

ORGANISE!

...for revolutionary anarchism

84

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Organise! The magazine of the Anarchist Federation

Organise! is the magazine of the Anarchist Federation (AF). It is published in order to develop anarchist communist ideas. It aims to provide a clear anarchist viewpoint on contemporary issues and to initiate debate on ideas not normally covered in agitational papers.

We aim to produce Organise! twice a year. To meet this target, we positively solicit contributions from our readers. We aim to print any article that furthers the objectives of anarchist communism. If you'd like to write something for us, but are unsure whether to do so, why not get in touch first? Even articles that are 100% in agreement with our aims and principles can leave much open to debate.

As always, the articles in this issue do not necessarily represent the collective viewpoint of the AF. We hope that their publication will produce responses from our readers and spur debate on.

For the next issue of Organise! Please send all contributions to the address on the right.

It would help if all articles could be either typed or on disc. Alternatively, articles can be emailed to the editors directly at organise@afed.org.uk

What goes in Organise!

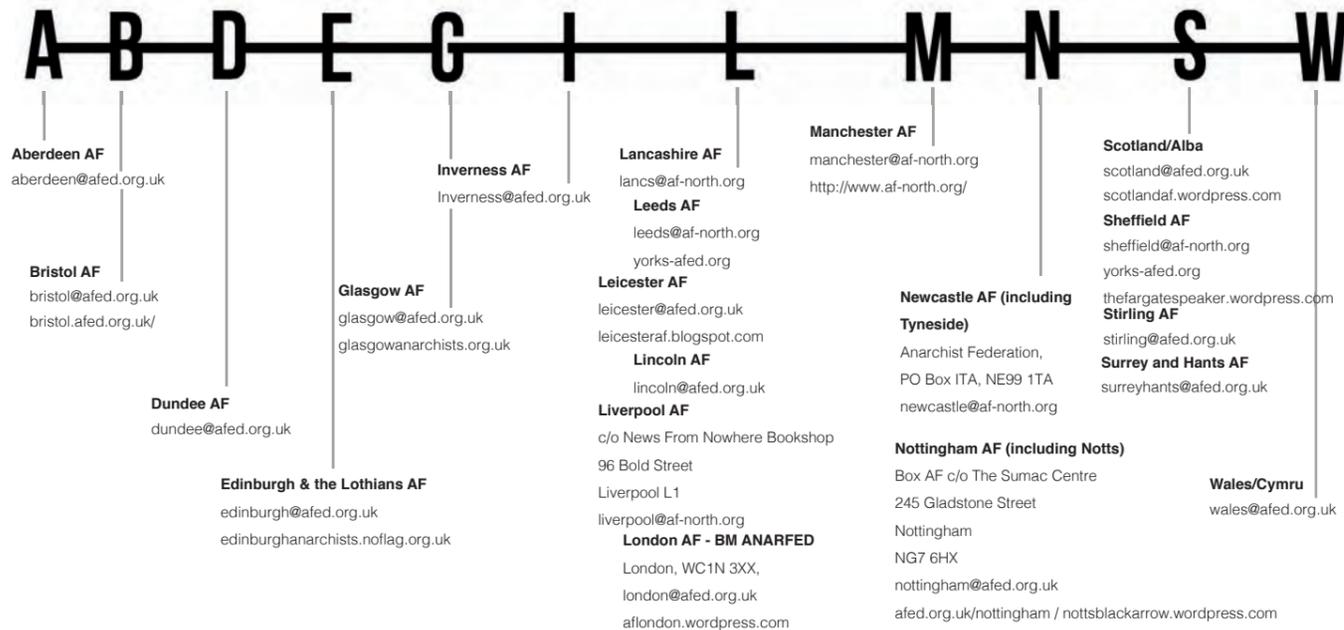
Organise! hopes to open up debate in many areas of life. As we have stated before, unless signed by the Anarchist Federation as a whole or by a local AF group, articles in Organise! reflect the views of the person who has written the article and nobody else.

If the contents of one of the articles in this issue provokes thought, makes you angry, compels a response then let us know. Revolutionary ideas develop from debate, they do not merely drop out of the air!



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Single issues of Organise! are
3.50
4.00 EU
4.5 rest of the world

Annual subscriptions to
Organise! (two issues) are
available for
6.00 UK
7.00 EU
8.00 rest of the world

We accept cheques or Postal
Orders made payable to AFED
and sent to
BM ANARFED, London,
WC1N 3XX, England, UK

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Editorial

What's in the latest Organise!

This issue of Organise! goes to press at the time of the election. As we say here, whoever wins the election the governments always gets in. Whichever brand of politician ends up in the majority or whatever coalition is lashed together we know that the current programme of capitalist austerity will continue. It will result in even more devastating cuts than we have already experienced, coupled with a strengthening of police powers to curb any opposition. As the crisis that is capitalism rumbles on, we must be prepared to fight against its latest representatives whoever they may be.

Fight for the City explains some ways in which opposition can be developed, in this instance focusing on the housing struggle. Social cleansing and gentrification, another facet of the capitalist crisis, are effecting towns and cities across the world with increasing speed and we must learn how to organise against them with similar speed and tenacity.

We also include an in-depth analysis of the resistance to austerity in the UK so far. Looking back over the past five years of Student Occupations, TUC strikes, UK Uncut Actions and mass rioting. We take a look at the strengths and weaknesses and how we can build a more effective resistance.

Another aspect of the crisis of capitalism is the descent into war and barbarism. We look at the various

plays of both the big powers like the US, Russia and China and local powers like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel in the Near and Middle East. Our opposition to capitalism and the State must always have a strong anti-militarist and internationalist emphasis.

We include a critical look at the situation in Rojava from French revolutionaries, which questions the rebirth of the PKK into libertarian organisation.

The question of voting, not voting, and what we can even vote for anyway, is discussed in Crystal Balls. This theme is continued in the article on what the Suffragettes won for us, with a no-nonsense view on the use of Parliament by Sylvia Pankhurst to back it up. This is followed with a look at the contemporary Anarcha-Feminist movement with a report from AFem 2014.

Also in this issue is an article on the Belgian painter Theo Van Rysselberghe, who like many other painters in France and Belgium, took up the anarchist cause. In addition we have our usual book reviews, which includes a look at a new collection of the writings of Malatesta, one of the most pragmatic of anarchist revolutionaries, and a book on how the State used the most ferocious means to crush the IWW, a mass organisation of the working class, in order to protect their war interests.

We finish this issue of Organise! on a sad note as we remember Colin Parker, one of the founders of the Anarchist Federation, who died early this year.

Fight for the city

Social cleansing, Social warfare

Over half of the world's population live in cities. This is expected to rise to 75% by 2050. The move to the cities first occurred in Europe with industrialisation. It was a relatively slow process compared to the pace of change in the developing world. For example, London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1780 whereas, China added more city-dwellers in the 1980s than did all of Europe, including Russia, in the entire 19th century (Davis: 2007). And cities are constantly changing, transformed by the need for capitalism to find new sources of profit. Capitalism has continually strived to ensure that all aspects of work involve the creation of surplus value. Now, capital is bringing all aspects of life into the capitalist orbit- making where we live and what we do when we are not at work, part of this value creation system. This means the control of all space, not just where we work.

Symptoms

Britain and other western countries have seen a massive increase in the cost of housing, increase in evictions and homelessness, whole council estates torn down and sold off to private developers, overcrowding in squalid accommodation, city centres privatised and transformed into sanitised shopping malls, business centres and tourist destinations, attacks on the poor- cuts in benefit, the bedroom tax, low wages, fewer green and open spaces and more sky scrapers, increased pollution, police violence, and increased surveillance.

Meanwhile, developing countries have seen rapid urbanisation as rural dwellers are forced into the cities to make a living, no concern to provide any housing for the new arrivals, massive growth in slums and shanty towns, slum clearances on a regular basis when it suits the needs of capital, demolition of traditional urban communities to make way for corporate architecture and gated communities.

All of these things have one cause- the transformation of cities all over the world from places of homes, neighbourhoods, and social networks to places where capital can make money. We are witnessing social cleansing on a mass scale as cities are turned into investment opportunities and playgrounds for the increasing number of the super-rich, both home-grown and foreign, with local and national politicians firmly behind them. Yet at the same time, capital has need of workers, so they can't push us too far outside of the city. So the working class and the poor are channelled into enclaves of sub-standard, overcrowded housing or slums and shanty towns in the developing world. Meanwhile, the well-off hide in their gated communities and their security-protected luxury tower blocks. We are witnessing nothing less than the complete takeover of the city by capital and the state, reshaping the city for high-value business, including tourism and the culture industry, such as universities and the areas that surround them.

This process has been going on for several decades. There have been pockets of resistance as individuals and groups fight back: against workfare, benefits cuts, the bedroom tax, hospital closures, estate evictions, luxury developments, police violence, and racism. However, the attack continues, seemingly unstoppable. But recently more and more people are realising what is happening, and they are beginning to link up struggles and are winning some important victories against property developers, landlords, and government. The future of our cities now hangs in the balance. It is up to us to fight for the kind of city we want to live in. This puts us in direct opposition to wealthy investors, property developers and construction companies, financial institutions and corporations, estate agents and landlords as well as politicians, both local and national, their servants in the police. In other words, it is a fight against global capitalism and the state; a fight for anarchist communism.

This article will examine both the causes of the attack on our cities and what we need to do to win the battle. It will focus mainly on London, which has its own peculiar situation as the centre of finance capital, but you will be able to find many similarities with other cities in Britain and the rest of the world. It is in two parts. The first part focuses on the issue of housing, the way in which capital is transforming homes into investment opportunities and the consequences of this for the working class in the city.



The second part will examine the general privatisation and control of all space in the city, turning every part of the city into a place for capital and excluding all who don't produce profits or challenge the system in any way.

Regeneration: The working class evicted

One of the most significant signs of what is happening to our cities is the forcing out of the working class from areas of the city that are the target for money-making ventures. In London and many other cities, the centre and the immediate periphery are considered 'prime' property. This means that the working class is being pushed further and further out. It may go under the name of regeneration but what is happening is effectively social cleansing. It is at its most obvious in the slum clearances that occur regularly in the cities of the developing world. For example, the demolition of Zhejiang Village, the poorest area of Beijing, in 1995. It was a two-month operation involving 5,000 armed police and party cadres. In the end 9,917 homes were destroyed, 1,645 'illegal' businesses were shut down and 18621 'illegal' residents were deported. This might seem an extreme example, but there are certain similarities with Britain, with whole estates demolished and their residents 'decanted' no one knowing exactly where they went. This social cleansing is a consequence of both market forces and deliberate government policy. In Britain, there has traditionally been a mixture of people in different parts of the city, including the centre. This was

because of the building of council housing on a massive scale in the 1930s and then after World War II. It wasn't just the poor who lived in council homes, but many from the wider working class and even the middle class. Now, there is a move to create areas of the city that are exclusively for business, tourism, culture industries, and the super-rich.

Decimation of social housing

Council housing was decimated with Thatcher's right to buy policy in the 1980s, which took millions of homes out of the public sector.

Once the damage had been done, both physically and ideologically, the next governments, both Conservative and Labour, continued to sell off its housing stock.

With the economy in more or less constant crisis, governments sought ways of making the working class pay by finding ways of making cuts that would leave the rich untouched. Selling off housing stock to housing associations was a main way of doing this for local councils, who were being squeezed by central government cuts. By 2008, 170 councils had no housing stock left. Scotland has almost none left. By 2012 there were only 1.7 million council homes, but 2.4 million in housing associations.

Transferring the stock to housing associations was the first step to full privatisation. Housing associations are now in the process of going into 'partnership' with private developers, which usually means selling off a part of their stock to private developers in order to raise funds for the property that remains. The New Era Estate in Shoreditch, London fought and won against their so-called social landlord who was planning on selling off the estate to Westbrook, an American property developer. However, this is only



one victory and there are countless other examples, often not fully publicised, of this kind of sell off on the part of social landlords. Councils are also quite happy to sell off their stock and evict tenants. The Fred John Towers in Leytonstone, London is currently fighting against their local authority who wants to sell one of the towers to private developers and move out the rest for 6 years whilst they renovate the other tower. The Aylesbury Estate in south London and the Carpenters Estate near the Olympic Park, both recently occupied by housing protesters, have been subject to gradual neglect and eviction of residents, with the aim of knocking the estates down and selling them off.

Another key policy introduced by Tony Blair was Pathfinder. This programme was designed to 'create a housing market' in so-called deprived areas across northern Britain. This means that it wanted to increase the demand for housing which would be seen in rising house prices. The fact that people are quite happy

living where they are and don't need or want housing market, seems to have escaped the politicians. For them, as always, it is about making money. Anna Minton in her book Ground Control documents the effects of this policy in detail. Whole terraces of houses, a mixture of council, social and private

were allowed to run down, encouraging the council and social tenants to leave. Housing associations were known to pay tenants to go elsewhere. The end result was a few people left in the streets, giving the government the excuse to demolish all the houses and sell them off to private developers. Whole communities were decimated as a result. The new developments would be more attractive in theory and therefore there would be increased demand for them. Needless to say, the original residents would not be able to afford to buy any of the new homes.

GENTRIFICATION IS
CLASS WAR!
FIGHT BACK

With the right to buy, many of those being threatened with eviction owned their own homes. Ironically, the 'home owner democracy' counted for little when the state wanted to get its hands on their homes. The main weapon used was compulsory purchase. A new law was passed that enable the government to put out a Compulsory Purchase Order it was necessary for the economic benefit of the public. So if money was to be made, which supposedly would 'trickle down' to the public, then a CPO was justified.

These practices of evicting whole estates and streets shows the contempt that governments, 'social' landlords, and developers have for ordinary people. They don't consider that, for individuals and families, the flats and houses that they are being moved from are their homes, part of a neighbourhood, and in some cases a close community. To think that it doesn't matter as long as people have been moved somewhere, indicates either a conscious or unconscious desire to sabotage working class communities.

Rising house prices and rents

Another factor contributing to social cleansing, in London in particular, is the rise in house prices and rents. To understand why this is happening we need to take a step back and analyse the relationship of the housing market to capitalism. Capitalists are forever searching for new ways to make money. They may have made money out of production or resource extraction, eg the oil, but in some ways actually using the money made to produce something useful may be too hard and too slow. And they certainly don't want to use their money to help alleviate world poverty. Whatever the reason, the

main way that people make money is through the financial system, either investing in stocks or other speculative investments. With uncertainty around the stock market, property has increasingly been seen as a safe investment that would guarantee quick and lucrative returns. This has been the case even for the middle classes who have taken advantage of buy-to-let mortgages as an alternative to relying on a pension. As a result, the demand for property, not homes, has shot up and therefore with a limited supply, so have the prices both to buy and to rent.

The government has fuelled the rise in prices through their own policies. And there is a reason for this;

the whole economy depends on rising house prices. This might seem odd, but given that Britain has very little manufacturing industry left to provide jobs and that most people are now worse off financially than they were a decade ago, there has to be a way of getting them to spend money. This is a fundamental contradiction of capitalism - they squeeze workers at the point of production, paying them as little as possible, but then want those same workers to be consumers! They have found the perfect solution - encourage them to take out a mortgage so they think they are home owners, keep house prices rising and they'll think they are better off than they are. Capitalism then makes sure that credit is easily available to keep them spending and getting them further in debt.

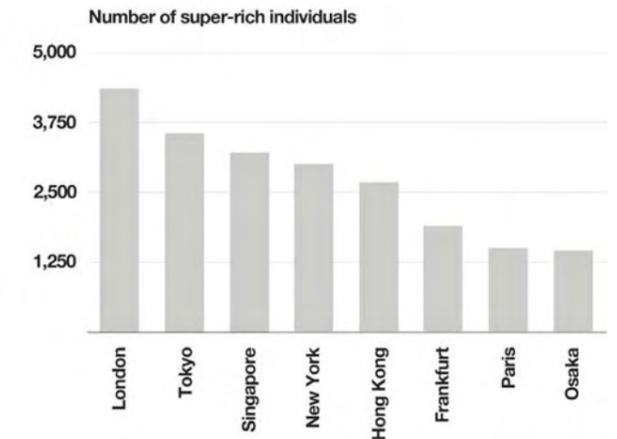
This is what caused the crisis in 2008.

People started to default on their loans. However, the government bailed out the banks and soon it was business as usual as house prices rise. Though it is harder to get a mortgage than before, people are still encouraged to taken one on even if it means more debt. However, even the middle classes are beginning to suffer, and increasingly people who are not already on the property ladder are forced into rental accommodation. This increase in demand has pushed rents up as well as house prices in general.

The super-rich and the housing market

Linked to the rise in house prices in London is the influx of the world's rich. In 2009, after the financial crisis had passed, there were 115 billionaires in China, 101 in Russia, 55 in India in addition to 413 in the US and 32 in Britain. The incredible amount of wealth accumulated by some individuals is due largely to a transfer of wealth from the mass of the population. One percent of the population now own 50% of the world's wealth. This was seen most blatantly in Russia, as the resources once owned by the State were gradually bought up at knock-down prices by a few individuals.

The Russian oligarchs came with suitcases full of roubles to London. Now it is the turn of the Chinese. The privatisation that took place in China has meant that some individuals have made big money through a combination of corruption and ruthless exploitation of their workforce, all enforced by the state.



These people need somewhere to put their money. They are not interested in putting it into something to help raise living standards of the world's poor or even into producing a product. Apart from spending large amounts of their wealth on lavish lifestyles, they want their money to be safe and to make more money. London offers the ideal opportunity.

London has always been a world financial centre. It is a place for the rich to invest their money, allowing the banks to do what they want with it, as long as they make more money. The role of the financial sector in the British economy has increased in the last few decades. London's deregulated financial system means that investors can get away with practices they wouldn't be able to elsewhere. It is closely associated with the off-shore banking network in places like Jersey and Guernsey.

The taxation system favours the rich, with very low taxes on income and is also very favourable to foreign investors.

They may be making money as a result of their investments, but if they can show that these

investments, but if they can show that these investments are based elsewhere or that they are not permanent residents in Britain, they have to pay little or no tax. And, in case they are liable for tax, London has a booming tax “avoidance” industry.

Britain’s role as head of an empire has also played a role in attracting the world’s wealthy to London. The life style of the English aristocracy seems to be one that is sought after by many. Most of the world’s wealthiest people, both corporate executives and celebrities, have at least one property in Britain, usually in London, where they can come and play at being a lord or lady. The Russian oligarchs, arriving in force in the late 1990s, have managed to revitalise the yachting industry and increase sales in the luxury goods shops, not to mention the increased demand for private school places and nannies and butlers.

Politicians such as Boris Johnson and Ken Livingstone before him, went to great lengths to attract the rich to London. The justification for this is that there is a housing shortage and that they cannot afford to build new social housing because of the austerity measures. (They of course refuse to consider actually taxing all the wealth that has flooded into London, making the banks pay for their mistakes or cutting down on their war expenditure). The only way they say we can get new housing is by attracting private sector investment.

Therefore, they have offered up London on a plate to the super-rich and global corporations. Developers are having a field day, with new housing developments even in previously “undesirable” areas.

Most of them are then being sold to foreign investors, hoping to make a killing out of the rising prices and soaring rents. There is a minimal amount of affordable

housing which is actually not affordable, but 80% of market rents, so none of these developments are within the reach of the average Londoner and certainly not the poorest. They may rent some of the units out to the lawyers, accountants, bankers, other well-off professionals, and even tourists, but many of the units will remain empty, now known as ‘buy-to-sit’. There are whole streets in Chelsea and Kensington that have no lights on at night. It is estimated that 20% of this borough consists of empty properties.

Therefore, the demand for cheaper housing by everyone else, including councils for their large homeless populations, is higher than supply. As a result private landlords step in and charge the maximum they can get away with, cut back on repairs and improvements, and/or squash more people into the property than it can reasonably hold. If anyone is made homeless, the council is quick to try and move them out of the central London boroughs or out of London completely. Housing benefit levels are too low to be able to rent properties in most parts of London.

Therefore, social cleansing is a consequence of shortage social housing, rising house prices and rents, all of which are caused by the need of capital to make money out of the city.

Apartheid in the city

It is important to grasp that we dealing here with a fundamental reorganisation of metropolitan space, involving a drastic diminution of the intersections between the lives of the rich and poor.

P.119 Planet of Slums

It is not just a question of moving the working class further out from the city centre. Many of the well-off do not want to live in the centre in a high rise flat. They may have one for work, but if they have a family they are more likely to move to the leafy suburbs.

entrances (“poor doors”), the subject of an on-going campaign at 1 Commercial St in Aldgate, London.

In some of the developing countries, in which the extremes of rich and poor are much greater and therefore more frightening for the rich, gated communities are the norm. In Planet of the Slums, Mike Davis documents the rise of what he calls ‘off-worlds’ - a term taken from the film Blade Runner.

Whole suburbs are built which completely isolate the well-off from the mass of the population. These are often modelled after places in southern California. Cairo has Beverly Hills, Beijing has Orange County, and Hong Kong has Palm Springs.

These may be actual places in southern California, but for the rich of the developing world they are brand names which are symbolic of wealth, status, and exclusivity. They are surrounded by high fences and tight security. They are connected to the financial and business centres by super highways that provide a safe corridor between their suburban mansion and their place of work, though many of these places are now incorporating business headquarters as well. According to Jeremy Seabrook, quoted in Davis: ‘the Third World bourgeoisie cease to be citizens of their own country and become nomads belonging to, and owing allegiance to a superterrestrial topography of money; they become patriots of wealth, nationalists of an exclusive and golden nowhere’. (p.120)

Therefore, the rich are separated not just from the rest of the population but also from the reality of the country itself. There are similarities with the foreign investors in London.

The Russian oligarchs may ape the life-style of the British upper classes but they have no interest in Britain or its people.

This is already the case in the US where there has been a massive exodus of the upper and middle classes from downtown. In Britain, there still is a tendency for the well-off to prefer a more centrally located house, but we are still witnessing moves outside of London to a large house or mansion in Surrey. So it is not just a question of moving the working class out of the centre but of making sure that the working class, especially the ‘undeserving poor’, do not ‘contaminate’ other social classes. Many local councils support regeneration by saying they want a better ‘mix’ of residents. However, this is only so they can get the better-off residents into the area. This ‘mix’ is deceptive. The new developments are often versions of gated communities. This idea started in the US but has taken off in other parts of the world. These gated communities separate off the rich and the middle class from the ‘dangerous’ masses. These could be city centre developments with high level security systems or they may be special communities in the suburbs, which are linked to the centre by special transport systems.

New residential ‘towers’ are springing up in key areas of London. Some are along the Thames in central London whilst others are in and around Canary Wharf, Liverpool St, and Stratford.

In theory every development is meant to have some ‘affordable’ housing or make some contribution to the community, such as a health centre. Developers are increasingly finding ways of avoiding having to provide any affordable, and certainly not social, housing. They will often pay the council a sum of money as a contribution to their social housing fund. They then can promote their development as ‘completely private’ to their potential clients, assuring them that they won’t have to mix with the riff-raff! Meanwhile, the council doesn’t use the money for any social housing. If the developers do end up providing some cheaper housing, they will put in separate

They live a life of luxury on their yacht or Chelsea mansion with the wives shopping at Harrods, but that is as far as the connection goes (apart from bribing our politicians!). The planned development at the Royal Albert Docks is another case in point. Boris Johnson sold the whole area to a Chinese company without any opportunity for British companies to even bid. The aim is to establish an 'East Asian enclave' in Newham, one of the poorest boroughs of London. This will be another Canary Wharf where East Asian executives will be able to conduct their business without even having to mix with their British counterparts! It is similar to what the Europeans did in China in the 19th and early 20th century with their special enclaves in places like Shanghai.



Labour force

It is not possible to exclude the working masses completely. After all, who will do the cleaning? Who will do the lowly office jobs and staff the restaurants? In the developing countries the problem is solved by having people live in special accommodation near their work. So maids will sleep in the garden shed or the basement of the exclusive suburbs, and rural migrant workers will stay in factory dormitories. These workers have no right of residence and even if they did, they wouldn't be able to afford the prices. Or, the workers will live in the slums, shanty towns that they set

up themselves in order to be near work. They are safe as long as the rich are protected from these slums in their high security suburbs or until the land they are on is wanted for yet another money-making opportunity.

In Britain, workers have two choices. They can live close to their work in sub-standard and over-crowded conditions, paying at least half their salary in rent, or they can move further out and spend more money and time commuting. The point here is that capital does not bear any of the cost of this - it is the workers' time and money that is being spent getting to work. And, if the workers decide to live closer, capital also wins by making huge profits on the rent paid.

Resistance

People are fighting back. There have been a number of campaigns against all aspects of the attack on working class housing in the city. The Pathfinder project produced campaigns that went on for years, such as the Derker Community Action Group in Oldham or Elizabeth Pascoe's fight in North Liverpool (see Anna Minton's Ground Control for more detail). In London, the residents left on the Carpenters Estate in Stratford, east London managed to fight off the plans of the University of London to take over the estate and build a branch of the university.

Campaigners in West Hendon estate in North London have managed to keep their homes for years, despite the constant threat of eviction. New Era estate in Shoreditch, London mounted one of the most successful campaigns.

They managed to 'persuade' the US development company Westbrook to abandon attempts to turn the property into up-scale private flats and now the estate is to be turned over to a social housing association.

Currently new campaigns are springing up around London, such as the Aylesbury Estate in south London. Even though squatting residential properties is now a criminal offence, they are using occupation as a tool in the struggle, physically taking over empty flats.

Campaigns are also fighting individual evictions and against private landlords. Focus E15, who ran a successful campaign to get 29 single mothers rehoused in the local area rather than being sent out of London, continues to fight individual cases and also organised a militant protest at the British Credit Awards (aka the 'Bailliff's Ball'). Solidarity networks are also being set up (eg. in Glasgow and Bristol), a way of supporting individuals who are facing any housing problem such as losing a deposit or landlord refusal to do repairs. Private renter groups are also being organised, tackling issues such as rent rises.

The struggles have had different degrees of success. What are the common ingredients?

Campaigns that focus on one individual landlord or situation tend to do well. This is partially because it is possible for the landlord, or council, to give in on one case more easily than a campaign that is fighting evictions or other problems on the level of the whole estate.

However, these campaigns also have had victories because of the tactics used: direct action - taking the fight directly to the landlord or council. Focus E15 has been relentless in their attack on Newham council and the mayor Robin Wales, recently winning a case against him for verbal abuse of two of the young mothers at the heart of the campaign. They also mounted an occupation of Carpenters Estate and have been making links with and encouraging other campaigns in the area. Though a political

organisation, the Revolutionary Communist Group, has been involved in the campaign from the beginning and their paper is frequently to be seen on all events, their message is that it must be those directly involved, the residents themselves, who take charge of the campaign. Those who come along to the stall or one of the actions are there to support and not take over or substitute themselves for the estate residents or individual facing eviction.

The lack of support from residents is one of the key weaknesses of some of the other campaigns. The Aylesbury occupation came about as a result of the March for Homes with some activists, many from the squatting movement, thinking about what action they could take to make the struggle more effective than a march from A to B.

They were aware of the need to get residents on their side and there are some directly involved in the occupation. They say that there is 'passive' support for the occupation but the campaign would be much stronger if it was based on the residents themselves with support from the occupiers, rather than the occupiers trying to get support after they have already occupied and are then busy trying to maintain the occupation and fight off the police. However, the estate itself has been in the process of being 'decanted' for some time so that in many ways it is difficult to build up support. That is the problem with fighting whole estate evictions. Often the process is gradual, and if the residents themselves aren't organised and ready to fight, the estate is almost empty before housing activists find out about what is going on. This doesn't mean that these occupations are not worth doing - they are a good way of raising awareness of what is going on and provide a focal point for struggles in the local area - it is just that to actually win, the residents need to still be living there and wanting to fight.

the international property developers fair MIPIM last October and a week of action ending with a protest against Boris Johnson and his budget in February.

As shown in this article, the problems are much larger than the council refusing to build more council houses and selling off their properties to private developers. In fact, it may not even be necessary to build more homes, which will only use up more land that could be used for open public space such as parks. It is more a matter of redistribution of the empty properties that are there, for example the takeover of the empty mansions, and the transformation of all the empty office blocks into housing.

In addition, we shouldn't be uncritical of both council and social housing. Council housing in its early years was about the provision of housing for the 'deserving' poor and itself involved social cleansing of the 'slums'. In addition, just because housing is owned by the state does not make it in itself desirable.

The state can also be a bad landlord, which is why so many tenants did not put up much of a fight when council housing was sold off to residents or transferred to social landlords. Though many people have good memories of the sense of communities on council estates, it depended very much on which estate. However, the sale to social landlords, the housing associations, has proved to be a disaster. Though councils themselves have sold off property to private developers, it is much more likely to happen under a so-called social landlord. These landlords have had money cut by central government which has exacerbated the tendency for them to transform themselves into private corporations, putting rents up, selling off properties, and/or going into 'partnership' with private developers. What

counts more than the type of tenure, is the degree of organisation of tenants and residents. It is probably easier to organise if the landlord is the council, which is the main reason why it is still a worthy demand. However, the focus of all campaigns must be to strengthen the self-organisation of the tenants and residents themselves, no matter who the landlord is.

Though we still need to target councils and make the demands, we must begin to widen the scope of the campaign and fight both the developers and the foreign investors who are buying up properties.

As long as cities are held hostage to capital and the need to make money out of the city, any council is going to face strong pressure to accept the logic of private investment. Not only are their funds limited by central government itself, but the power of companies and individuals worth millions must be a great temptation for the politicians. In other words, the fight is against global capitalism itself and the State which facilitates the takeover of the city.



The New Era campaign demonstrates a combination of successful tactics. The residents started organising themselves many months before local activists became involved to support. This meant that they were already well-organised and united and could be at the centre of their campaign. There was no need to win over the residents because they already were fighting. The other tactic is the way in which they took the struggle direct to the developer. They made links with WestbrookenantsinAmerica which embarrassed Westbrook. In the end, a big property developer like Westbrook didn't want the hassle and pulled out.

Another positive feature of the growing housing struggle is the fact that many of the campaigns are beginning to make links. The Radical Housing Network in London brings together several local campaigns as a way of giving each other support, as well as organising united action against common enemies. For example, they organised a successful protest outside

Poking a future monarch with a stick - a critical look at the UK anti-cuts movement

The fight against austerity driven cuts (or 'savings' as the state refers to them) mobilised hundreds of thousands of people across the UK, saw the wide spread adoption of direct action, and an unprecedented level of student militancy. It saw the largest strike in a generation, the largest protest since the outbreak of the Iraq war, the most widespread rioting in decades, and attacks on key government buildings on a scale not seen since the poll tax riots. It also failed. It didn't meet any of its key goals, and whilst we should celebrate those small victories that were achieved, we also have to recognise that we failed to harness or sustain the level of anger and activity that marked the peak of the anti-cuts movements in 2010 and 2011. Here we take a look at those intertwined movements, the student revolt, UK UNCUT, the Trades Union Congress (TUC), local anti-cuts groups, and single issue campaigns. **Why weren't they more effective? How could they have been? Most importantly, what can we do now?**

The Student Movement

Some of the earliest blows against austerity were landed by the student movement. The foundations for this movement were laid in 2009, with the wave of university occupations in support of the struggle of Palestinians against the Israeli state. This experience taught many students important tactical lessons, and the victories it achieved boosted the confidence of those that took part and those who would follow them.

Following the announcement of the tripling of tuition fees, the cutting of education funding and the scrapping of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), the response from college, school, and university students was explosive. Demonstrations, marches, and occupations spread across the country, and with Labour in opposition, the National Union of Students (NUS) was free to capitalise on this anger. The NUS called for both local actions and large national marches, however on the 10th of November 2010 it became clear they weren't able to control the monster they'd helped to unleash. While students were still on the streets of London battling the police and trashing the Tory party HQ at Milbank their union's leader, Aaron Porter, was on TV condemning their actions. The NUS continued its trajectory into



irrelevance, culminating in Porters successor being chased from the stage by hecklers in 2012. The NUS confirmed this beyond doubt when they pulled out of the 2014 student demonstration completely.

Perhaps the NUS should've seen this uncontrollable level of militancy coming. The local demonstrations had become steadily more confrontational, as police repression and government indifference radicalised students far faster than us anarchist infiltrators the police were warning everyone about could. The student rebellion would peak on the 6th of December 2010, the night that parliament voted through the cuts and fees. The anger on the street led to running battles with the police, the trashing of the treasury and west end shops, an attempt to burn Trafalgar's christmas tree, and, almost beyond belief, the Prince of Wales and Duchess of Cornwall driving through an angry mob that began chanting off with their heads. The Duchess was famously poked with a placard stick, and the secret service escort car had its rear window smashed by a bin.



So much focus had been on the vote in parliament that by the start of 2011 the movement felt drained and demoralised. Much of the energy left got diverted in attempting to win elected NUS positions in the hope of making it a more radical organisation. Many anarchists argued this strategy was counterproductive from the start. Even in locations where radical candidates did end up in positions of power, activists often found they were too bound by the structure of the NUS to be much help. In fact, in one Westcountry uni the most receptive officer to activist requests was the right leaning president. Never underestimate how many concessions a scared right wing representative will give you - even compared to supposedly leftist reps.

Elsewhere some anarchists tried to push for a more horizontal and federated structure within the National Campaign Against Fees and Cuts (NCAFC), however despite being much smaller than the organisation they'd instigated, the centrist Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) was able to shut down these plans due to their control of the communications within NCAFC.

Many of the other connections between students in different cities were fragile and informal. Despite the widespread influence of anarchic methods, attempts to create anarchist student organising structures never gained sufficient traction. The flames of resistance continued to burn over the next few years, most noticeably in Birmingham and the South East, where great strides were made in student/worker solidarity. Attempts by the state and university management to crush the remaining student movement backfired massively in 2013, with the cops off campus demonstrations proving students still had plenty of fight left in them. However in 2015 we are left without a cohesive movement;

a union not fit for purpose, the occupations not giving way sustained contact between universities, NCAFC not growing substantially beyond its London Centric Cell, and other leftists being caught up in the dead end of electoral politics.

TUC Unions & Anti Cuts Alliances

Whilst university organising always suffers from the transitory nature of university itself, the long established public sector unions that make up the majority of the TUC do not have that drawback. Many looked to them to lead the fight against cuts, some going as far as prioritising

the active lobbying of the TUC leadership.

The first union initiatives were the anti-cuts groups formed in many towns and cities, primarily by local union branches and the socialist activists working within them. However the sources of the strength of these groups were also the sources of their major weaknesses. The involvement of the traditional 'entryist' left often led to energy being wasted on petty power struggles. In the early days of the Bristol Anti Cuts Alliance both the Socialist Party (SP) and Socialist Workers Party (SWP) approached the large anarchist contingent - within minutes of each other - and asked us if we wanted to band together to pick who would get into elected positions. We politely declined. When the SP did gain the upper hand, the SWP members left to form the ironically named Unite the Resistance group in Bristol. We've heard similar reports from across the country.

The traditional leftist/union nature of these groups and their initial membership led to traditional leftist/union style meetings. These were incredibly off putting to those who hadn't previously experienced them. Few new people stuck around beyond a couple of meetings, which left anti-cuts groups unable to be a forum for the individuals and grass roots groups they aimed to unite.

Like the student movement, these groups engaged in a flurry of activity in late 2010, mostly in the form of marches and rallies in their locality, but they were often initially reluctant to support more diverse actions, such as occupations, for the fear of legal ramifications directed at their constituent trade unions. In our experience it was often left to the anarchists within the group to actually follow up the talk (oh so much talk) with some genuine action.

AFed has some successes introducing anarchists, and our ideas and tactics, to the struggle via our Anarchists Against the Cuts initiative. This was later replicated on a larger scale by the shortlived Network X. Ultimately however we still ended up bound by the structures already in place.

The local action was sustained throughout much of 2011 but the reliance on a core of Trade Union activists meant that much of their available energy was taken up with plans for the national marches, strike action, and ever increasing union caseloads as cuts hit individual union members. The first of these national marches on the 26th March 2011 was certainly a great show of strength for the union movement in the UK, with a reported half a million people in the streets.

There was also a strong showing from the anarchist organisations with the large Anarchist Federation & Solidarity Federation backed radical workers bloc, and a 1500 strong black bloc that trashed The Ritz along with other high profile targets.

Predictably the union leaders were quick to condemn these actions, even if many of their members were cheering the smashed windows earlier in the day.

A little more surprising perhaps was the nine month wait for the TUC to launch coordinated strike action, in the form of a 24 hour public sector general strike. Luckily union activists further down the hierarchy had been able to keep the momentum going since March, and November 30th saw up to two million workers on strike and over a thousand vibrant and well attended demonstrations. It could've been an excellent launch pad for sustained action, but the TUC leadership was apparently hell bent on breaking the momentum that had been built up. They entered into drawn out negotiations with the government over pay

and pensions, and their next day of strike action the following May involved only a fraction of the unions, their own estimates declaring it as only 15% of the size of November 30th.

The rhetoric changed as well, with focus switching from a general resistance to austerity to the specifics of pay and pensions, making it all the easier for the right wing press to play on the divide between private and public sector workers. Strikes by education workers, NHS staff, and fire fighters continued, but their relative isolation meant they could only aim for minor renegotiations on the manner of austerity rather than resistance to it.

UK Uncut

The movement that taught us that if you got the owners scared enough, you can shut down a mobile phone shop for the day with just two people! It burst into being in the autumn of 2010 (you may be noticing a pattern here), its decentralised nature allowed it to spread quickly, and the media spotlight on tax avoidance fuelled its rapid growth. It played an important role in countering the idea that austerity was 'necessary' by providing a simple alternative (get rich corporations to pay the tax that existing rules dictate they should be paying already). It also helped popularise direct action in the form of pickets, blockades, occupations, and creative forms of disruption to dent the profits of major retailers.

It was arguably too narrow in its scope and too vague in its politics, not even taking an explicitly anti-capitalist stance. This despite the majority of core participants having anarchist or socialist political outlooks and their demonstrations targeting large corporations and banks. Its high point was arguably on March 26th 2011, when using the cover of the TUC march, UK Uncut activists shut down Oxford Street before occupying Fortnum and Masons. The ensuing

legal action against the occupiers and their own legal action against HMRC would take up much of the core group's energy. However, not wanting to get stuck in a rut, they switched focus to supporting NHS workers in the fight against the Health and Social Care bill. Despite some energetic protests, this fight had the same fatal flaw as the previous year's fight against tuition fees - no plan B when the initial vote was lost in Parliament.

UK Uncut actions continued, albeit much smaller in number. They had a major influence on the growth of Boycott Workfare, who have a clearer political stance and continue to win victories to this day. Additionally UK UNCUT were one of the first organisations to put their weight into supporting Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC). Like UK Uncut, DPAC used a creative array of direct action tactics and captured a swell of public anger, this time in the form of disgust at the governments attacks on disabled people. The most infamous of these attacks were the work capability assessments, carried out by private firm ATOS on behalf of the state. DPAC's tactics were arguably even more confrontational than those of UK Uncut, and their impact could not be ignored. Whilst ATOS have been booted, their replacements (Maximus) aren't making any real changes, so the struggle will continue.

How could we have won?

There are several key moments that could've driven the coalition government to the brink, and perhaps led to the ruling class rethinking the level of their attacks. The first of these was when the student movement had sprung into action. Whilst many lecturers were sympathetic, and there were words of support from their unions, there was precious little action. Many students put considerable effort into working with staff, and if those staff had taken the risk of coming out on strike in coordination with the student days of action the gains for both could've been considerable.

During this time anger amongst younger sections of the working class was steadily increasing. Austerity and economic hardship escalated existing social tensions such as feelings of alienation, demonisation in the media, restricted access to education, high unemployment, lack of support and services, and incessant police harassment. All of this was compounded by a society that promotes happiness via material possessions whilst denying the younger generation any hope of acquiring them. This anger found a focal point in August 2011 with the police murder of Mark Duggan, and subsequent repression of demonstrators, triggered waves of riots across the country.

At this point much of the left and trade union movement was either staying quiet or following the party political line of condemning the rioters out right in order to appear respectable. Anarchists were rumoured to have taken part in the rioting and were certainly hard at work in the weeks and months that followed offering advice and support to those fearing



or jail. Despite this, as a movement we lacked a swift and organised response to the situation. During that week the state was losing its image of control, but it was always going to take more to really hit back at it. This would've been the moment

for the unionised working class to strike, and for the anti austerity movement to make links with the rebellious inner city. Messages of support for the grievances suffered, and solidarity with those on the streets (regardless of any personal opinions some may have had on their methods) should've been swiftly followed by angry demonstrations and direct actions on the days between the nights of rioting.

This is all wishful thinking of course, and it is all too easy to dwell on things we could've done better. There wasn't, and isn't, a strong enough working class movement in the UK to have taken these actions. So what can we do to build such a movement, and to achieve victories in the battle against austerity?

Out of the Ashes

There was a marked decrease in the levels of participation and activity in anti austerity (and related) struggles in 2012, activity since has been on the rise, but much more slowly. There have still been many inspiring demonstrations, campaigns, and victories. From Pop Up Unions to Solidarity Networks, Focus E15 to Poor Doors, energy and creativity has sparked a resistance able to evolve to suit the participants and the situations they find themselves in. A keen sense of where the state and capital is most vulnerable has been key, from the chambers of the local council to the sites of developers and the offices of bailiffs there are many places to hit back.

Collective struggles amongst people who are all being affected by a specific issue are particularly powerful, as has been shown by the fights for social housing in London. One of the reasons some of these campaigns have been so resilient is the effort taken by those involved and their supporters to create links with similar groups. This has allowed for mutual aid and the sharing of skills,

Internationalism and Escalation

Austerity, like capitalism, doesn't stop at borders, and the resistance to it shouldn't either. This article has stuck to covering the movements of the UK but looking further afield can provide not just inspiration but solidarity. Joint European strike action, and international days of action has shown there are still vibrant international links in our movements, which can benefit us and our comrades over seas. Student action in Chile and Quebec has demonstrated what is possible when fights are not given up at their first defeat in parliament.

This international struggle against austerity is primarily a demand for capitalism to provide us with a much larger cut of the wealth we create as workers.

However, it could and should go far beyond a desire to return to the pre-crisis days of 2007 (remember, things were pretty shit back then too). We must demand the things our communities need and desire, and take or create them directly wherever we have the means to. These demands will come at the expense of capitalism's masters and their profits, indeed there will come a point where capitalism is incapable of giving us everything we demand. So be it, a movement with the power to overturn austerity will be one capable of overturning the entire capitalist system. It turns out «no more cuts» may be a far more revolutionary demand than many of us realised.



it has meant that even if a campaign goes through a period of inactivity or ends (due to victory or defeat) momentum can be sustained.

Where these struggles appear, or where there is potential for them to appear, they should be offered as much support, solidarity and skills to as possible. They should also be assisted in resisting attempts to take them over, force them in particular directions, or use them to serve other projects at their own expense. Comrades in Action East End have set an impressive example linking struggles together, and building alliances organically from the ground up, rather than the attempted top down alliances of the past, aided by their reputation for support. Spreading news and making others aware of the battles taking place around is another key task ñ especially when the people learning about these battles are facing similar challenges.

Achieving a campaign's stated aims will always be its priority; whether that campaign is industrial action, a housing struggle, or a fight to keep a service open. These aims are more achievable and the campaigns themselves strengthened when they join together in a more general anti capitalist resistance, this is a view we should share widely if we are to secure gains for the working class.



The increasing troubles faced by capitalism are exhibited in the ongoing situation in the Near and Middle East. We take a look at the situation in Libya, Israel, and Palestine, and the constantly developing situation in the region encompassing Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

War and Barbarism

Libya: The fall of Gaddafi and the developing civil war

Libya experienced the same fate in 2011 as previously suffered by Iraq and indeed Somalia and Afghanistan. It was subject to a massive military attack that deposed the Gaddafi regime, leading to the dictator's death, many thousands of civilian deaths, and the hacking up of the country. Until then Gaddafi had been seen by the West as a useful ally in ensuring the stability of Libya and the surrounding region. Tony Blair had developed good relations with the dictator. Gaddafi had maintained control of Libya through a combination of repression and relative economic wealth through oil revenues. The Sarkozy government in France unleashed its military power against Libya in a savage wave of bombing under the mantle of NATO. In this it was supported by the Coalition government in Britain, with the implicit support of the USA. Why had this happened?

Gaddafi was looking towards building up an alternative power base to the West in Africa. He talked about increasing the power of the African Union, of creating an African Central Bank and an African Monetary Fund with an African common currency. This would have threatened both the euro and the American dollar. In addition Libya was moving to take over the Arab banking corporation in Bahrain and had built up \$200 billion in foreign reserves and encouraged Chinese development of the Libyan infrastructure. Whilst manoeuvring in an on-off courtship with the western powers, he was simultaneously continuing

accords with China and Russia. He was thus viewed as volatile and unreliable by the West.

The French intervened to stop Gaddafi's sale of oil to China, and to the Italian corporation Eni. They hoped to gain favourable terms with a new regime installed after Gaddafi's overthrow. Hence the war was not created by France wishing to help the dissident movements in Libya but purely for greed.

Unfortunately for France, and indeed for all the Western powers, oil production in the chaotic situation now reigning in Libya has caused oil production there to be 5 times lower. The war between the different factions in Libya has resulted in increasing attacks on oil wells. We now have three governments in Libya. In Tobruk a new "constitutional dictator" has emerged in the shape of Abdulla Al Thani. This is the regime that has received backing from the West. He is supported by Halifa Haftar, who controls many of the troops from the old Libyan army. They are at war with the Islamist government in Tripoli led by Umar Al Hasi. Like their rivals in Tobruk they wish to protect the oil wells in the region they control.

ISIS, the Caliphate of Al Baghdadi in Syria and Iraq, has established itself in the towns of Derna and Sirte. The area ISIS controls is on the Gulf of Sirte, in between the Tobruk and Tripoli regimes and so of strategic and economic importance.

In addition there are the 140 tribes in Libya, who whilst they have no oil wells, can threaten the pipelines and water supplies from the oases.

The Tobruk regime is backed by both Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Meanwhile Qatar is supporting the Islamists in Tripoli. Egypt is deeply opposed to both the Tripoli Islamists and Libyan ISIS, as this could lead to reinforcement of the Islamist internal enemies of the Al Sisi regime. It has already conducted bombing raids against ISIS following the slaughter of Egyptian Coptic Christians by ISIS.

The Tobruk regime for its part is backed by Turkey and Qatar. Turkey is looking to become a big oil broker in the region, and is building up its facilities in that sphere. It is thus opposed to its rivals in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Qatar has long been in rivalry with its major oil rival Saudi Arabia, and now sees the military regime in Egypt as another threat. As for Libyan ISIS it is secretly supported by factions in the ruling elites in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Israel and Palestine

The Hamas administration centred in the Gaza Strip section of Palestine has been under severe stress in the last year. The arrival of the Sisi government and the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt robbed Hamas of valuable financial help. It had obtained the allegiance of many Palestinians in the Gaza Strip through implementing a welfare programme. Financial aid from the Brotherhood was now severely hindered, with far tighter controls on the border from the



new Egyptian regime. In addition other supporters and benefactors like Syria and Iran were now pre-occupied with other matters and had quarrelled with Hamas, as had Hezbollah in Lebanon. The developing economic crisis on a world level also made the situation in the Gaza Strip worse, with most of the population below the poverty line. The welfare programme of Hamas is in tatters. It finds it difficult to even employ the civil servants of its administration.

Similarly, the rival group in Palestine around the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank is also in trouble and has had to form an alliance with Hamas.

The Israeli government led by Netanyahu intervened and demanded that the National Authority of Abu Mazen should break its alliance with Hamas whom it accused of being "terrorists".



with Hamas whom it accused of being “terrorists”. This was because Netanyahu was threatened at home, even within his own ruling party and needed the excuse of a military adventure to take attention away. This resulted in the murderous onslaught on the Gaza Strip. This does not seem to have saved Netanyahu in the long run as the March 17th elections threaten to destabilise his regime.

Hamis itself had instigated rocket attacks on Israel to divert attention from the crisis the Gaza Strip was going through.

The economic crisis has hit Israel badly, affecting both the working class and endangering the professional and managerial classes. House prices have shot up by 55% in the last 6 years whilst rents rose 30% and wages remain static. Food prices have soared. Defence costs are continually increasing and Israeli subsidies of the settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories are at the cost of spending within Israel itself.

Netanyahu is attempting to divert attention by highlighting the threat of Hamas and the supposed nuclear threat posed by Iran. The social protests in Israel that were triggered by food rises in 2011 have not returned in a big way (though a protest camp set up to highlight the cost of living may point to unrest to come) but Netanyahu may well be punished in the elections.

Iraq and Syria

We had a detailed analysis of the situation in Syria and Iraq in the last issue of Organise! Let us just sum up that Saudi Arabia and Qatar financed ISIS and other Islamist outfits in Syria and Iraq in order to attack the Assad regime and to weaken the predominantly Shiite government of Iraq. ISIS probably now has a bankroll of at least £2 billion dollars



which it can use to buy more weapons and pay its troops. ISIS was a useful weapon of the Saudis and Qataris against Assad and the Iraqi government and against Iran. Now however ISIS is making a bid to act on its own and to turn on its benefactors. The USA itself had financed the various Islamist factions for its own ends in the region. Now both US influence in the region is severely under threat, as is Saudi control of the Middle East. Hence ISIS now has to be eradicated or severely weakened. Saudi Arabia does not want to see ISIS as an alternative pole of Sunni power in the region. Similarly the growth of ISIS has threatened the supplies of oil and gas in Syria, Iraq, and Iraqi Kurdistan. Now that ISIS controls some of the oil fields it can substitute the revenue from them for the lost incomes from its erstwhile backers.

Iran is now jockeying to be seen as a possible useful ally of the West and its allies against ISIS, as indeed is the Assad regime in Syria. Already figures in the French government are talking of normalising relations with Assad, in line with their own interests in the area.



French government are talking of normalising relations with Assad, in line with their own interests in the area. Meanwhile both Russia and China continue to back Assad in order to control gas and oil resources in the region, and to divert it towards their own economies and the Asian markets.

All of these powers, whether it be the interests of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Syria, or Turkey or the power blocs of the USA, Russia, and China, are intent on establishing control of energy resources in the region and political influence. All of these sordid manoeuvres have led to the collapse into barbarism and war that we are now seeing. Proxy wars are now being waged in different parts of the world. Alongside this and intertwined with it is the economic crisis that have reduced the masses to poverty, not just in the Middle East but elsewhere in the world.

The working class cannot benefit from supporting any of these different competing factions of the ruling class. Be it the ruling class represented by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank, the Zionist regime in Israel, the clerical reactionaries of ISIS or Iran, the Turkish state or the Kurdistan government of Barzani, the different factions in Libya, the military government in Egypt, or the feudal regimes in Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The spiral down into war, civil war, barbarism, and economic crisis and poverty can only be answered by the action of the masses in the Near and Middle East against ALL their masters. This may now seem difficult, but it is the only real alternative. Unity has to be argued and fought for, whatever particular ethnic and religious backgrounds, whether Arab, Israeli, Kurd, or Turk.

Rojava: Reality and Rethoric

The following article is from Troploin written by GD & TL. As with all articles we publish, it does not necessarily represent the views of the AF as a whole. The editors of Organise! include it here as we feel it provides a useful contribution to the ongoing discussions around the Rojava revolution and the internationalised civil war taking place in Syria.

The narrative of the Kurdish independence movement is well documented: its geography that overlaps four countries (Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran), its division between rival parties, the propensity of these parties to play off one neighbouring country against another, sometimes one super-power against another, the dire consequences of these shifting alliances, its reliance on a large diaspora in Europe, its resilience to repression and internecine conflict, its ability to survive the ups and downs of international politics equalled by its incapacity to create a national State. Sometimes there is a thin line between survival and suicidal tendencies. Until 2003.

Then three major events changed the deal for the Kurds, and among other effects remodelled the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey.

First, after 2003, the break-up of Iraq into three disjointed parts: Sunni, Shiite and in the north the Kurdistan Regional Government, ruled by the PDK led by the Barzani clan, more like a Western protectorate, actually.

Secondly, the Syrian State, entangled in civil strife and sectarian division, lost control over much of the country, including Kurdish areas.

Thirdly, Sunni jihadists captured a large swathe of Syrian territory and threatened the survival of the Kurdish population. So it was the rise of ISIS/Daesh that finally propelled the Kurds into the foreground. (ISIS is the English acronym for Islamic State in Iraq & Syria, Daesh the Arabic acronym for Islamic State in Iraq & the Levant.)

If ISIS was only a danger for the lives of hundreds of thousands of people, the West would not be doing more than it has done since 2011 to stop the Assad regime from butchering its own population.

As it happens, ISIS is a threat to the regional political balance and to vested oil interests, so the West is doing its best to prevent ISIS from taking over the area and its oil wells.

The dictator Assad now appears as a lesser evil than uncontrollable jihadists. The implicit US support of a regime that the US was thinking of bombing into submission a couple of years ago is nothing of a surprise: since 1970, American policy toward Syria has shifted more than half a dozen times, and none of these reversals had anything to do with the Damascus rulers killing and torturing more or less. For the dominant powers, the spill-over effects of regional chaos have to be contained, by supporting Assad if need be, even by consolidating a Kurdish homeland.

In Kurdish areas in the north of Syria, an implicit popular (i.e. trans-class) alliance was first formed after 2011 to self-manage a territory deserted by the Syrian authorities, and then in 2014 to defend it against the deadly threat from ISIS. The resistance combines former traditional ties and new movements,

combines former traditional ties and new movements, women's particularly, in a working community of proletarians and middle class elements, cemented by an emphasis on a common Kurdish nation.

An autonomous hinterland has been established: Rojava (west in Kurdish), made up of three non-contiguous cantons (Afrin, Kobane and Cizire) in northern Syria, along the Turkish border. It is about 18.300 square km big, with a population estimated at 4,6 million in 2014. (By comparison, Wales is 20.700 square km, with over 3 million inhabitants.) After the official Syrian military left, some fighting occurred between the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds, who repelled them. There is now "a sort of unwritten agreement whereby the Syrian regime leaves the Rojava some autonomy in exchange for Syrian Kurdish neutrality in the on-going civil war" (Lato Cattivo)

In those areas, a Kurdish majority coexists with various other "ethnic" groups, all repressed in the past by the Iraqi State. The disintegration of official law and order in the region created a power vacuum in northern Syria and has given birth to a grassroots people's organisation, coordinated under the name Tev-Dem (Movement of the Democratic Society).



combines former traditional ties and new movements, women's particularly, in a working community of proletarians and middle class elements, cemented by an emphasis on a common Kurdish nation.

Self-defence

"A vast cloud of "movements" — armed and unarmed, and oscillating between social banditry and organized guerrilla activity — act in the most wretched zones of the global capitalist junkyard, presenting traits similar to those of the current PKK. In one way or another, they attempt to resist the destruction of already marginal subsistence economies, the plundering of natural resources or local mining, or the imposition of capitalist landed property that limits or prevents access and/or use. (..) we can randomly cite cases of piracy in the seas of Somalia, MEND in Nigeria, the Naxalites in India, the Mapuche in Chile. (..) it is essential to grasp the content they have in common: self-defence. A self-defence that may also be considered vital, but which does not differ in its nature from what is expressed in any industrial action aimed at protecting the wages or working conditions of those who animate it. Just as it would be a sleight of hand to pass off a wage struggle, even if extremely fierce and broad-based, as a "revolutionary movement",

it is equally fallacious to overload this type of self-defence practiced by exhausted populations with an inherently revolutionary meaning.” (Lato Cattivo)

Self-defence implies self-organisation.

What we have in Rojava is: “(..) a real movement against state plunder and coercion, fighting militarily on its borders and inwardly through the diffusion of power within them. The limits of the struggles in Rojava in this sense are those of struggles everywhere where the relation between labour power and capital has become a matter of repression and struggles that take that repression as a starting point. These struggles take place far from the strongholds of capital’s reproduction and are not directed at overturning relations of exploitation.” (Becky)

The whole question is whether self-defence in Rojava has been - or could become - the way to an overturning of production relationships.

But first, a little on nationalism.

Nation has a newface

21st century national liberation movements greatly differ from what they used to be when colonialism was coming to an end and the USA-USSR Cold War erupted in local wars by proxy, with a rich array of shifting alliances and millions of deaths. The Kurdish people paid the price for it even more so as the Kurds are torn between four countries. Yet the deep change in the nationalist agenda is not due to humanitarian considerations, a commitment to non-violence or a reading of authentic critical theory. More matter-of-factly, its former plank had become obsolete.

In a nutshell, once in power, a typical national front programme was to cut off ties with the dominant power (in the Middle East, Britain until the 1940’s, the

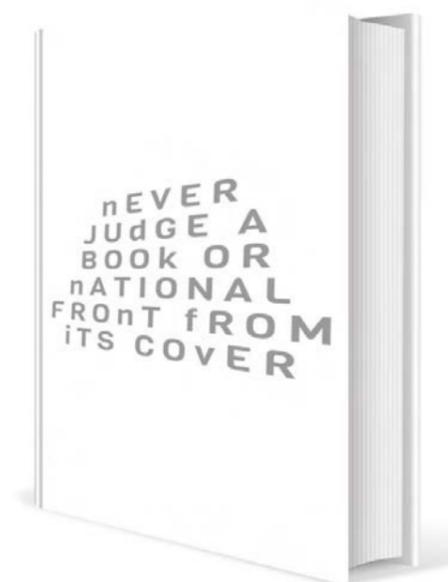
US later), to seek assistance from its rival (USSR) and to develop a State-run indigenous growth based on collectivised agriculture and heavy industry. At least that was the plan. Wherever there was no adequate bourgeoisie, or a feeble one, national liberation opted for a bureaucratic instead of a bourgeois capitalism, looked for recipes in Marx and Mao, not Adam Smith and Keynes, and installed a dictatorial regime led by a supposedly worker or people’s party. It achieved more dictatorship than development, but that is another story. Anyway, with the demise of the USSR and the advent of globalisation, this became impractical. So, after advocating Marxism-Leninism, Guevarism



its own version of alter-globalism. The discredit of socialist nationalism led to ethnic nationalism which in the PKK’s case morphed into a call for a multi-ethnic nation. Logically, this new line was also endorsed by the PKK’s branch in Syria, the PYD.

Like any political movement, national liberation gives itself the ideology, the allies and the targets it can aim at, and modifies them when it suits its interests. In 1903, at its 6th congress, known as the “Uganda congress”, Zionism was still debating whether a Jewish homeland could be found in Africa.

In 1914, Pilsudski did not choose between Right and Wrong: he supported what he thought best for Polish independence, and changed sides with the fortunes of war. The loyalty of a nationalist is not to a class or creed, simply to what he regards as “his people” and his own role as this people’s leader. Allegiances fluctuate and doctrines too.



On the ground, PKK cadres will support a landowner or a boss because he has influence in the area. They will also defend strikes or organise protests if it helps them rally the local people. Here they will side with rigid forms of religion, and there with tolerance. Today they will appear as traditionalists, tomorrow as modernists. This is politics: the PKK upholds what increases its power base. In the days when it claimed to be part of world socialism, it had no time for heretics like Pannekoek or Mattick, and went for successful Marxism-Leninism. When it espouses libertarianism, it does not take after Makhno, and prefers an acceptable version, probably the most moderate of all today, the Bookchin doctrine, that spices 19th century municipal socialism with self-administration and ecology.

Quite a sensible choice. The PKK has had to scale down its ambitions and confederal municipalism is the only political ideology available to a party that

has to make do with States and borders because it cannot hope to create its own State with its own borders, which would mean forcefully redrawing the boundaries of at least two neighbouring countries. Making a virtue of necessity, the PKK has ditched “class” and “party” references, and promotes self-management, co-operation, communalism (not communism), anti-productivism and gender. David Graeber was rejoicing over the fact that in Kurdistan people might now be reading Judith Butler. A spot-on remark. Deconstruction of the political subject (i.e. of the proletariat as an historical agent), prioritisation of identities, class replaced by gender... the PKK has doubtlessly swapped Marxism for postmodernism.

Speaking of a “non-State” is playing on words. The PKK has not given up the objective of every national liberation movement.

Though it takes great care to avoid using a word that sounds too authoritarian, it is still aiming at creating a centralised decision-making political apparatus on Kurdish territory, and what better word for this but State?

With the rider that this State would be so democratic under its citizens’ control, that it would no longer deserve the name of State. So much for ideology.

In the real world, the objective of a strong internal autonomy coupled with grassroots democratic life is not utterly unrealistic. This is the condition of a number of regions in the Pacific: central government does not mind the locals keeping their customary rural society, self-administering themselves to a large extent, living off a subsistence-based economy or falling into poverty, as long as they do not trouble anyone.

As soon as ore or oil is at stake, everything changes and if need be, the army is called in, as happened in Papua New Guinea. Somaliland has quite a few attributes of a State (its own police, currency and economy), except no other State recognises it. In the Chiapas (whose situation is often compared to that of Rojava), the Zapatistas have been surviving for twenty years in a regional semi-autonomy where they safeguard their culture and customs without bothering the Mexican federal State, providing they stay where they are. The Zapatista uprising was perhaps the first of the alter-globalisation era, as it did not aim at securing independence or transforming the whole country, but at preserving a traditional way of life.

As for the Kurds, they do not live peacefully on an island, many of them are city-dwellers, they (un) fortunately sit on a lot of oil which raises world and money matters far beyond their command, and the region happens to be torn apart by endless conflicts and ruled by dictators. That leaves little margin for Rojava... or a very small and dependent place: its economic viability is low, but not inexistent, thanks to possible future oil revenue. Black gold has already created puppet countries like Kuwait, a rentier State disbursing patronage from underground wealth, and the Kurdish micro-State in Iraq owes its existence solely to its oil wells. In other words, the fate of Rojava depends less on the mobilisation of its people than on the interplay of big business and dominant powers.

If the PKK no longer demands its own State (it can't have it), it wants self-ruled Kurdish regions federated within several States, Syria for a start (whose "territorial integrity" Rojava's Social Contract recognises). It remains to be seen what a confederation of three or four autonomous trans-border zones extended over at least three countries would involve for the population. Coexisting autonomies do not do away with the central political structure that unites them. Nowhere have trans-border zones, like the one on the Oder-Neisse line in Europe, ever diminished statist power. Central "law and order" apparatus delegates some of its duties to local authorities. This is how a modern State rules.

Construction of a democratic nation

Though words are not everything, in politics a lot is in the words. The writers of Rojava's Social Contract wished to avoid the term constitution which reminded them of statist revolutions, but the wording they chose echoes 18th century Enlightenment. In their search for the roots of antiauthoritarian thought, they bypassed Bakunin and met Rousseau. Their Social Contract reads like a modernised version of past bourgeois revolutionary declarations of intent.

The date is 2014, so its Preamble takes into account "equality and environmental stability", and wants "a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority



in public affairs". This last point contradicts article 86, which says members of the Legislative Assembly will take their Oath of Office "in the name of Almighty God". Before passing judgement, let's remember that in the British House of Commons, until 1888, MPs had to take an oath that excluded Protestant dissenters, Catholics and atheists.

Now for the heart of the matter. Rojava will be based upon the "mutual and peaceful coexistence and understanding between all strands of society". Strands, strata, social groups, classes... The French translation says layers ("couches"). Obviously we are not to understand that Rojava is devoid of social division. It simply means that as long as they are citizens of Rojava, all its inhabitants can and must live together in peace. There is no room for a recognition of class struggle in what amounts to nothing more than a democratic constitution.

Rojava gives us the same speech as a bourgeois revolution. In the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, the right of "resistance to oppression" was explicit, but went with the right to property. Freedom was complete... within the limits of the Law. The same in Rojava;

Article 41 provides for the "right to the use and enjoyment of private property" except "for reasons of public utility or social interest".

What property means socially is not that any person is entitled to the possession and use of his or her own clothes, room or bike. It means that those who happen to own the means of production can hire the labour of those who own only their clothes, room or bike. This is what class is about. Once that social frame is established, as it was in France, 1789, and as it is in Rojava, 2014, nearly everything else can be granted or promised; "separation of powers", "independence of the judiciary", "ecology balance",

"freedom of speech", women's "inviolable right to participate in political, social, economic and cultural life", "the elimination of gender discrimination", the "right to peaceful assembly" and "peaceful protest, demonstration and strike", "national resources " as "public wealth" and "extractive processes (..) regulated by law", "all building and land public property", at least 40% women in "all governing bodies, institutions and committees", no death penalty, no child labour, the right to "political asylum", the assurance that "No civilian shall stand trial before any military court or special or an ad hoc tribunals" and that no house search will take place with a proper warrant, an education system with no "racist and chauvinistic principles", the "separation of religion and State" (though the Oath...). If, in an emergency, "Martial law may be invoked and revoked by a qualified majority of 23/ of the Executive Council", "The decision must then be presented to and unanimously adopted by the Legislative Assembly." One of the 22 Executive Council Bodies specialises in "Family & Gender Equality".

As a safeguard against Kurdish domination over Arab, Assyrian, Armenian and Chechen minorities, Rojava pledges to encourage a multi-ethnic "Unity in diversity". Here again, this resonates as a distant echo of democratic revolution: E pluribus unum ("one out of many") had been on the US seal since 1782, and was the de facto motto of the USA, until Congress adopted "In God we trust" in 1956. Could Rojava be more "secular" than contemporary America?

Politically correct modern governance could not ask for more (only animal rights are missing). No oversight as far as conscription is concerned, though: every Rojava citizen can be called to military service. This is one of the traditional prerogatives of a State, which expects those under its protection or rule to serve in its army. Actually, it is not an army, it's "The People's Protection Units (YPG)" which only acts as

a “self-defence” force “against both internal and external threats”: as we know, any political power makes extensive use of the notion of internal threat.

“Without exaggeration, it is the most democratic constitution that people of this region ever had.” (Sardar Saadi)

Quite true. Rojava’s Social Contract defines a society of equals before the law: each man or woman only interconnects with his or her peers. Social division is left out, there are no more rich or poor, bourgeois or labourer, only citizens with equal rights: “a bourgeois democratic system that is called democratic confederation” (Zafer Onat).

DEMOCRACY is the most adequate political form that reunites socially divided people.

Change

“Areas of self-management” cannot be created by law. What is the state of play in the field?

All across the political spectrum, observers and visitors have reported deep daily life changes. First a dispersal of power, with a host of locally-managed initiatives and the administration of villages by collectives. Also an effort to collect and disseminate local knowledge (in regards to medicine for instance)

and to relink people to nature, exams replaced by interactive education, mutualism in schools to bridge the teacher/taught gap, communal (men and women) living in the university, elected commanders in the militia, a new approach to health care with an emphasis on preventative and more holistic methods that treat mind and body at the same time (on the principle that stress reduction can cause other diseases to decrease), and justice rendered in each village via an elected woman-man committee which mediates conflicts, decides upon the sentence and tries to reintegrate and rehabilitate the offender. In other words, an endeavour to abolish separations. A lot of what Western reformers and radicals try to implement in Europe is being experimented in Rojava.

Maybe the most noted transformation concerns the relations between sexes.

Co-ed schools are the norm. Women no longer stay indoors all day. Meetings are held with at least 40% woman attendance. All bodies have two heads, feminine and masculine. Encouragement is given to a women’s world-view and even to a new field of knowledge, jinology (“science of women”). Though feminism has been strong in the Kurdish liberation movement for a long time, these changes are no small innovation in the Middle East, and in some respects sex equality seems more advanced in Rojava than in Europe.

On the economic ground, Rojava is trying to achieve optimal self-development. Under Syrian rule, the area had oil but no refinery, and wheat but no flour mill. The emphasis is now on self-reliance.

Appearances are deceptive. Like all seasoned professionals, PKK and PYD master the art of projecting the positive image of themselves that outsiders wish to see. It is also only natural that the locals should try to impress visitors by stressing the most successful side of their movement. But not all is

of it is window-dressing. Self-organisation does improve the everyday life of a previously neglected and repressed population.

Common assemblies regularly meet with an attendance of several hundred people, not just sitting but taking an active part, with a widespread concern (at least partly put into practice) for the lower echelons to keep control over the top ones.

Bottom and top... This brings us nearer to the crux of the matter.

What is being debated? Do the people’s councils reach decisions over minor or major issues?

The answer is in the question. Rojava’s council system is parallel to a transitional (transitions can be endless) government that runs a war, negotiates with foreign countries, reorganises tax collection, plans oil production, etc., like any central political institution ruling over a territory. In plain English, a State. And nobody has ever seen a State dissolve in local direct democracy.

A classless people?

As often the case in similar situations, the imperative of self-defence against a mortal danger (ISIS, in this case) has led the Kurds to form a common front, in the usual sense of joint action as well as in the 20th century political sense of a popular front. Solidarity has created a temporary suspension of social differences, but not their obliteration.

Nobody argues that the population known as “the Kurds” are fortunate enough to be the only people in the world living in serene harmony. Like all other peoples, the Kurds are divided in groups with conflicting interests, in classes, or if class smells too much of Marxism, divided between dominant and

dominated, between rulers and ruled. Therefore, if a major social upheaval is under way in Rojava, when and how was the ruling class overthrown? Dominant groups are known to resort to all available means, armed struggle included, to stay in power. What intense class struggle toppled them in Kurdistan and initiated the change?

Though such an exceptional event is unlikely to have passed unnoticed, those who believe in a Rojava “revolution” do not suggest any answer. The question is brushed out of the picture. Well, nearly. In fact, they have an explanation, summed up by David Graeber: “(..) the Rojavans have it quite easy in class terms because the real bourgeoisie, such as it was in a mostly very agricultural region, took off with the collapse of the Baath regime. They will have a long-term problem if they don’t work on the educational system to ensure a developmentalist technocrat stratum doesn’t eventually try to take power, but in the meantime, it’s understandable they are focusing more immediately on gender issues.”

D. Graeber has the great merit of encapsulating the mind-set of a large swathe of radical opinion. What we are told here is that, though class and gender both generally matter, today’s priority in Rojava is gender because the class issue has been (at least temporarily) solved by the departure of the ruling class. What remains is the common people, simply the people.

The Rojavans may be in dire straits but they have achieved what Western radical reformers vainly aim at: bringing 99% of the population together.

D. Graeber mistakes a class for the persons it is composed of. Of course class is flesh and blood, but it is a lot more, it is made of social relations. The bourgeoisie does not vanish from an area which bourgeois individuals have fled. At the time of the Paris Commune, the ruling class left the city but

its power structure was perpetuated during those two months: in the vaults of the Banque de France and their millions of francs the communards made no attempt to confiscate, and fundamentally in the continuation of the money economy and of wage-labour. In Rojava, there is no sign that the lower classes have done away with the market economy and the wage system.

Rojava enthusiasts talk a lot about empowerment and changes in the domestic sphere: they never mention a transformation of exploitation relationships. At best, we are given examples of agriculture, textile, trade and construction co-ops (which we hear compete with private business), but we never read about an experiment in collectivisation. Oil wells are operational again, a refinery has been improvised, but we know nothing about the people who work there.

Governing bodies are organising a transition from mono-cropping to food self-reliance: formerly State-owned land is being distributed to agricultural co-ops: the products are sold to the administration, or on the market with price control. Bread is subsidised. “Smuggling is huge”, reports Becky. That is confirmed by other visitors, and to be expected: in regions devoid of fixed frontiers, and ravaged by want and war, smugglers are illegal trans-border tradesmen. The extent of smuggling shows the resilience of a commodity economy, with its businessmen hiring poorly paid labour to do the job. Where things are bought and sold, human beings - labour power – are being bought and sold too. No equality there, and certainly little gender critique.

As Janet Biehl, a defender of Rojava’s “revolution”, writes: “Some Rojavans have wages, but many work on a voluntary basis; still others just make a living, say, from a cow.” Meanwhile, people pay little or no income tax, and government revenue comes from oil. In other words, some Rojavans are paid a wage, some live on money earned

elsewhere, some live in a subsistence economy, and the non-State State sells oil. One way or another, money suffuses every sphere of Rojavan society.

By and large, markets are open for shoppers at normal hours, commerce and crafts are functioning, which is an immense improvement over the situation before. Zaher Bader visited Cizire in May 2014 and believes a revolution is taking place in Syrian Kurdistan:

“Before we left the region we decided to speak to shopkeepers, businessmen, stall holders and people on the market to hear their views which were very important to us. Everyone seemed to have a very positive view and opinion of the DSA and Tev-Dam. They were happy about the existence of peace, security and freedom and running their own business without any interference from any parties or sides.”

At last we’ve found a revolution that does not scare the bourgeois. Or maybe it all depends on what the bourgeois class is. If D. Graeber reserves the notion for the top tier of the ruling elite, then he is right: there probably are very few high frequency traders and merchant bankers now residing in the three Rojava cantons. Thus, for Graeber, there is no class to speak of, only a people.



However, a man running a transport company with a 5-lorry fleet and employing a 15-strong labour force is a bourgeois. Rojava is a class society.

The “social revolution” thesis is wearing thin, but its upholders hardly make up facts: their own reports provide enough evidence to refute their claim. The flaw is in the failure to ask the proper question:

“The situation also has something in common with the trajectory of struggles around the world in the past few years. The state, now an agent of global capital, is seen as the guilty party by movements composed of middle as well as proletarian classes. Meanwhile, the nation is seen as the force to oppose it. Struggles rally under the ideology of citizenship (and the race and gender hierarchies this presupposes). The transformation taking place in Rojava rests to some extent on a radical Kurdish identity and on substantial middle classes contingent who, despite radical rhetoric, always have some interest in the continuity of capital and the state.” (Becky)

Power to the people?

Daily life is determined by production relations: as we have just seen, Rojavan self-managed communes and grassroots bodies are under the sway of business big and small. “When the Gods wish to punish us, they answer our prayers”, Oscar Wilde wrote. Rojava fulfils the dream of the step-by-step popular empowerment theorists. J. Holloway’s Change the world without taking power seems to materialise in Syrian Kurdistan. Society is supposed to be transformed from the bottom by a variety of gradual changes which will render the top helpless and harmless until it falls off or disappears. Therefore Rojavan police is not police, it can only be a non-police, an anti-police. Writes D. Graeber:

“Ultimately - and this is key - the security forces are answerable to the bottom-up structures and not to the top-down ones. One of the first places we visited was a police academy (...). Everyone had to take courses in non-violent conflict resolution and feminist theory before they were allowed to touch a gun. The co-directors explained to us their ultimate aim was to give everyone in the country six weeks of police training, so that ultimately, they could eliminate police.”

The point is not to make fun of such sheer naivety, but to realise what it is built on: the belief that there is nothing to fear from former or new repression forces in Rojava, because real power lies with the people at grassroots level, in the communes and the local committees, so whatever government officials may do, whatever political manoeuvring wannabe leaders might engage in, we are the police.

There is no denying the materiality of (sometimes multi-ethnic) neighbourhood and village networks, of woman collectives, that deal with a lot of issues, trivial (disputes) or big (school, health care, local trade), as well as with the necessities of war. That would be an indispensable component of a social revolution. But in the present circumstances, this community rule runs in parallel with a central structure that functions as the political head of the country. Who decides what? Who calls the shots? That is the question. The vaunted autonomy of the commune is secure as long as it is not exercised, as long as it does not compete with government. Administering is one thing, big decision-taking is another. Nothing shows that the local councils have any real say in policy making. Calling this regime “Democratic Self-Rule Administration” hardly changes anything but words. As for the plan to have free elections as soon as possible, it is as good as parliamentary democracy can be.

Women with guns

Suppose we change names and dates... A lot of the

praise showered on Rojava today, particularly on what is seen as its radical critique of gender, could have been penned in the 1930's by observers of fraternal and equalitarian pioneer life in small Zionist communities in Palestine. In those days also, visitors and supporters were struck by an utterly new role for women.

In the early kibbutzim, sex equality did not just result from progressive and socialist ideas. Material necessities (farming and self-defence) required not depriving a hard-pressed community from half its potential labour and armed force. For women to take their share of agricultural and military activities, they had to be liberated from "feminine" duties, so children were brought up collectively, a novelty for many and a shock for some.

There is no evidence of this in Rojava. Having woman soldiers does not cause the end of masculine domination (if it did, Israel would be one of the most sex-equal countries in the world). Z. Baher, a champion of the Rojavan "revolution" cause, first writes;

"There is total equality between women and men", then adds half a page later: "I have not seen a single woman working in a shop, petrol station, market, café or restaurant."

In "self-managed" refugee camps across the border, in Turkey, Kurdish women take care of the kids while the men go looking for odd jobs.



The subversive character of a movement or organisation is not to be measured by the yardstick of the proportion of women in arms. Neither is its feminist character. Since the 1960's, most guerrillas have used or still use a large number of woman fighters, in Columbia for instance. 25% of Sandinista troops were women, which did not bring about women's lib: abortion is totally illegal today in Nicaragua. Women's presence is a typical feature of the Maoist guerrilla. In Nepal, Peru and the Philippines, protracted people's war strategy calls for man-woman equality as a means to pull down traditional (family, feudal or tribal) ties which are always patriarchal. The aim is not to emancipate women, but to replace the domination of the village elders by the rule of party cadres. The important role of women in the PKK-PYD owes less to feminist influence than to the Maoist origins of the party.

Why is the woman in arms so easily taken as a symbol of liberation, even to the point of disregarding what she is fighting for?

If the picture of a woman with a rocket-launcher can make front-page news in Western tabloids and in radical mags, it is because she disrupts the (much-declined) myth of the female inborn peaceful or passive nature. The right to use weapons (even hunting ones) has long been a male privilege, so reversing the tradition is viewed as proof of the exceptionality and radicalism of a movement. The stereotyped macho hero carries an unpleasant image, the romanticised woman freedom fighter a positive one. Anti-militarists do not mind civil war so much when women go to the front. The woman fighter is the redeemer of armed struggle: revolution grows out of the barrel of a Kalashnikov in the hands of a woman. Not to mention the fantasy of the female Avenger, wielding a gun for a good cause, shooting sexists and rapists: vigilantism is also redeemed when taken into women's hands, as in Abel Ferrara's Ms. 45, a 1981 rape vengeance film.

How Western-centric this all is. In many parts of the world, woman soldiers were and still are fairly common, sometimes in combat roles and shock troops. A Russian woman battalion guarded the Winter Palace in October 1917. In WW II, the Red Army had female tank drivers, snipers, etc. Women with guns are only an oddity for the Western mind.

Let's add that Assad's army and ISIS also have a few woman-only fighting units. But as, unlike the Kurds, they ignore gender critique, they do not use women in front-line combat, only in police and support tasks.

A call to arms

It is small wonder some individuals and groups always prone to denouncing the military-industrial complex should now call for arming Rojava against ISIS, if we remember that in 1999, at the time of the Kosovo war, a few anarchists supported NATO bombings on Serbia... to prevent genocide.

Where and who are these weapons to come from? The average proletarian has no spare assault rifle or grenade to secretly smuggle to Kurdistan. Should he or she get in touch with international arm dealers? Or shall we expect the Western powers to supply Rojava with adequate weaponry? Deliveries have started on a modest scale. Should we pressure the US, France and Britain to do more? With what means? Libertarian demos do not resonate as far as the White House. And at what political price for the askers? Nobody contemplates organising new International Brigades, though ISIS already have theirs.

So, when voices call for military support to help Rojava face the jihadist onslaught, what exactly are they talking about? Either it is empty talk, or it can only mean asking for more Western air strikes. How and where? Bombs and missiles will rarely fall on a column of jihadist vehicles in the desert, and more often on a neighbourhood held by the jihadists, with

inevitable "collateral damage". There is no such thing as clean surgical strikes. According to the Pentagon, coalition strikes killed 6.000 ISIS fighters between September 2014 and January 2015. Some day we will know how many Kurdish civilians died at the same time.

Mass slaughter is obviously not what those who call for "Arms for the Kurdish resistance" really want. So it is empty talk. An attitude. That's perhaps the worst part of the story: that in the Middle East an effort at self-organisation and self-defence, genuine but unable to transcend itself because of hostile circumstances, should serve in Europe and north America as a pretext for mobilisations and slogans that nobody seriously expects to be acted upon.

Besides, would-be realists overlook one eminent factor. Surely military defeat dooms a revolution: the Paris Commune was crushed by the bourgeois army. But winning a war is no solution to an unsolved social conundrum: the Bolshevik victory in the civil war established the domination of a new exploitative class. Supposing ISIS troops were pinned down by US, French, British, Jordanian, etc. bombs and missiles, and supposing the dysfunctional Syrian State let Rojava survive, what revolution could stay revolutionary if it relied on the assistance of imperialists and dictators?

Mainstream radicalism

We are not amazed by the stand taken by some libertarian groups who have always endorsed national liberation. What troubles us more is the often uncritical behaviour of a larger circle of anarchist comrades, squatters, feminists, libertarian communists, even friends whom we know to have been more discerning.

That milieu is capable of personal energy and initiative, but there is something mentally spineless

about what one might call its “mainstream radicalism”. Negatively, this could be characterised by a rejection of institutions and mediations that stand as obstacles on the way to emancipation: States, parties, unions, parliaments, bureaucracy, also a “transition period” intermediate between capitalism and communism, even class in so far as classes perpetuate themselves within an endless class struggle. Positively, it focuses on empowerment, self-organisation, direct democracy and a revolution of daily life, which extends to all forms of domination, notably gender.

As a result, the perfectly justified mistrust of promised future Brand New Worlds morphs into a tendency to believe that Tomorrow Is Today, providing people are already changing their lives here and now, and appear to be self-governing. At the same time, a suspicion of politics from the top develops into a search for concrete measures from the bottom, even on a small scale, provided that they enable people to rebuild social links.

Quite a few texts on Kurdistan only consider Rojava from the point of view of local accomplishments, of what Rojavans manage to undertake in the street, the commune school, the district clinic or the little park mentioned by Z. Bader (all of which would be necessary components of a social revolution), without bothering much about the leadership of the PKK and PYD, because for these analysts local accomplishments matter more than political leaders and indeed determine Rojava’s policy. Their priority is the bottom-up dynamics, but they implicitly interpret Rojava as if the bottom commanded the top. What could we understand of 1944 Italy if the events were only seen from the angle of general assemblies, wild-catting, rioting and revolutionary statements, with a near dismissal of the unions, the CP, political bargaining and State forces? Rojava is at present an attempt at nation-building: radicals misread it as community-building.

In bygone days, Marxism and far-leftism focused on production and work: taking over the factories, managing the economy, etc. Revolution is now more and more conceived of as a behavioural issue : self-affirmation, self-organisation, an emphasis on gender, ecology, multi-culture, reconnecting, meeting, debating... Revolution is thought of in societal rather than social terms: the word has been expanded and its meaning restricted. Societal became fashionable with the fading of radical hopes. Societal is when you can’t transform social structures. Social change is putting an end to masculine domination: societal change is sex parity.

What critique of the State ?

If what embarrasses radicals in national liberation is that it aims at creating a nation-State, the moment a national movement proclaims to be non- or anti-statist, and has enough appearance to that effect, radicals no longer object to national liberation. Then the only need for radicals is to consider that the nation – providing it remains Stateless – is after all nothing else than the people, and who could be against the people ? The people is us, all of us minus 1%, the people is 99%.

Here libertarian thought finds itself one sandwich short of a picnic.

Outright opposition to the State is one of the fundamentals of anarchy, and its invaluable merit.

The snag is, unconditional hostility to State is compatible with a non-revolutionary perspective, i.e. with a vision of possible broad evolutionary change. Of the three 19th century- born main anarchist figures, Proudhon, Kropotkin and Bakunin, only the latter always maintained the necessity of a cut-off moment that would rupture the historical continuum, of a destructive/constructive break from the past. Proudhon was consistently hostile to revolution.

Kropotkin came to the idea in 1899 that “(..) the resistance which the movement will meet in the privileged classes will hardly have the character of obtuse obstinacy which made the revolutions of times past so violent.” His later views were fairly ambivalent on that issue. Though he mentioned a “revolutionary period”, it is unclear in his writings whether “constructive agencies of mutual aid” could - or could not - grow within capitalism and reach a critical mass that would enable them to quasi naturally replace the capitalist system by a communist one. (Needless to say, Marxist thinking has developed a similar thesis of capitalism socialising itself to the point of inevitably turning into socialism.)

Step-by-step progressive approaches are not inconsistent with anarchism. So it is not improper for a gradualist like D. Graeber to label himself an “anarchist”. For him, cross-border communities can develop so much that borders become meaningless, and cause “the gradual dissolution of the bureaucratic nation-state”. The most important word here is bureaucratic: when anything (work, money, war, business...) is run democratically, its nature changes altogether.

The weakness of anarchism is to regard the State above all as a coercive instrument - which it certainly is - without asking why and how it plays that role. A State is an administrative and security-guaranteeing apparatus maintaining the cohesion of divergent interests. For anarchists, though, the State is identified first and foremost with imposed vertical authority. Once these visible forms of constraint recede, it is enough for some anarchists (not all of them, far from it) to conclude that the end of the State has come or is under way. A genuine communal “horizontal”

police force, for instance, will not be regarded as police any more.

The libertarian is defenceless against what looks so much like his programme: as he has always opposed the State and supported democracy, democratic confederalism and social self-determination have a lot to please him. The anarchist ideal is indeed to replace the State by thousands of federated communes and work collectives.

On that basis, it becomes feasible for an internationalist to support a national movement, if it implements political, social and cultural self-management, or “re-appropriation of the common” in 21st century parlance. When the PKK insists it does not want to seize power, but to contribute to a system where power will be dispersed so that everybody shares power, it is relatively easy for the anarchist to identify with this claim.

Prospects

The attempt at a democratic revolution in Rojava, and the social transformations that go with it, have only been possible because of exceptional circumstances: the break-up of the Iraqi and Syrian States, plus the jihadist invasion, a deadly threat which accelerated radicalisation.

As things stand today, one possibility is that ISIS takes over the whole area, which would cause Rojava’s dissolution as a proto-State: Kurdish autonomy would revert to strips of shrinking land, pockets of guerrilla, which was its situation in all countries of the region before 2003.

The second and now most probable option is that Rojava holds the fort with Western military backing, and the Rojavan republic lives on with enough international patronage to navigate the stormy waters of a crisis-ridden Middle East (among other challenges, having the Syrian civil war the other side of the border: paradoxically, as long as the Assad regime holds out, it could act as a reluctant and unreliable ally of Rojava, adding another streak of uncertainty). Such a new-born country would be no more independent than the present Kurdish micro-State in northern Iraq under Western protection: like the Kurdistan Regional Government, Rojava would survive only if it played the game of the great powers and big business.



Oil would be both an asset and a constraint. For a small fragile country, geographically split into three parts, oil and mineral wealth is nothing without powerful buyers and allies. At the time of writing, there is only one airport in Cizire, under Syrian government control.

This would be the worst/best scenario. However democratic Rojava wishes to be, and even in spite of strong grassroots pressure, the consolidation and normalisation of the country would only promote what is compatible with bourgeois democracy, i.e. what does not conflict with capital hiring labour, circulating and accumulating money, doing business with foreign capital, etc. Russian "socialism in one country" was impossible: so is Kurdish democratic confederalism, whatever that means. A stop will be put to all social conquests with any subversive potential.

At best (which is probably asking too much), there will be relatively free elections, little corruption, some respect for human rights, local self-administration for local matters, a better public health system than in neighbouring countries, moderately repressive police, a progressive education, a free press (providing it stays clear of blasphemy), a tolerant Islam, and of course sex parity, perhaps with a woman vice-president.



No more. Probably enough for those who want to believe in a Rojavan revolution to go on believing. Devotees are never discouraged by reality. When their theory is disproved by facts, they dismiss the facts. "Be more dialectical!", they say: "Disregard the present : everything that looks bad today was worse yesterday, and will be getting better tomorrow..."

As for the prospect of a conflict between self-organised bodies and the apparatus that oversees them under the PKK's watchful eye, this brings us back to the question: "Who holds the real reins of power?" There is no "duality of power" in Kurdistan, no proletarian control from below competing for command with a political structure above. PKK supervision accepts communal self-governing collectives which leave it in charge of major decisions and which only self-manage daily life : the involvement of the local population does not alter the real balance of power. In Spain, 1936, the beginnings of a revolution were devoured by war. In Rojava, war prevails, and in spite of genuine efforts of Kurdish proletarians to take their matters into their own hands, nothing so far heralds the advent of a revolution.



A load of crystal balls: The election and beyond

Will you bother voting this time around? If the answer is 'No,' you're in good company.

In the 2010 general election, a third of those registered to vote didn't vote¹. In some inner city constituencies, turnout was as low as 44%.²

This is less than half of the story, however – many people, particularly the young³, don't register to vote at all, and aren't even included in the turnout stats as a result.

This is the first general election where individual voters have been responsible for registering themselves, rather than relying on the head of household – so we can expect levels of registration to be even lower.

The State's response to low levels of engagement with the electoral system has been to launch a big campaign to encourage voter registration. While libraries and children's centres are closed or cut, somehow the government found £4.2 million "aimed at ensuring everyone in the country is signed up to the electoral register and has their chance to vote".⁴

As well as the five lucky organisations who got their paws on some of the £4.2 million, big unions like Unite and Unison – with the backing of the Daily Mirror – are spending their members' subscription money on campaigns to encourage voting. Special mention must go to Unite, who are using an image of the General Kitchener lifted from First World War recruitment posters in their "No Vote, No Voice" campaign – because nothing says 'democracy' like the man who introduced the concentration camp into modern warfare, and encouraged tens of thousands of working class Britons to go to their deaths in the trenches.



We'll see later why the State, the media and politicians of all stripes care so much about encouraging people to vote. But for now, let's take a look at what they're asking us to vote for – starting with the main parties, and then at the so-called alternatives. It's time to play...

Bullshit bingo

"Hardworking families"

First on the bingo card is "hardworking families." It seems like that's all politicians care about, as a simple Google search reveals.⁵ As of January this year, David Cameron topped the "hardworking families" Google league table with a magnificent 22,500 results, followed by Ed Miliband on 9,780 and Nick Clegg on 8,110. Clegg and Miliband's lower

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/funding-for-new-ways-to-encourage-voter-registration>

⁵ Searches carried out on 15/2015/01/

scores could be because they've managed to come up with their own versions of "hardworking families." Miliband talks about "the squeezed middle," and Nick Clegg talks about "alarm clock Britain," for example. Or it could just be that no-one cares what they say.

The Tories are big on work. And very big on cracking down on those who don't work. Why should hardworking families who work hard at work pay their taxes to support those who don't, they ask? Benefits shouldn't be a lifestyle choice, they tell us.

In a speech launching a flagship policy for the election, David Cameron told us that he wants to end the "well-worn path from school gate, to the Job Centre, and on to a life on benefits."⁶ He clearly doesn't care so much about the equally well-worn path from Eton College, to Oxford or Cambridge, and on to a life on MPs' expenses. Cameron's proposal is that "Young people out of work, education or training for six months will have to do unpaid community work to get benefits, if the Conservatives win the election, [and] 50,000 18 to 21-year-olds would be required to do daily work experience from day one of their claim, alongside job searching".⁷ In other words, a massive extension of the workfare schemes that – despite successful legal challenges – led to more than half a million claimants having their benefits cut in the year to December 2013.⁸

**It's NOT Left vs Right,
It's the State vs You!**

⁶ <http://www.economist.com/news/britain/21644163-governments-flagship-welfare-reform-trouble-no-credit-where-its-due>

⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-31500763>

⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/14/more-jobseekers-allowance-claimants-subject-benefit-sanctions>

It seems like the Tories have abandoned all pretence that workfare is about helping people into work – not surprising when the existing Community Work Placement scheme costs £235 million alone and is faltering badly with over 500 charities pledging not to supply placements. It's all about "order and discipline," as Cameron was keen to point out at his policy launch.

Labour are offering the same, but with a crude smiley face drawn on the baseball bat of benefit sanctions and forced labour. Their scheme will offer "real jobs" instead of placements; paid employment not community work. But even though the carrot might be a bit bigger, the stick is still there – don't play along and it's no money for you. And meanwhile, Ed Miliband is returning to the well-worn theme of ending the "something for nothing" benefits culture and pledging to end Job Seekers Allowance altogether for 1821- year olds who do not have the "proper skills."



Since its introduction by John Major's government in April 1996, both Labour and Tories have extended the scope of workfare to the extent that the power to send a claimant – any claimant – on a scheme is now within the power of the Secretary of State for Employment. A novel solution to the problem of

¹ <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm>

² <http://www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout10.htm>

³ The lowest percentage of registrations is recorded for the 17–18 and 19–24 age groups (55% and 56% complete respectively). In contrast, 94% of the 65+ age group were registered

legal challenges – give yourself the power to make the rules up as you go along. The use of forced labour as a tool of government policy has been backed up by more ideological attacks on claimants, to the extent that the word is almost synonymous with “scrounger” in the political dictionary.

Furthermore, this assault on claimants and the worship of work has enabled further attacks on the social wage.⁹ For example, many local authorities used to provide after-school clubs at children’s centres which provided affordable childcare and allowed people – most often women – to go out to work. These clubs were part of the social wage. Now in cities like Bristol, every single after-school club is facing closure. The conditions for launching this kind of attack on the social wage are twofold. First, to refuse or leave a job because of a lack of affordable childcare now means loss of benefits. And second, because if you don’t work, well – that makes you into one of those scrounging bastards we read so much about in the papers.



From Labour and Tory alike, the message is clear – working class people are here to do exactly and only that: work. There are now over 300 fewer public libraries in the UK than there were in 2010, many of them closed by Labour councils. Because why do working class people need access to books when education is

⁹ “When we talk about a social wage we’re talking about all the different ways that working class people receive services from the state and the ruling class that are in effect part of their share of the profits of industry. Healthcare, subsidised and social housing, transport and utilities like water and electricity, libraries and social services, benefits and many other things can be seen as part of the social wage. Like wage increases and shorter working days these services are often the result of previous rounds of struggle, victories won by the working class in the past. They are also, just like the benefits we receive at work, often used to control us.” <http://www.afed.org.uk/publications/pamphlets-booklets/163-introduction-to-anarchist-communism.html>

all about getting the skills you need to work? Cuts made by Labour councils, you say? That brings us onto the next item on our bullshit bingo card...

Tough choices

No politician really wants to make cuts, or so they claim. No, they have to make “tough choices,” or “difficult decisions,” all because of “the mess we inherited from our predecessors,” or the big bad “global economy”. Politicians of all shades are engaged in a kind of Houdini act, all claiming that their hands are tied – councils have to make cuts because of central government. National governments have to impose austerity because of the global banking crisis – and because of what the Opposition did the last time they were in power, whoever they were and whatever it is that they did.

Annoying as it is, there’s an element of truth to this “tough choices” rhetoric – although we should still always ask ourselves, “Tough for who?” whenever we hear a politician use it, and not hesitate to hold them accountable for their actions.

The fact is that politicians couldn’t really change anything even if they wanted to, because of the way the political system is set up.

The main aim of parliament is to keep things going the way they always have, so that a rich few at the top have all the power and the vast majority of us have none. Voting to pick an imaginary side in this pantomime just props the whole system up by making it look democratic.

Yet there are parties who claim to be different. Eyes down for more bullshit bingo....

Vote for the real alternative

The LibDems

“We’re not like them, honest, vote for us,” sums up every LibDem manifesto pledge we’ve ever seen. Sadly, their encounter with government has made this claim slightly harder to sustain. The photograph of Nick Clegg pledging not to increase university tuition fees weeks before doing precisely that probably did more to convince people of the futility of parliamentary politics than a lot of anarchist propaganda. We put them in this section for old time’s sake, and also as an introduction to talking about....

The Green Party

Now that the LibDem’s solitary sniff of power has put paid to any claim they might once have had to being different, the Greens are presenting themselves as some kind of radical alternative party to the left of Labour. However, threatening paycuts of up to £4,000 for low-paid refuse workers and closing services, the Greens in power in Brighton have been described – by one of the refuse workers – as “Tories on bikes”. Another description could be “low rent LibDems.” Up until the current Tory-LibDem coalition, the LibDems could say pretty much what they wanted, secure – or so they thought – in the knowledge that they’d never get the chance to put it into practice.

The Greens in Brighton have done a Clegg, but on a much smaller scale. No doubt the Greens in Brighton have made “tough choices,” with their “hands tied” by central government. Nevertheless, they might keep their solitary MP, Caroline Lucas – and maybe even pick up another one in Bristol’s muesli belt. However, the key thing about the Greens, and parties like them, isn’t how many votes they win. It isn’t even the possibility that they might be able to use a couple of MPs to “put pressure on Labour,”¹⁰ as Caroline Lucas claims.

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/feb/02/green-role-pressure-labour--caroline-lucas-small>

As commentator Noam Chomsky points out, “The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there’s free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.”¹¹

The Greens might be on the fringes of that spectrum, but they’re still part of the exclusive debating club, designed to keep us quiet. And this is why everyone who wants to run our lives for us is so keen that we register, get out there, and vote – so that we place ourselves somewhere on that spectrum of acceptable opinion, and rely on leaders to run our lives for us.

The micro-left

While the bigger parties are making their tough choices, there are others who attempt to take a principled stand within the game of electoral politics.



They’re easy to spot – they’re often selling papers and usually shouting about Betrayal!, although the placards that they wave seem to get rebranded quite regularly – where once they might

have said Socialist Alliance, now they say TUSC or Left Unity. Welcome to the micro-left, a land of perpetual disappointment and simultaneous triumph of hope over experience.

¹¹ Noam Chomsky, “The common good,” p. 43

It must be an emotional rollercoaster on the left – you go on marches, you sign petitions, you place pressure on the politicians from below, you vote for them (with or without illusions), you call on your union branch to call on your union to call on the TUC to call on the Labour party to call on someone else to actually do something. And then they (whoever they are) don't turn your country (or town) into a workers' paradise, or even deliver on their manifesto promises. Gutted. Another betrayal. Sometimes parts of the micro-left, such as TUSC¹², venture onto the ballot paper in their own right where two things are certain. First, a lost deposit. And second, that they'll console themselves with the words, "That's 93 votes for socialism, comrades."

UKIP

If there's one thing that everyone seems to agree on about UKIP, it's that they're different from the other parties. Anti-racists will tell you that UKIP's different and worse, UKIP will say that they're different and better, but they all agree that they're different. It's a lot rarer to see anyone point out that, in a lot of important ways, UKIP actually stand for keeping things the same. They may talk big about scaring the political elite and empowering ordinary people, but their promises are just as hollow as the ones you hear



from the other politicians – even if their leader Nigel Farage can hold a pint and look as if he's done it before. UKIP managed to come out of the parliamentary expenses scandal of 2010 unscathed, helping them to present themselves as anti-establishment outsiders – it helped that they didn't have any MPs at the time. However, as soon as they have access to the trough, UKIP representatives don't hesitate to get their snouts in there. For example, Nigel Farage took time off from his ordinary bloke act to claim £205,000 for an office that was already being bankrolled by a UKIP supporter.¹³ There's also the case of UKIPer Tom Wise, an ex-copper and the first Member of the European Parliament to be jailed for expenses fraud.¹⁴



Success at the European elections aside, UKIP's greatest achievement has been to make Nigel Farage look like an ordinary bloke – not hard when you're up against Cameron and Miliband. But this blokey exterior doesn't stand up to much scrutiny. Educated at public school Dulwich College (which, with fees of £12,000 per term is currently pricier than Eton), Farage went into the City to work as a trader. Hardly a man of the people, eh?

¹² Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, dominated by SPEW (Socialist Party of England & Wales, the former Militant Tendency)

¹³ <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jun/12/nigel-farage-europe-expenses-ukip>
¹⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/8008994.stm>

A lot of the time, anyone who'd even consider voting for UKIP is dismissed as a racist or unhinged. The public proclamations of their members, blaming immigrants for racism or saying they don't trust "negroes" certainly don't help. However, we don't think that everyone who votes UKIP is a racist. The people who vote UKIP because they're scared or angry about issues like jobs and housing are right to be angry.

Although they're wrong to blame these problems on immigrants – and when UKIP say that mainstream politicians have abandoned ordinary people they're telling the truth. What they don't say is that UKIP is as mainstream as all the other parties. Where they're different and dangerous is creating a political mood where racist and anti-immigrant views are more acceptable

but, as with the National Front and the BNP before them, racism and racists will be beaten on the streets, not by the ballot box.

Never mind the ballots

Many people will agree with some of our arguments, but still say you should vote anyway, because it's the «practical» or «realistic» thing to do. But we're convinced that voting is not a realistic way to solve anyone's problems. Most of the time, voting comes down to picking a politician because you like some of the things they promise to do – or maybe just dislike them a bit less than the other candidates – and then hoping that they'll live up to their promises, even though you have no way of forcing them to, and they're often unable to do so even if they want to. When it comes to solving your problems, voting

is about as effective as wishing on a star. In some ways, it's even less effective than wishing on a star, as stars tend not to cut the benefits people need to survive, use the police to beat up protesters, or throw people in prison for stealing a bottle of water.

So what alternatives do anarchists suggest? Most of what we propose can be described as direct action. This is exactly what it sounds like: people acting together to solve their problems directly, without relying on anyone else to do it for them. And it's not only anarchists who take this approach – we can see it happening across the UK.

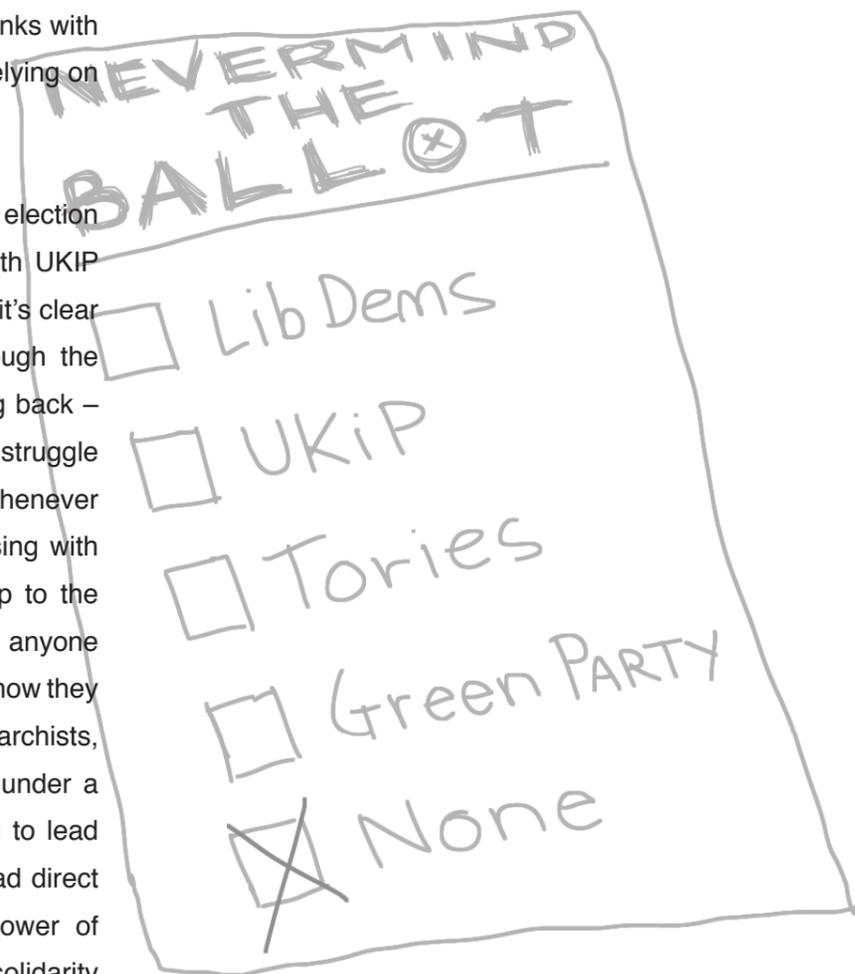
Recent months have seen an upsurge in the number and intensity of struggles around housing. In London alone, tenants and campaigners are fighting evictions and social cleansing – whether in Newham, Tower Hamlets, West Hendon or Elephant & Castle.¹⁵ Just as important, these groups are coming together – not to form one big housing campaign, but in a federal way, working from below to make links with other groups and individuals looking to fight back. Most recently, a Radical Housing Network has been formed of these groups.¹⁶ Unlike the traditional micro-left approach of declaring an empty organisation into being and waiting for people to get involved (People's Assembly, we're looking at you), this more organic approach is an example of federalism in action.

Meanwhile, while the big unions like Unison and Unite put their energy and resources into funding the Labour Party and urge us to register to vote, people are getting together to fight the bosses at work, too. Groups like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and the Solidarity Federation (SolFed) are winning small but important victories over wage thefts and discrimination. Equally important, workers are learning that we don't need leaders to

¹⁵ The Focus E15, Balfour Towers, Fred John Towers groups in East London, West Hendon in North London, the Aylesbury Estate in South London, and West Heathrow and Earls Court in West London. These groups are often skint, so don't look for websites, try Facebook & Twitter instead.
¹⁶ <http://radicalhousingnetwork.org/>

take on the bosses and win. Likewise in some of the mainstream unions like BECTU and the RMT, we are seeing groups of workers like those involved in the Ritzy Living Wage struggle make direct links with other workers and the community, without relying on the full-time officers to do it for them.

As Labour and the Tories build their election promises around forced labour, and vie with UKIP to see who can be the most anti-immigrant, it's clear that more resistance is needed. Even though the task looks huge, people are already fighting back – and not only in organised groups. The class struggle is being fought everywhere, all the time. Whenever we resist work, either by skiving or organising with our workmates; whenever women stand up to the everyday sexism they encounter; wherever anyone experiencing oppression for who they are or how they look stands up and says, "Enough!". As anarchists, we don't want to bring all these struggles under a single banner, and we certainly don't claim to lead them. Instead, we work with others to spread direct action and direct democracy using the power of argument and example to build the kind of solidarity that can and does make the bosses tremble.



It's not how or whether you vote on 7 May that will help you take control over your life and end the years of attacks from politicians of all stripes, it's what you do the day after. And the day after that.

And the day after that.



What the Suffragettes did for us

(hint: it was more than the vote)

Nearly all children in the UK are told at some point, by some well-meaning adult: "You must eat all the food on your plate, because there are children starving in Africa." Around half of us are subjected to a second, similarly inane cliché. This one goes: "When you grow up, you must vote in every election, because women died to get you the vote."

The connection, you might have noticed, is that they're both wrong-headed appeals to a sense of moral duty towards somebody who will be entirely unaffected by the action we're told we must take. They're also massive oversimplifications of complex issues. They concern problems that are created by a vast, tangled network of systems of power, and promote solutions that look, on the surface, like a personal response to those systems, but which don't question or disrupt them in any way.

Most of us are soon able to point out that starving children in specific regions within Africa or anywhere else are unlikely to know or care whether we finished our second scoop of over-salted instant mashed

potato, though they might appreciate fairer global economic systems governing food production and distribution¹. It took me a lot longer to untangle the second fallacy. It was a lot longer before it occurred to me to try. In fact, there are several fallacies underlying this one, and it's worth going through them in detail.

Fallacy no. 1: The Suffragettes could have cared less whether or not I vote.

Similar to the starving children in Africa, the suffragettes didn't know me and had pressing problems of their own. What they wanted was not that every woman in perpetuity should be guilt-tripped into participating in any political system that used the ballot box to legitimise itself, but that wherever men were balloted, women would be too. As far as that goes, they got what they wanted, and those future women's decisions on how to use that enfranchisement weren't a major concern. In fact, the whole point was that they trusted future women to make their own decisions. Sylvia Pankhurst, for one, lived to reject parliamentary democracy as an out of date machine and refused to cast a vote or stand for election herself. I daresay that should she be haunting polling stations on May 7th, she would be far more appalled by the cuts to essential women's services that every option on the ballot would continue to implement, than at women who spoiled their ballots or stayed away. I like to think she'll give me an approving nod as I substitute my ballot paper for a sheet of folded bog roll, but honestly, if I believed in an afterlife I'd be sure that Sylvia Pankhurst, of all people, would be doing something better with it than haunting polling booths. She's probably swanning round Europe with the spectre of communism.

¹Well, eventually. Most of us start by suggesting a parcel of leftovers.

Fallacy no. 2: The vote was the sole legacy of the suffragettes, and using it the only way to respect their memory.

Here's the thing: the suffragettes never intended it to stop with the vote. They weren't satisfied, and they didn't intend us to be. We respect their memory by continuing their work, not by being content with it.

We also need to remember that "suffragettes" was a blanket term for a diverse women's movement. The vote might have been the only demand of the more privileged groups, especially those in the US who refused membership to black, working class and fallen women and were happy for the vote to be extended only to a married and propertied respectable few, but who'd want to honour their memory? For the Women's Social and Political Union in the UK, at least at the beginning, there was a lot more to it than the vote itself.

It was about women's solidarity, women's ability to work together and stand up and fight together, to write and speak from their own experience to each other and to the world, not just on the vote but sexual, social and vocational freedoms, including fair pay and reproductive rights.

Being denied the vote was an infantilisation, an insult to women as intelligent, rational human beings, regardless of how much use the vote itself would or wouldn't be. Using the vote was almost beside the point compared to what it would mean for women to have the vote, to not be designated as mere extensions of their husbands but decision-making adults in their own right.

Getting the vote was a victory largely because

of what women achieved through the process of fighting for it. The speeches, the publications, the meetings, the direct actions, the smashed windows, the battles with police, the martial arts training in preparation for those battles, the imprisonments, the hunger strikes, the resistance to force-feeding and refusal to give in: these did more to raise the status and confidence of women, the possibilities and opportunities for women as public, professional and political people, than the vote itself ever has, and a shed load more than a woman Prime Minister and all the other careerists who've cynically used women's struggles to promote themselves while throwing working class women under the bus.

Fallacy no. 3: Gratitude for the end of their disenfranchisement should put a particular obligation on women to involve themselves in the system that kept them disenfranchised.

"Do you see what mummy gave you? Now, say thank you very nicely, and stop complaining." Because, frankly, fuck that condescending, paternalistic shit right there. Working class men also fought for the right to vote, but do they get that cooed at them every time they suggest that there are more effective means of change than the ballot box? This attitude turns women's votes into an issue of conformity rather than conscience, in direct opposition to who the suffragettes were and what they fought for.



The partial information we get fed at school paints the suffragettes as a peaceful campaigning lobby, who were awarded the vote because they made their case well and proved their economic worth while the men were being fed into the slaughter of the first world war. The truth is, the suffragettes achieved their aims because they were a radical, inspirational and effective direct action movement. They achieved incredible things for themselves and for future generations of women, and yes, they deserve our respect and our gratitude. But more than that, they deserve our study and our effort to comprehend the full enormity and complexity of their struggle. They deserve better than to be reduced to a single-issue soundbyte, their courage and militancy twisted into a liberal message of support for the system many of them never stopped fighting when their leaders were co-opted. They deserve so much better than to be used manipulatively, as bogeywomen to shame us into a tokenistic legitimisation of the very systems they opposed.

So this polling day, whether you vote or organise or both, consider honouring the suffragettes' memory by not using them as a stick to beat women with when they treat their vote exactly as the suffragettes fought to allow them to: as their own, to use or not, on their own terms.

“Women could no more reform the decaying parliamentary institution than men could...the woman professional politician is neither more nor less desirable than the man professional: the less the world has of either, the better it is for it.”

Sylvia Pankhurst on Parliament

Sylvia Pankhurst, commenting on the election of eight women to parliament:

“The return of eight women to Parliament marks an advance in public opinion. People have realised at last that women are persons with all the human attributes, not merely some of them and that women have an equal right with men to take part in making the social conditions under which they live. This country has not been first in admitting women to political equality with men: other countries preceded us in admitting women to the legislature, and we have not yet reached political equality in the franchise here, although the women of this country led the way in agitating for political and legal equality.”

It is interesting to observe that the legal barriers to women's participation in Parliament and its elections were not removed until the movement to abolish Parliament altogether had received the strong encouragement of witnessing the overthrow of Parliamentary Government in Russia and the setting up of Soviets.

Election to Parliament is always much more a question of the strength of the party machine than of the qualities of the candidate. An archangel would be defeated at the polls if he lacked a strong party backing. The majority of the electors vote without having heard or seen the candidate, who actually plays but a minor part in the election. Nevertheless, there was undoubtedly some prejudice to be overcome by the first women candidates; which acted as a makeweight against them, outbalancing what would otherwise have been the normal strength of the party behind them.

This election is the first in which the electors have voted for the successful women candidates to any appreciable extent on the merits of those candidates. Lady Astor, Mrs. Wintringham, and Mrs. Phillipson entered Parliament merely as deputies of their husbands.



This fact, from a democratic standpoint, was particularly objectionable in the case of Lord Astor since he was thus given a voice in ruling the people through both Houses of Parliament.

The women who entered Parliament in place of their husbands introduced no original policies, nor do we anticipate that their successors will do so. They were nominated candidates and have been elected to represent certain parties, and, in the main, their parliamentary doings must follow that of their men colleagues in the party, otherwise the party will cast them out.

Most of these hardships, and the more serious of them, cannot be remedied within the system. Most of them, too, cannot even be mitigated without tampering with economic conditions; and there, at once, the general party policy will certainly obtrude itself, and the party woman will be called to heel by the whips like a party man if she stray far from the party plan.

Nevertheless, on questions of the special hardships of women and on questions specially related to sex the women members of the various parties may sometimes show themselves a trifle before or a trifle behind the general standard of their party by adhering in some respects to what has come to be generally regarded as the accepted programme of feminism. It is so regarded because it was adopted by certain women of the middle and upper classes, who were, for their day, more or less advanced though narrow and prejudiced in many respects, but who were of forceful energetic personality and built up a movement reflecting their conception of what should be the legal status of their sex and primarily of their class. That programme is, in many respects, retrograde and, and in all respects, incompatible with Socialism.

One should not expect to find new policies on any subject springing up from Parliament; the atmosphere there is arid, the life stultifying to thought. At best at very best -- the Members of Parliament carry on the politics they adopted before they entered there,

“ I HAVE GONE TO WAR TOO.

I AM GOING TO FIGHT
CAPITALISM
EVEN IF IT KILLS ME.



IT IS WRONG THAT PEOPLE
LIKE YOU SHOULD BE
COMFORTABLE AND WELL FED
WHILE ALL AROUND YOU PEOPLE
ARE STARVING ”



or catch up some vibrations or movements going on outside. Parliament is a decaying institution: it will pass away with the capitalist system: it will be replaced by the industrial soviets, when production, distribution and transport pass out of the hands of the capitalist, to become the joint concern of the whole people, each branch of industry being administered by those who are engaged in it.

Women can no more put virtue into the decaying parliamentary institution than can men: it is past reform and must disappear.

Once the special legal disabilities of women in politics were in large measure, though not wholly, removed, it became inevitable that there should be little difference between the woman in politics and the man in politics. That is as it should be.

The women professional politician is neither more nor less desirable than the man professional politician: the less the world has of either the better it is for it. The time to look forward to is that in which there will no longer be a body of persons whose business it is to rule or to listen to speeches of the rulers and their puppets and to while away hour upon hour waiting to record their votes in division lobbies to the call of the party whips.

The Soviets, under Communism, will meet for the administration of the services of the community, not to carry on the party warfare which is inevitable to present - day society, because it is based on competition and torn by the struggles of warring classes. To the women, as to the men, the hope of the future lies not through Parliamentary reform, but free Communism and the soviets.

Report from AFem 2014

Anarcha-feminist conference in London

19th October 2014



In October 2014, about 400 people gathered in London, the day after the Bookfair, to attend AFem 2014, the first of what the organisers hope will be a series of international anarcha-feminist conferences.

Participation

Of those attending, the vast majority were individuals and people working in collectives, either as anarcha-feminists or activists around gender-oppression issues. There were also formal groups from the UK including Anarchist Federation, Solidarity Federation, the Sex Workers' Open University, and the Feminist Library. We were excited that many came from outside the UK and those represented by groups included the Workers Solidarity Movement (Ireland), Black Rose (USA), International Workers Association (Poland). Strong contacts had developed between the AF and Black Rose, and we worked with the Solidarity Federation and IWA Poland on a meeting with them about the workplace. From the International of Anarchist Federations of which the AF is a member, the Italian, German-speaking, French-speaking federations, and of course the Spanish, who contributed so much to the meetings they participated in, plus the Federation of Anarchist Organising (Slovenia/Croatia) were all represented. By Skype, an Iranian in exile, an American from Black Rose, and an individual from La Alzada in Chile participated. Individuals included those from USA, Canada, Ireland, Germany, France, Holland, Sweden, Poland, The Czech Republic, Brazil, and Australia.

Reflections and reports

On our blog and social media (facebook) sites you can find links to reflections by organisers and write-ups of meetings that took place on the day and follow-up documents. They include reports by/about:

Accountability processes

Black Rose (Los Angeles and Chicago, respectively)

Disability meeting

People of Colour

Safer Spaces

Sex Workers' Open University

We are still deciding what to do in the future. The organisers would almost all identify as social anarchists, are great comrades, and the AF certainly wants to work with them again. But we don't feel able to do something that big in the UK again soon as was it too much work for only a few people. In practice we had about 20 organisers, with others helping with practicalities on the day, and while this number may not seem so few, we had not worked together before and had to spend a lot of time establishing structures that were both helpful and equitable. We were working for many hours each week, which was tiring, used up work or holiday time, and other anarchist work suffered. Some people even moved to the UK from abroad especially to help organise the conference!

We also had a lot of shit to deal with, and although we are glad that the feedback has been almost all positive, we had a large number of issues leading up to the day and on the day, including rape-apologism, transphobia, anti sex-work difficulties, ageism, Islamophobia, racism, sexism, even more rape-apologism, and some just plain nasty people at different times. In general terms this did not spoil the whole event, but it did affect some of the organisers very badly. We felt that some people were behaving as though they owned anarchy-feminism, particularly some who have been in the movement

or many years, and the struggle against this attitude took its toll both prior to the event and on the day.

Due to the pressures and stress placed on the organisers we will have to build in a support structure for ourselves to support a future event.

Money, money, money

Putting on such a large and diverse event does not come cheaply. We spent around £3500 altogether on publicity, building hire, travel costs, childcare, and so on. Much of this was raised via a website and through donations from organisations. However, it is too much to ask organisations to give us this money every year. As a result of these difficulties, our intention is to use our contacts to help smaller events set up and to initiate them ourselves.



What is the legacy of AFem 2014?

There have been events and meetings that have spun off from AFem 2014 or have been made more feasible because of it. As mentioned above, Black Rose (LA/Chicago) wrote a large internal report and are now running a series of regional speaking events

that are both report-backs on AFem in particular and jumping-off points for discussion and debate about the definition and practice of anarchy-feminism more broadly. Some of them are moving to Chile to work with La Alzada. Also in the USA, Black Rose Portland is working on a large booklet about accountability processes. Here in the UK, local anarchy-feminists now have a stronger network and new groups have been set up in some towns, e.g. Bored of Patriarchy in Bristol. Many anti-authoritarian feminist groups have associated themselves with AFem, which you can see on our social media site. In addition, the Peace News Camp held a connected meeting on trans issues; anarchy-feminist meetings have been held at regional book fairs and anarchy-feminism is being introduced into broader feminist events more confidently, for example Reclaim the Night and Ladyfest.

What we should/could have done, but didn't.

There are probably many things that we should have done differently. We did not address disability issues as well as we could have, for example, we did not provide hand-outs in large print. Neither did we address cultural appropriation well enough in advance. There are lots of issues here. For example, some People of Colour do not like white people wearing dreadlocks, but should the organisers tell people how to style their hair? This is a matter for further discussion and learning. Also, it transpired that there was a need for a quiet space, and a space for people who wanted to talk or resolve conflicts. Whilst Food not Bombs cooked for us on the day, they were not able to feed everyone.

Despite the difficulties, it was a very positive event and is, we hope, a turning point for anarchy-feminism within our movement and within wider society.



An AFem 2014 organiser and AF member

Visit the blog for more information about the event and specific reports:

afem2014.wordpress.com

Theo Van Rysselberghe

Theo Van Rysselberghe was one of the many artists who rallied to the anarchist cause in the late 19th century. *Organise!* looks at his life.

Theodore Van Rysselberghe was born on November 28th 1862 in Ghent, Belgium, to a wealthy family. He studied painting at schools of fine arts in first Ghent and then Brussels. In 1884, he travelled to Spain and Morocco which opened his eyes to the need to depict light in his paintings.

Returning to Belgium, he helped found the Group of Twenty, whose secretary was Octave Maus. This group wanted to increase links between Belgian and French artists and to fight for an "intransigent art" and a «conscious and organized insurrection against academicism». This went well with Theo's independent spirit and his dislike of establishment artists.

He was a friend of the socialist poet Emile Verhaeren. One day in 1886 Verhaeren told him to come down to Paris to see the painting in the new divisionist/pointillist style by Georges Seurat, *Un Dimanche Après-midi à l'Île de la Grande-Jatte* [A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande-Jatte]. He was so affected by the painting that he broke his cane in half!

He determined that he would now paint in the new style. He made contact with other painters like Paul Signac, Camille Pissarro, Maximilien Luce, Henri-Edmond Cross, and Charles Angrand. All of these had strong anarchist convictions and contributed both financially and artistically to the French anarchist press. Van Rysselberghe's rebellious temperament was attracted to these ideas and he too became an anarchist.



Another of Theo's friends was the art critic Félix Fénéon, also extremely active in the anarchist movement. Fénéon introduced Theo to the group of Symbolist writers. In 1892 Theo gave money for a fund for the children of an imprisoned French anarchist. After the wave of repression against anarchists in France in 1894, many fled to Belgium, including Camille Pissarro, the geographer Elisée Reclus, and the writer Bernard Lazare. Pissarro wrote that: «Theo is really charming with us and does everything to make the time enjoyable for us.» Pissarro and Van Rysselberghe painted together in Bruges and Knokke. It should be noted that Pissarro was beginning to move away from divisionist techniques that he regarded as too cold and clinical, something which Van Rysselberghe was to do later.

Theo was a friend of the anarchist activist Jean Grave and he supported Grave's call for artists and writers to involve themselves actively in the anarchist cause. He supported Grave's newspaper *Les Temps Nouveaux* (New Times). The dilemma of the committed artist is highlighted here. He was to write to Grave that whilst he was keen on providing works, he could not supply drawings on demand. He was to again write to Grave in 1905 that: "As much as I would like the pleasure of sometimes giving you a drawing — without any connection to any text, nor even with the philosophical or social ideas of the journal — it would be difficult to make one to fit your purposes. A drawing finds sufficient cause in its purely graphic interest, and that if it has value (as a graphic), it will even have an educational role, perhaps even better than a drawing with literary or philosophical meaning. Whatever the meaning might be, I am particularly inept at that kind of drawing: Everything I have tried to do has given me too much trouble, and to my eyes has been a complete botch-up."

Nevertheless Theo provided a series of designs, *Les Errants* (The Wanderers) for Grave's articles on

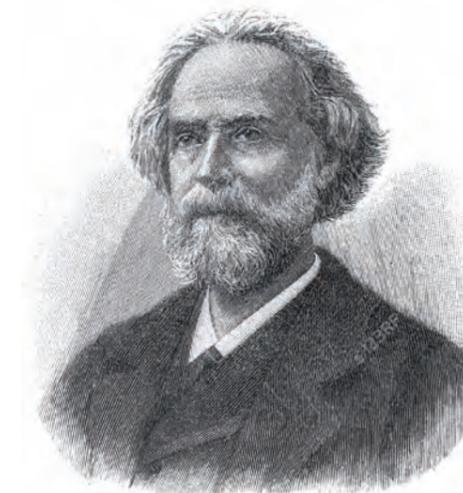
the homeless. He was also to illustrate a pamphlet by the anarchist thinker Kropotkin on *Anarchist Morality* and to provide illustrations to Grave's novel for children on the future society *Les Aventures de Nono* (1901). He also offered his works as prizes for fundraising raffles organised by *Les Temps Nouveaux* in 1899, 1900, 1908, and 1912, also presenting three water colours in 1909.

In 1898 Theo moved to Paris where he deepened his contacts with the Symbolist writers. By now Theo was himself moving away from divisionist techniques and his long and close friendship with Signac suffered as a result, especially when he moved to a classicist style which resulted in a final break in 1909.

Theo moved to Saint Clair on the Côte d'Azur in the south of France in 1911. There he built a house with his brother Octave and fellow painter and anarchist Henri-Edmond Cross. Division had been replaced by a freer use of brush strokes coupled with a more pronounced emphasis on light and weather conditions.

He died on December 13, 1926.

Fénéon wrote that his friend's greatest wish had been to live in a caravan, put on travelling exhibitions, and once successful, to burn all his paintings, to avoid speculation by art collectors. Ironically, most of his works are now in private collectors' hands.



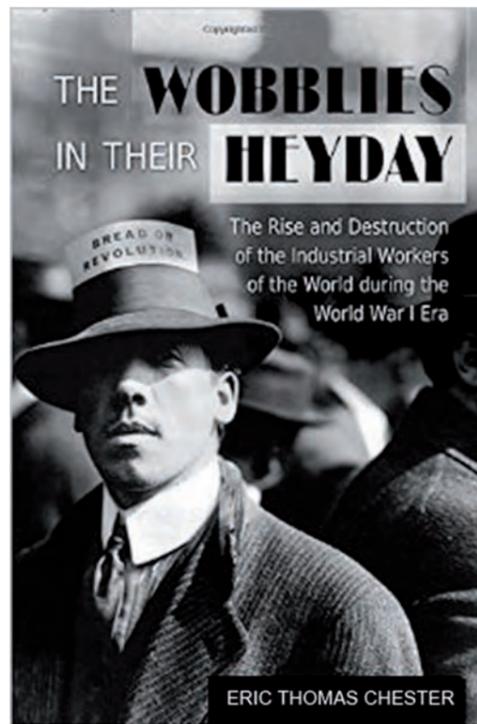
Elisée Reclus.

Book review

The Wobblies in their Heyday

The rise and destruction of the
Industrial Workers of the World
during the World War One Era.

by Eric Thomas Chester.
317 pages.
Praeger



This book is refreshing in that it is written by an actual member of the IWW, currently active in Glasgow and thus marks itself off from the usual detached academic approach.

The Industrial Workers of the World was a mass workers' organisation that emerged in 1905 in the USA. It soon gained the nickname of The Wobblies. It led two bitter strikes in Lawrence and Paterson in 1913 that established its radical and fighting reputation. Despite the Paterson and Lawrence strikes, it failed to get as much traction in the eastern States as it hoped. In the West it was a different matter. Here large numbers of miners, loggers, and farmworkers joined up to the IWW, some leaving the established unions for an organisation that openly proclaimed the abolition of the wage system: "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the means of production and abolish the wage system"

(from the IWW Preamble)

Chester is convinced that this radical stance led, not to failure as standard accounts maintain, but to many workers joining because they did indeed want to transform society.

With the coming of the First World War the IWW actually increased its influence, particularly in the Western states, where the war was unpopular. An economic boom accompanied and was indeed set off by the war, which raised the fighting morale of workers. By August 1917 IWW membership had increased to 150,000. Until the coming of the war the Federal government only regarded the IWW as an irritant. However this changed quickly once the United States had entered the War. In particular the IWW organisation of copper workers was seen as a threat because copper was essential for the war effort, as it was used in guns, bullets, vehicles, and warships. Government officials and advisers now began to focus on the IWW. John W. Davis, the solicitor general and acting attorney general, talked about the "extermination" of the IWW.

A relentless attack began on the IWW until it was greatly reduced in size and influence, and was rent by bitter divisions. The Federal Government also

attacked the Socialist Party of America, but this party did not have the organisational cohesion of the IWW.

Only particular sections of the SP, the most vociferously anti-war, were targeted, and the federal authorities did not aim at its destruction lock, stock, and barrel. Chester says: "The coordinated campaign of repression directed at the IWW was a unique occurrence in U.S. history. In the ferocity of the assault and the scope of the attack, the government's offensive on the IWW remains unequalled." In order to do this the U.S. Government flouted many civil liberties.

The book deals with the strike of copper miners in Bisbee, Arizona, which led to an unprecedented mass deportation of said strikers - 1200 in total! - in 1917 and the horrific lynching of IWW organiser Frank Little in Butte, Montana. Butte was the largest copper-mining area in the USA and Wobblies, in alliance with left-wing socialist miners, created a strong local workers organisation. In response, company gunmen and the Army bloodily intervened.

The IWW stance on the War is also dealt with in detail. The IWW had always opposed war and militarism, but its leadership now peddled a muted approach in the hope that this would deflect the mounting repression. It was militants like the martyred Frank Little who pushed for a clear anti-war stance.

In 1917 the Federal government, in coordination with state governments, made membership of the IWW a crime. The Army intervened in many areas, and soldiers were ordered to disrupt IWW meetings. The Post Office banned IWW papers in the mail. Some foreign members were arrested and deported. Hundreds of Wobblies were jailed with mass trials in Chicago, Sacramento, and Wichita. Many IWW leaders received long sentences at Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas, with punitive hard labour that affected their health.

As a result of this the IWW was crippled and weakened. Chester claims that in 1924 internal dissensions as a result of this repression, fostered by the authorities among the prisoners in Leavenworth, caused a damaging split.

But should we accept this scenario. Yes, there was bitterness between those who stood by a collective amnesty and those who obtained an individual one. But many other factors were at work with the 1924 disaster. Not least of these were the differences between the decentralisers and the centralisers within the IWW, between the local branches and the Industrial Unions and the General Executive Board and General Headquarters. Also in play were those IWW members who had now joined the Communist Party and who backed the centralisers. It should be borne in mind that the IWW had refused to join the Moscow-backed Red International of Labour Unions. As a result the American Communist Party worked actively towards the destruction of the IWW.



Some of Chester's other theses should be questioned too. He says that the IWW was wed to "the macho bravado" of the idea of sabotage as developed by French anarchists like Emile Pouget and supported by leading Wobblies like Big Bill Haywood. He claims this helped initiate the repression that came down on the IWW during the War. Sabotage was used in various ways to support strikes in the pre-WW1 period but really should it not be argued that the repression that the IWW suffered was because it was damaging the war effort, which Chester himself clearly states. Whether the IWW advocated sabotage or not was a by the by, as the Federal Government were looking for any excuse to attack it.

Did the IWW's failure to develop a clearer stance on the War have an effect on its ability to attract more support as Chester claims?

He asserts that anti-war feeling was strong in the Western states and that "millions of workers were looking to the IWW for leadership". Certainly Haywood and the General Executive Board refused to oppose the draft and refused to come out openly in support of draft resisters. But would the IWW have been able to act as an organising force for workers? Was anti-war feeling as strong as Chester claims?

Certainly whether the IWW adopted a clear anti-war position on all fronts, it was victimised because it affected the war effort full stop. As Chester argues, it would have been better to have taken a clear position to "uphold its commitment to building a social movement pointing to a new society".

Certainly whilst the repression against the IWW during WW1 was unprecedented, perhaps more could be made of the fact that this opened the way for a following wave of repression known as the Palmer Raids, in the period after the war. A. Mitchell Palmer, the new Attorney General launched a series of raids against radicals (and not primarily the Communist Party as Chester states but in particular anarchists) resulting in the deporting of 500 radicals from the USA, including anarchists like Emma Goldman.

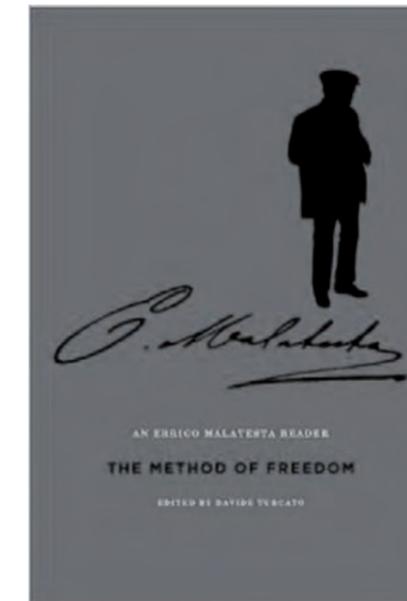
Perhaps also a comparison with the FBI Cointelpro campaign against Black Panthers, civil rights groups, the American Indian Movement etc. in the 1960s could have been made. There is much of interest in this book, in particular much information about the debates on the War within the IWW, and it certainly deserves a read, despite the criticisms made in this review.



Book review

The Method of Freedom

An Errico Malatesta Reader. edited
by David Turcato.
550 pages
AK Press



Davide Turcato has written on Errico Malatesta in his *Making Sense of Anarchism: Errico Malatesta's Experiments with Revolution, 1889-1900*, which came out in 2012. There he gave an overview of the career and political development of Malatesta. Now Turcato has compiled a collection of Malatesta's writings in this new book, which is an appetiser for the project of all of Malatesta's writings in ten volumes(!) to be also brought out by AK Press in the coming period.

Malatesta was one of the ablest militants of the international anarchist movement and he was active in it for more than sixty years. From his association with one of the founders of anarchism, the Russian Bakunin, within the first mass organisation of the working class, the First International, through his exile in Argentina, Egypt, and England, and on to his involvement in the revolutionary events in post-World War One Italy and his final house arrest by Mussolini and subsequent death, Malatesta maintained a more or less uninterrupted activity for the cause. He was above all distinguished by his pragmatism, his advocacy of effective organisation, his many articles for the anarchist press expressed in simple and uncomplicated language that explained often complex ideas.

Here indeed we have many articles on the problem of organisation. He again and again underlines the need for anarchists to create effective organisations

and to relate these organisations to the mass of the people. At the same time he emphasises the need to steer away from electoralism and the abandonment of the revolutionary road, just for "something to do" in the place of struggle.

Above all, he urges anarchists to immerse themselves in the daily struggles of the working class.

Whilst he welcomed the development of anarcho-syndicalist and revolutionary syndicalist organisations, he was all too aware of their shortcomings. He was one of the first to develop the idea of the General Strike as a revolutionary weapon as the result of his observation of the strikes in Britain in 1889. Whilst he lauded the effectiveness of this method he did not think it could be the be-all and end-all of revolutionary struggle. He does not confuse it with the social revolution itself, stating that "It would only be a splendid opportunity for making the Revolution, but nothing more." A general strike would have to be transformed and supplemented by revolutionary action.

The book contains many of his best known explanations of anarchism and of anarchist aims, including his *Anarchy*, *Towards Anarchy*, and *The Anarchist Programme*. His committed internationalism is revealed in his polemics against his old comrade Kropotkin, who took the side of the Allies in the First World War.

Similarly he addresses himself to the many problems of social revolution in his no-nonsense way. He outlines the problems that an unfolding revolution would face and how they could be overcome, whilst at the same time criticising Leninist concepts of revolution.

There is much here of value to both newcomers to the anarchist movement, and those who would like to learn more about anarchism, as well as veterans of the movement. Malatesta's ideas are argued in an uncomplicated and pragmatic way, and his grasp of strategy and his clear-headed approach are at all times apparent.

A valuable contribution to the renewal of the revolutionary anarchist project.

“BY ANARCHIST SPIRIT I MEAN THAT DEEPLY HUMAN SENTIMENT WHICH AIMS AT THE GOOD OF ALL FREEDOM AND JUSTICE FOR ALL SOLIDARITY AND LOVE FOR ALL WHICH IS NOT AN EXCLUSIVE CHARACTERISTIC OF SELF-DECLARED ANARCHISTS, BUT INSPIRES ALL PEOPLE WHO HAVE A GENEROUS HEART AND AN OPEN MIND”



Obituary: Colin Parker

1948--2015

by Nick Heath

Colin Parker was born in the pit village of Crook in Co. Durham on 15th December 1948. His father Martin was a miner. He apprenticed as a fitter-turner after leaving school at the age of fifteen. He worked as a lathe operator in the local factory owned by Marshall Richards, a manufacturer of wire and tube making machines.

At an early age he joined the local library and became an avid reader of books on politics, art and history. With three of his brothers he joined the local Labour Party and was associated with the Militant Tendency within it. He and his brothers were expelled for confronting a local Labour Party official, Colin being the most vociferous of all. He subsequently joined the Communist Party.

He was sponsored by his union to attend Ruskin College in Oxford in 1969. After the end of the course he moved to London to study a politics degree at East London Polytechnic. He then went to the London School of Economics and got an MA in politics in 1974.

The following year he took a teacher training course and in 1976 became a teacher at Barking College of Further Education where he worked until his retirement in his early sixties. As his son Martin noted: "He aimed to reach out and empower working

class people to achieve greater educational success and get more from their lives". In the meantime he had left the CP and flirted with various Trotskyist groups. The Workers Revolutionary Party considered him an important enough catch to send around Vanessa Redgrave to his council flat in central London, but he was not convinced. He then attended Socialist Workers Party branch meetings but started asking too many questions about their politics. All of this was part of his evolution towards class struggle anarchism.

He began producing a duplicated magazine named *Virus* and subtitled *For Militant Anarchism* in 1984 during the height of the miners' strike. He contacted



19 year old apprentice Colin Parker operates a Broadbent Schofield lathe with 4 ft. chuck.

the Libertarian Communist Discussion Group the following year and suggested that Virus become the mouthpiece of the Group. Regular meetings were held at Colin's flat and a network of contacts was built up around Britain, leading to the founding of the Anarchist Communist Federation in March 1986.

He was active in the ACF, subsequently renamed the Anarchist Federation, until his death.

He took an active part in support for the miners' strike and then attended many demonstrations during the Wapping printers struggle. He threw himself into the struggle against the Poll Tax and refused to pay. He was arrested during an anti-Poll Tax demo and subsequently fined. He was a stalwart of the London group of the AF for many years, always warmly welcoming new contacts and providing an uncomplicated introduction to its ideas.

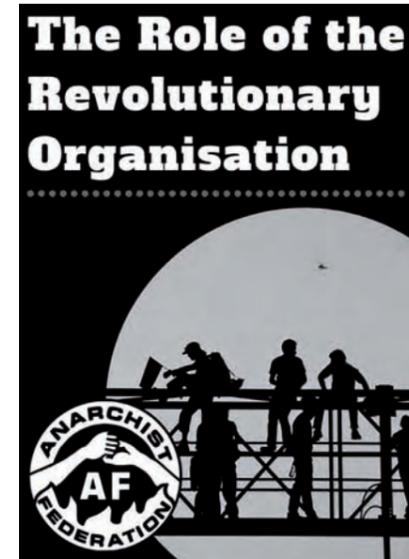
After his retirement he returned to Crook. He died as a result of a brain aneurism on January 22nd 2015.

He passionately hated the police, the various Leninist outfits, and former radicals who had sold out, which included some of his workmates who had accepted management positions. He remained devoted to revolutionary anarchist ideas to the end.

He was a warm and generous person, with a wide knowledge of politics, history and art, which he had acquired through his own reading. I was fortunate enough to have him as a close friend and comrade for thirty years. His death has come as both a loss to me personally, to the AF and anarchism.



Pamphlets



We in the Anarchist Federation seek the abolition of capitalism and state in favour of bringing about a society based on the guiding principle 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.' This is anarchist communism. In order to achieve this we need a revolutionary organisation to undertake a certain role as part of the working class. All libertarian revolutionaries should read this fundamental text.

Read/download free online or order a print copy (£1.00 +p&p).
Translations of an older edition of The Role of the Revolutionary Organisation is also available in French: Le rôle de l'organisation révolutionnaire, and Serbo-Croat (print-only).

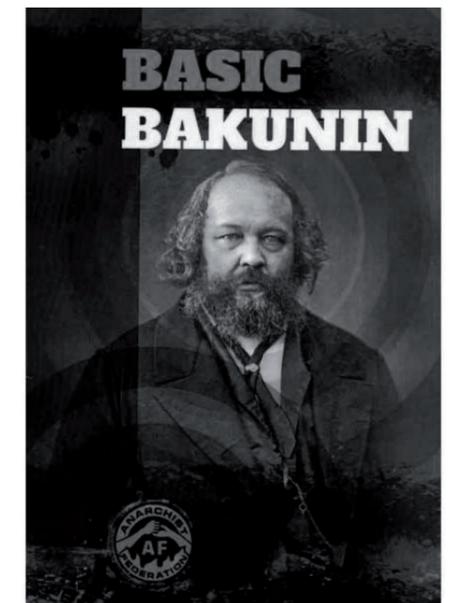
Introduction to Anarchist Communism

Anarchist Federation



The main text lays out the fundamental ideas of anarchist communism. It is a really good overview of the politics of the Anarchist Federation. Various insets throughout the text give examples from history to illustrate the ideas described in the main section.

Printed copies £2.00 +p&p.



This 2014 fully updated 4th edition of our first ever pamphlet outlines the ideas of one of the 19th century founders of class struggle anarchism whose birthday was 200 years ago.

£1.50 +p&p.

Aims and Principles of Afed

1 The Anarchist Federation is an organisation of revolutionary class struggle anarchists. We aim for the abolition of all hierarchy, and work for the creation of a world-wide classless society: anarchist communism.

2 Capitalism is based on the exploitation of the working class by the ruling class. But inequality and exploitation are also expressed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, health, ability and age, and in these ways one section of the working class oppresses another. This divides us, causing a lack of class unity in struggle that benefits the ruling class. Oppressed groups are strengthened by autonomous action which challenges social and economic power relationships. To achieve our goal we must relinquish power over each other on a personal as well as a political level.

3 We believe that fighting systems of oppression that divide the working class, such as racism and sexism, is essential to class struggle. Anarchist-Communism cannot be achieved while these inequalities still exist. In order to be effective in our various struggles against oppression, both within society and within the working class, we at times need to organise independently as people who are oppressed according to gender, sexuality, ethnicity or ability. We do this as working class people, as cross-class movements hide real class differences and achieve little for us. Full emancipation cannot be achieved without the abolition of capitalism.

4 We are opposed to the ideology of national liberation movements which claims that there is some common interest between native bosses and the working class in face of foreign domination. We do support working class struggles against racism, genocide, ethnocide and political and economic colonialism. We oppose the creation of any new ruling class. We reject all forms of nationalism, as this only serves to redefine divisions in the international working class. The working class has no country and national boundaries must be eliminated. We seek to build an anarchist international to work with other libertarian revolutionaries throughout the world.

5 As well as exploiting and oppressing the majority of people, Capitalism threatens the world through war and the destruction of the environment.

6 It is not possible to abolish Capitalism without a revolution, which will arise out of class conflict. The ruling class must be completely overthrown to achieve anarchist communism. Because the ruling class will not relinquish power without their use of armed force, this revolution will be a time of violence as well as liberation.

7 Unions by their very nature cannot become vehicles for the revolutionary transformation of society. They have to be accepted by capitalism in

order to function and so cannot play a part in its overthrow. Trades unions divide the working class (between employed and unemployed, trade and craft, skilled and unskilled, etc). Even syndicalist unions are constrained by the fundamental nature of unionism. The union has to be able to control its membership in order to make deals with management. Their aim, through negotiation, is to achieve a fairer form of exploitation of the workforce. The interests of leaders and representatives will always be different from ours. The boss class is our enemy, and while we must fight for better conditions from it, we have to realise that reforms we may achieve today may be taken away tomorrow. Our ultimate aim must be the complete abolition of wage slavery. Working within the unions can never achieve this. However, we do not argue for people to leave unions until they are made irrelevant by the revolutionary event. The union is a common point of departure for many workers. Rank and file initiatives may strengthen us in the battle for anarchist communism. What's important is that we organise ourselves collectively, arguing for workers to control struggles themselves.

8 Genuine liberation can only come about through the revolutionary self activity of the working class on a mass scale. An anarchist communist society means not only co-operation between equals, but active involvement in the shaping and creating of that society during and after the revolution. In times of upheaval and struggle, people will need to create their own revolutionary organisations controlled by everyone in them. These autonomous organisations will be outside the control of political parties, and within them we will learn many important lessons of self-activity.

9 As anarchists we organise in all areas of life to try to advance the revolutionary process. We believe a strong anarchist organisation is necessary to help us to this end. Unlike other so-called socialists or communists we do not want power or control for our organisation. We recognise that the revolution can only be carried out directly by the working class. However, the revolution must be preceded by organisations able to convince people of the anarchist communist alternative and method. We participate in struggle as anarchist communists, and organise on a federative basis. We reject sectarianism and work for a united revolutionary anarchist movement.

10 We oppose organised religion and cults and hold to a materialist analysis of capitalist society. We, the working class, can change society through our own efforts. Worshipping an unprovable spiritual realm, or believing in a religious unity between classes, mystifies or suppresses such self-emancipation/liberation. We reject any notion that people can be liberated through some kind of supernatural force. We work towards a society where religion is no longer relevant.