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Where They Retreat, We Must Advance
2005

Retrieved on 2020-04-12 from blackrosefed.org
Originally published in *The Northeastern Anarchist*, #10, Spring/Summer 2005 under the title "Where They Retreat, We Must Advance: Building Dual Power."

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Building Dual Power

Where They Retreat, We Must Advance

Wesley Morgan

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This is the general strategy, to attempt to create dual power in the public sector, to build autonomous, community-based, self-managed social infrastructure—schools, clinics, mutual aid organizations, perhaps hospitals one day—to help a create a revolutionary process of organizing without hierarchy or domination. Where the state has retreated, we must advance, and begin organizing to fill the gap in a liberatory manner, to build the revolutionary capacity and potential for an end to all forms of domination and hierarchy.

On a final note, however, I should add that, as anarchists, it is our duty to support all workers. However, in relation to these workers in the public sector, I would suggest that it is particularly important to support and organize. In doing so we should agitate and organize to begin to introduce radical critique and direct action where it is appropriate. In solidarity organizing, anarchists can begin to develop ties with workers in these sectors, and begin to discuss and organize dual power. It is also crucial to recognize that, in our capacity as revolutionary organizers, most of us don't have the skills or the knowledge to build these organizations from the ground up. Rather, in solidarity with workers who work in these sectors, we can begin to organize with them and their unions.

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schools, meal programs, and shoe programs. While the Black Panthers fell victim to their marginalization in ghetto communities, police repression, and internal power struggles that were partially related to the effects of the FBI's counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO), this model of community organization is one that still holds a great deal of potential. In the case of the Spanish anarchist movement in the 1930's, part of their strength relied upon the mutual aid societies, schools, and workers' centers that they organized. Indeed, a not insignificant proportion of the literate working class was educated in anarchist schools in Spain in the 1920's and 1930's. It should come as no surprise that after the Spanish revolution/civil war broke out, anarchist schools flourished—anarchists had a great deal of experience at organizing and running schools.

By advancing where the state has retreated, by beginning to create a community-based, self-managed, anti-State public sector, anarchists can begin to generate a broad-based movement that has the organizational capacity to create a fully self-managed society. The public sector is strategically crucial also because of the fact that these institutions would not only re-organize the work life of public workers, but they would also be central and tied into life in the community more generally. Moreover, it would begin to develop the revolutionary capacity of anarchists to manage public life more generally, through federated institutions that are genuinely democratic.

Unfortunately, anarchist attempts to create "dual power" through the creation of cooperatives often create what might be termed "market syndicalism." While these cooperatives are internally self-managing, they exist as units in a market economy, they still rely upon access to the market. Building an autonomous public sector begins to develop the practical revolutionary infrastructure to make not only the State, but also the market irrelevant in social life.

the State and the capitalist class are implicated in these reforms. Furthermore, the imposition of neo-liberalism has had a disproportionate effect on female workers, creating contradictions not only in terms of the class relations which these workers are drawn into, but also highlighting their subordination in a patriarchal division of labour. It is for these reasons that it was precisely these groups of workers who almost went on a General Strike in British Columbia (BC) this year. While bargaining with hospital workers the provincial government of BC not only attempted to engage in concession bargaining, they also aggressively pursued contracting out and privatization, causing lay-offs. When these workers went out on strike the government attempted to legislate them back to work. In response, provincial teachers, transit and ferry workers, mill, steel and forestry workers, garbage and city maintenance workers, as well as library, community and recreation centre employees came close to joining a general strike, before labour leaders negotiated a settlement that was widely condemned as a sell-out.

Openings: Potentials and Pitfalls for Dual Power

Anarchists have been active in fighting neo-liberalism, but we also have to recognize that capitalism in its less sophisticated form (i.e. neo-liberal versus welfare state models of capitalism) creates certain openings in revolutionary strategy. The withdrawal, or retreat, of the State from the public sector opens up the space for the creation of dual power, the organization of an autonomous, community-based public sector that is organized according to principles of self-management, an anti-State public sector.

It is difficult to understate the revolutionary effect of organizing to create, and support, self-managed community services. There are even examples of this in North America— the Black Panther Party, at their strongest, ran over 60 social programs, such as

> *"We will take or win all possible reforms with the same spirit that one tears occupied territory from the enemy's grasp in order to go on advancing, and we will always remain enemies of every government"* – Errico Malatesta

Reformists have been accused of sacrificing long-term goals to short-term expediency, and revolutionaries, on the other hand, have too often sacrificed the concerns of today to a vision of tomorrow. Building a revolutionary strategy means/implies thinking about how our short-term, medium-term, and long-term activities are linked, as what we do today influences what we do tomorrow.

Questions of Strategy

Questions of strategy loom large in anarchist discussions, as do concerns regarding our marginalization as a movement — I am sure that there are no anarchists who have not been told that anarchism is "just not possible". Moreover, revolutionary groups face an uphill battle because most revolutionary situations have led, in the end, to tyranny. In the chaos that often follows revolutions, so-called revolutionary groups have generally re-created the institutional life of the "Old Regime".

Abstract promises of a grand liberatory revolution are simply not sufficient. While I am a committed anarchist, I cannot fault people who see an anarchist revolution as unachievable. Social domination structures our experience so systematically that it begins to acquire a "facticity", it appears to be "just the way things are done". It is very sensible and practical not to worry about changing things that you can do little about, like the weather. We always make decisions within the context of external constraint, getting on with life means accepting these constraints and making decisions within those limits. Because domination is so pervasive, addressing it literally involves a revolution, it requires fundamental changes in the

way that we organize our social, political, and economic institutions. If we reject domination, which is the basis for the dictatorial "one-man rule" model of workplace organization[1], the ability of a person to control others on the basis of a specific organizational role, what do we have? How will things get done? Does it mean breaking society apart and going off to live in the woods? In contrast to "one-man rule," advocates of self-management have long advanced radically democratic models of workplace organization.

The Experience of Self-Management

For most sensible people, however, self-management might be a nice idea, but it is simply not possible, domination is just "how things get done." All individuals construct their frameworks of interpretation and understanding in terms of their concrete, material experiences. The compelling force of a lifetime of direct experience with authority suggests that authority is necessary, although unpleasant. People might think that it would be nice to sprout wings out of their backs and fly around, but their materially-rooted interpretive frameworks, based upon concrete, material experience tell them that this is unlikely to happen. Unfortunately, for many, self-management goes into the same category. It is noteworthy, in this context, that a study of attitudes towards workplace democracy found that for both managers and workers the single greatest predictor of support for workplace democracy was experience with workplace democracy (Collom, 2003: 88). Why? Because people who have experienced workplace democracy have had the experience of democratic workplace relations actually working. Revolutionaries, anarchist communists in particular, need to offer more than dreams and critiques of the status quo. These creative and critical skills are necessary but not sufficient. The challenge lies in building practical, livable alternatives. The only thing that can

[1] As a key form of social organization

the public sector, these values, commitments, and allegiances are drawn into active contradiction with the pursuit of profit.

It seems that, in general, when work in the caring sectors of the economy is subjected to market mechanisms, the priority shifts from the provision of service and building relationships with members of the public to the maximization of profit. Performing caring labour is taxing both in terms of the time it requires and the emotional investment it involves. However, profit mechanisms reorient workplace priorities to ensure that workers who perform caring labour spend less time with the individuals that they are working with—spending less time with more patients is more profitable than spending more time with fewer patients. Both the quality of care that these workers are able to deliver, as well as the quality of the work life of these workers, decline as neo-liberal managers reorganize work. Throughout this sector of the economy these largely female groups of workers are seeing their work intensify dramatically, their earnings stagnate or decline, and their ability to care for the people they work with also decline. In these situations, burnout becomes increasingly common and endemic, and attempting to care for the public becomes more and more difficult. As a clerical worker who was involved at a staff strike at McMaster University put it, "it wasn't about people anymore, it was a business, it was about making a profit." Neo-liberal restructuring of the public sector creates a contradiction between the work that these workers want to do and their ability to do it, and because of this, it has begun to create not only an a-capitalist ethic, but an anti-capitalist ethic among these groups of workers.

As capitalists and politicians re-structure the public sector according to the demands of the market, and as these market mechanisms undermine the ability of public sector workers to engage in caring labour, it is the operation of the market itself that becomes problematic, and the profit-motive is increasingly identified as the source of crises in the daily labour of these workers. It is through the State that these reforms are being imposed, meaning that both

The Present Context and Conjuncture

While this discussion has been focused at the level of general revolutionary principles, these general principles are only meaningful when they are applied to specific historical contexts. At this juncture, we are living in a period where neo-liberalism has been bringing back the aggressive forms of capitalism that had created such militant struggles as those of the IWW a century ago. Indeed, many of the issues are similar, such as the use and abuse of temporary workers, the marginalization of whole groups of workers in the economy, and basic trade union freedoms.

In the last 30 years in particular, the State and the capitalist class have acted in a highly coordinated fashion, causing the on-going breakdown of the "class compromise" of the post-WWII period. In this process we have seen the disciplining of the industrial working class and the creation of the "rust belt" in Canada and the USA. However, at the same time, in the post-WWII class compromise (i.e. the welfare state), a large public sector was created—healthcare, education, social services—and all of these areas are increasingly being cut adrift by the state, often being privatized. Even in the cases where the jobs in these sectors remain public, quasi-market reforms are introduced.

Neo-liberal reforms have had the general effect of creating real contradictions in the lives of public sector workers. In the era of the welfare state these areas of the economy were made part of the public sector, and these jobs were ones that tended to revolve around the provision of "caring" for members of the public (i.e. nurses, teachers, etc). While there are real differences between the labour processes of public sector workers, in general the labour processes associated with caring labour in the public sector have created loyalties, commitments, and allegiances that reflect the caring orientation of most of these jobs. These values, commitments, and allegiances were not anti-capitalist when they existed alongside the private sector. However, when market mechanisms are imposed in

puncture the hegemony of dictatorial workplace ideologies is concrete, material, living proof of democratic workplaces, and practical experience with these modes of organizing. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words, and what might be termed the "propaganda value" of dual power[2] organizations is crucial in building a strong, broadly based mass movement. If anarchists can actually show people that self-management works, then we can be taken seriously when we agitate for a self-managed society.

Infrastructure of Revolution

However, beyond the "propaganda value" of dual power organizations, dual power is an essential element of going beyond an insurrectionary politics, towards a more broadly revolutionary politics. Beyond practically demonstrating that self-management works, building dual power organizations is valuable because it begins to develop the infrastructure of the revolution, to create the active capacity for self-management. As Errico Malatesta suggests,

"...the origin and justification for authority lies in social disorganization. When a community has needs and its members do not know how to organize spontaneously to provide them, someone comes forward, an authority who satisfies those needs by utilizing the services of all and directing them to his liking ...organization, far from creating authority, is the only cure for it and the only means whereby each one of us will get used to taking an active and conscious part in collective work, and cease to be passive instruments in the hands of leaders." (1965: 86)

Social structure and organization are both crucial because an industrial society requires a high degree of coordination, which involves a great deal of complex organization. In every insurrec-

[2] That is to say, practical institutions, which are organized in a revolutionary fashion, that are autonomous from, and opposed to, capital and the State.

tionary moment that we can observe, chaos and difficulties centering on issues of coordination were acute in the opening phases of the revolution. In each case, purportedly revolutionary juntas recreated the institutional structure of the "Old Regime". As deeply flawed as the "Old Regime" was, as much as these groups railed against it, they re-created it because at least it got things done. As Malatesta suggests to us, this is only to be expected. Unless revolutionaries have practical solutions, and have already begun to be able to provide revolutionary means of re-organizing social life, in all of its concrete details, chaos will ensue the insurrection. In general, in times of uncertainty people naturally fall back on what they know, their sense of "how things get done".

In particular, a recurrent theme of revolutionary crisis centers around problems with supplies and the transportation of raw materials and important goods. In both the French and Russian Revolutions, the problem of getting food from the countryside into the cities was acute, to say the least. The Bolshevik's New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 re-introduced capitalistic reforms in the context of a bureaucratic and authoritarian state- not unlike the basic relations of production that marked the Czarist era (Pollack, 1959: 61). As bad as this arrangement was, and as much as they had ideologically railed against the exact same things under the Czar, the Bolsheviks found that this bureaucratic, or state capitalism[3], at least formed a basis for social coordination. Franz Schurmann reported that the land reforms introduced in the Maoist era were comparable with traditional imperial forms, with the collectives and communes resembling patterns of state control and militarization of the peasantry in projects of corvee labour in imperial China (cited in Rapp, 2001: 15). In fact, he compares the Maoist rural collectivization policies with the military farms policy, or tuntian, of imperial China (14). In the Spanish Revolution, problems of coordination proved problematic, specifically centering around exchange. In some regions of Spain, they tried to abolish money altogether, but found themselves resorting either to rationing of one sort or another, or the production of local currencies. Once again, in a problematic situation, they fell back upon the old routines which were familiar, and which coordinated action in the past.

[3] Lenin, incidentally, coined this term himself for the purposes of describing Bolshevist Russia.

It is not sufficient to create a negative contradiction within society, that is, to create a revolutionary rupture through organized opposition. This is necessary, but not sufficient. It is necessary to move from an insurrectionary strategy, focused on the creation of a negative contradiction (against all forms of social domination), to a revolutionary strategy, the creation of a positive contradiction. As I suggested, times of crisis tend to breed reaction more than they breed revolution, as people will fall back on what they are familiar with—social organization based on authoritarianism. Indeed, one of the key crises of capitalism in the last century was the Great Depression, which gave rise not to an international proletarian revolution but Fascism. We need not only a strong oppositional movement, but we need to be able to organize social life on a self-managed basis, to provide the practical basis for a revolutionary society. Indeed, Malatesta suggested that not only must revolutionaries be able to maintain social production, but we must be able to increase production, to eliminate poverty[4]. To fail to do so is to breed counter-revolution and reaction, as post-insurrectionary chaos breeds uncertainty. In this context, there is a general tendency to revert back to the old ways of doing things (i.e. through authoritarian institutions), as these old solutions may be problematic, but they at least coordinate social life on a day-to-day basis.

[4] Of course, this does not mean the mindless pursuit of productivity gains, the very nature of production needs to change in the process, away from profit and towards need.