. The state has evolved a structure based upon minority, top-down rule that ensures the continence and protection of that rule. And as Kropotkin argued, 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."* [Peter Kropotkin, *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*]

The same means cannot be used to serve different ends as there is an intrinsic relationship between the instruments used and the results obtained - that is why the bourgeoisie do not encourage participatory democracy in the state or the workplace! Just as the capitalist workplace is organised to produce proletarians and capital along with cloth and steel, the capitalist state is organised to protect and reinforce minority power. The state and the capitalist workplace are not simply means or neutral instruments. Rather they are social structures which generate, reinforce and **protect** specific social relations. These social relations are based on delegating power to others, letting leaders act for you, letting others fight for you. These have an impact on those who use these tactics, both the individuals and the organisations.

The "essence" of state is, to use Luigi Frabbi's words, *"centralised power"* and *"hierarchical despotism."* It is based on delegating power into the hands of a few - in a democracy, elected representatives and the state bureaucracy. It should be a truism that elections empower the politicians and not the voters. Parliamentarianism focuses the fight for change into the hands of leaders by its very nature. Rather than those involved doing the fighting, the organising, the decision making, that power rests in the hands of the representative. The importance of the leaders is stressed, as it must be in a centralised system. This position is acknowledged by the SWP, in their own way - as they argue, an elected LSA member would have be a *"focus"* for many struggles and campaigns.

Preparation or postponing?

Anarchists, in contrast, argue that we need to reclaim the power which has been concentrated into the hands of the state. That is why we stress direct action. Direct action means action by the people themselves, that is action directly taken by those directly affected. Through direct action, the people create their own struggle, it is they who conduct it, organise it, manage it. They do not hand over to others their own acts and task of self-liberation. That way, we become accustomed to managing our own affairs, creating alternative, libertarian, forms of social organisation which can become a force to resist the state, win reforms and become the framework of a free society. In other words, direct action creates organs of self-activity (such as community assemblies, factory committees, workers' councils, and so on) which, to use Bakunin's words, are *"creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself."*

In other words, the idea that socialists standing for elections somehow prepares working class people for revolution is simply wrong. Utilising the state, standing in elections, only prepares people for following leaders - it does not encourage the self-activity, self-organisation, direct action and mass struggle required for a social revolution.

If we look at the Poll-Tax campaign we can see what would happen to a mass movement based on electioneering. The various left-wing parties (particularly Militant) spent a lot of time and effort lobbying Labour Councillors not to implement the tax (with no success). Let us assume they had succeeded and the Labour Councillors had refused to implement the tax. What would have happened? Simply that there would not have been a mass movement or mass organisation based on non-payment, nor self-organised direct action to resist warrant sales, nor community activism of any form. Rather, the campaign

would have consisted to supporting the councillors in their actions, mass rallies in which the leaders would have informed us of their activities on our behalf and, perhaps, rallies and marches to protest any action the government had inflicted on them. The leaders may have called for some form of mass action but this action would not have come from below and so not a product of working class self-organisation, self-activity and self-reliance. Rather, it would have been purely re-active and a case of follow the leader, without the empowering and liberating aspects of taking action by yourself, as a conscious and organised group.

Of course, even discussing this possibility indicates how remote it is from reality. The Labour Councillors were not going to act - they were far too "practical" for that. Years of working within the system, of using elections, had taken their toll decades ago. Anarchists saw the usefulness of **picketing** the council meetings, of protesting against the Councillors and showing them a small example of the power that existed to resist them if they implemented the tax. A picket would have been an expression of direct action, as it was based on showing our potential power. Lobbying, however, was building illusions in "leaders" acting for us to and based on pleading rather than defiance. But, then again, Militant desired to replace the current leaders with themselves and so would not object to such tactics.

Unfortunately, Militant never really questioned **why** they had to lobby the councillors in the first place - if standing for seats was a valid radical or revolutionary tactic, why has it always resulted in a de-radicalising of those who use it? This would be the inevitable results of any movement which "complements" direct action with electioneering. The focus of the movement will change from the base to the top, from self-organisation and direct action from below to passively supporting the leaders. This may not happen instantly, but over time, just as the party degenerates by working within the system, the mass movement will be turned into an electoral machine for the party - even arguing against direct action in case it harms the election chances of the leaders. Just as the trade union leaders have done again and again.

Waste of Time?

Is it correct to argue that elections divert attention away from building alternatives and campaigns in our communities and workplaces? On the most obvious level, election campaigns use on time, resources and energy which could be used elsewhere. Also, if radicals are elected the whole focal point of