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James Hutchings

Leninism and Anarchism

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This article has some specifically Australian references. Also, people might take issue with my description of the Zapatsitas as anarchist-inspired.

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There are two kinds of revolutionary socialism: Leninism or Trotskyism, and anarchism. Leninists believe in forming a “vanguard party”, of the most “advanced” sections of the people. The idea is that the vanguard will lead the workers to revolution, and take power in their name, setting up a “workers’ State”, which will “wither away” over time. But anarchists say that no one should take power. Any workers’ State would turn into another tyranny, as in Russia. Instead, we should abolish inequality directly. Anarchists are against any inequality in revolutionary groups — no Branch Committees, National Secretaries etc. Everyone should have an equal say in the group. Anarchists see revolution as being led not by a vanguard party but by the workers themselves. An anarchist’s job is encouraging and helping to defend a revolution — not running it. Some examples of anarchist-oriented groups are: the I.W.W. (a revolutionary union), the CNT in the Spanish Revolution (still a major union bloc in Spain), and the Situationists, influential in the May ’68 uprising in Paris. Today, the Mexican Zapatistas are the best-known anarchist-inspired group. The most common arguments against anarchism are as follows.

Anarchists are Racist, Sexist etc: Leninists usually “prove” this by finding a quote from Bakunin or Kropotkin (major anarchist writers). Neither Bakunin nor Kropotkin were anarchists all their life. Bakunin started out as a Slavic nationalist. So, there are heaps of quotes which “prove” that anarchists are nationalists. Also, anarchists aren’t “Bakuninists” or “Kropotkinists”. Anarchist ideas come from all sorts of people (including Marx). Anarchists don’t say Bakunin or Kropotkin had it all right: we agree with them on some things and not on others. People should work out their own ideas, not follow anyone — Bakunin, Marx or Trotsky.

Anarchists Ignore the Differences Between Trotsky and Stalin: In 1921, the workers of Kronstadt rose up against the Bolsheviks, demanding an end to the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks, freedom of speech for all revolutionary socialists, and so on. They voted to share their rations equally (the Bolsheviks had a system of different grades of ration). Trotsky ordered the Red Army to “shoot them down like partridges”. The Red Army went into battle with guns at their back, for fear that they would change sides. Trotsky and Lenin said the

uprising was a Tsarist plot! Trotsky also believed that the government should conscript people to work gangs — in “Terrorism and Communism”, he wrote that compulsory labour was “quite unquestionable”. He also believed in revolutionary groups based on “the leadership’s organised distrust of the members, manifesting itself in vigilant control, from above, of the party” (quoted in Deutscher’s “The Prophet Armed”).

What’s a revolution meant to do — free workers, or shoot them for going against a dictatorship?

Anarchism is Utopian, Leninism is Scientific: This is a quote from Bakunin, made in the 1870s — “But, the Marxists say, this minority [the government of the “workers’ State”] will consist of workers. Yes indeed, but of ex-workers who . . . cease to be workers. And from the heights of the State they begin to look down upon the whole common world of the workers. From that time on they represent not the people but themselves” (from “Statism and Anarchy”).

Isn’t that what happened? It’s utopian to expect a few people to have so much power and not end up with a tyranny.

Anarchism is “Petty Bourgeois”: Were the I.W.W “petty bourgeois”? What about the Spanish Revolution? It’s not bourgeois to want freedom, despite Lenin’s claim that “freedom is a bourgeois prejudice”.

Anarchism is Disorganised: Recently, we brought out the anarchist and ex-Black Panther Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin on a speaking tour. We held all the talks scheduled, plus some extra ones, even though the government arrested, bashed, and tried to deport him. We wouldn’t have been able to do that if we were disorganised. Actually, anarchist groups can be more organised. You don’t get the same kind of power struggles, splits and expulsions that characterise Leninist groups. None of us are any cleverer than any of you. We don’t need a Branch Committee to organise — neither do you.

What about you? Do you think that freedom is bourgeois? Do you think that Bakunin’s prediction came true? Do you find that everyone has an equal say in your group, or are there leaders and followers? Is your group open and democratic, or do they kick anyone out who questions the party line? And who sets the party line anyway? If we can organise without a National Committee,

why can’t you? It doesn’t matter what you call yourself — anarchist, socialist, communist or whatever. What matters is the ideas, not the labels. If you agree with what I’ve said, or some of it — are you on the right side?