

Do Anarchists Reject “Class Conflict” & “Collective Struggle”?

An Anarchist FAQ



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ish them... labour’s emancipation means at the same time the redemption of the whole of society.” He stressed that **“only the right organisation of the workers can accomplish what we are striving for... Organisation from the bottom up, beginning with the shop and factory, on the foundation of the joint interests of the workers everywhere... alone can solve the labour question and serve the true emancipation of man[kind].”** [What is Anarchism?, p. 187 and p. 207]

As can be seen, the claim that Kropotkin or Bakunin, or anarchists in general, ignored the class struggle and collective working class struggle and organisation is either a lie or indicates ignorance. Clearly, anarchists have placed working class struggle, organisation and collective direct action and solidarity at the core of their politics (and as the means of creating a libertarian socialist society) from the start. Moreover, this perspective is reflected in the anarchist flag itself as we discuss in our appendix on the symbols of anarchism. According to Louise Michel the *“black flag is the flag of strikes.”* [The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel, p. 168] If anarchism does, as some Marxists assert, reject class conflict and collective struggle then using a flag associated with an action which expresses both seems somewhat paradoxical. However, for those with even a basic understanding of anarchism and its history there is no paradox as anarchism is obviously based on class conflict and collective struggle.

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Of course not. Anarchists have always taken a keen interest in the class struggle, in the organisation, solidarity and actions of working class people. Anarchist Nicholas Walter summarised the obvious and is worth quoting at length:

“Virtually all forms of revolutionary socialism during the nineteenth century, whether authoritarian or libertarian, were based on the concept of class struggle... The term anarchist was first adopted by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in 1840, and although he disliked the class struggle, he recognised it existed, and took sides in it when he had to... during the French Revolution of 1848, he insisted that he was on the side of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie... his last book was a positive study of the need for specially proletarian politics...”

“The actual anarchist movement was founded later, by the anti-authoritarian sections of the First International... They accepted [its] founding Address..., drafted by Karl Marx, which assumed the primacy of the class struggle and insisted that ‘the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves’; they accepted the Programme of the International Alliance of Social Democracy (1869), drafted by Michael Bakunin, which assumed the primacy of the class struggle... and they accepted the declaration of the St. Imier Congress which assumed the primacy of the class struggle and insisted that ‘rejecting all compromise to arrive at the accomplishment of the social revolution, the proletarians of all countries must establish, outside all bourgeois politics, the solidarity of revolutionary action’... This was certainly the first anarchist movement, and this movement was certainly based on a libertarian version of the concept of the class struggle.”

“Most of the leaders of this movement - first Michael Bakunin, James Guillaume, Errico Malatesta, Carlo Caliero, later Peter Kropotkin, Louise Michel, Emile Pouget, Jean Grave, and so on - took for granted that there was a struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie and that the social revolution would be conducted by the former against the latter. They derived such ideas... from the traditional theory of revolutionary socialism and the traditional practice of working-class action...”

“The great revolutions of the early twentieth century - in Mexico, Russia, Spain - all derived from the class struggle and all involved anarchist intervention on the side of the working class. The great martyrs of the anarchist

And Pat Stack argues that Kropotkin did not see *“class conflict as the dynamic for social change,”* nor *“class conflict”* as *“the motor of change”* and the working class *“not the agent and collective struggle not the means”!* Truly incredible and a total and utter distortion of Kropotkin’s ideas on the subject.

As for other anarchists, we discover the same concern over class conflict, collective struggle and organisation and the awareness of a mass social revolution by the working class. Emma Goldman, for example, argued that anarchism *“stands for direct action”* and that *“[t]rade unionism, the economic area of the modern gladiator, owes its existence to direct action... In France, in Spain, in Italy, in Russian, nay even in England (witness the growing rebellion of English labour unions), direct, revolutionary economic action has become so strong a force in the battle for industrial liberty as to make the world realise the tremendous importance of labour’s power. The General Strike [is] the supreme expression of the economic consciousness of the workers... Today every great strike, in order to win, must realise the importance of the solidaric general protest.”* [Anarchism and Other Essays, pp. 65-6] She placed collective class struggle at the centre of her ideas and, crucially, she saw it as the way to create an anarchist society:

“It is this war of classes that we must concentrate upon, and in that connection the war against false values, against evil institutions, against all social atrocities. Those who appreciate the urgent need of co-operating in great struggles... must organise the preparedness of the masses for the overthrow of both capitalism and the state. Industrial and economic preparedness is what the workers need. That alone leads to revolution at the bottom... That alone will give the people the means to take their children out of the slums, out of the sweat shops and the cotton mills... That alone leads to economic and social freedom, and does away with all wars, all crimes, and all injustice.” [Red Emma Speaks, pp. 355-6]

For Malatesta, *“the most powerful force for social transformation is the working class movement... Through the organisations established for the defence of their interests, workers acquire an awareness of the oppression under which they live and of the antagonisms which divide them from their employers, and so begin to aspire to a better life, get used to collective struggle and to solidarity.”* This meant that anarchists *“must recognise the usefulness and importance of the workers’ movement, must favour its development, and make it one of the levers of their action, doing all they can so that it... will culminate in a social revolution.”* Anarchists must *“deepen the chasm between capitalists and wage-slaves, between rulers and ruled; preach expropriation of private property and the destruction of State.”* The new society would be organised *“by means of free association and federations of producers and consumers.”* [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 113, pp. 250-1 and p. 184] Alexander Berkman, unsurprisingly, argued the same thing. As he put it, only *“the workers”* as *“the worst victims of present institutions,”* could abolish capitalism and the state as *“it is to their own interest to abol-*

Far from denying the importance of collective class struggle, he actually stressed it again and again. As he once wrote, “to make the revolution, the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this.” He argued that it was “a question of organising societies of resistance for all trades in each town, of creating resistance funds against the exploiters, of giving more solidarity to the workers’ organisations of each town and of putting them in contact with those of other towns, of federating them... Workers’ solidarity must no longer be an empty word by practised each day between all trades and all nations.” [quoted by Cahm, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 255-6]

As can be seen, Kropotkin was well aware of the importance of popular, mass, struggles. As he put it, anarchists “know very well that any popular movement is a step towards the social revolution. It awakens the spirit of revolt, it makes men [and women] accustomed to seeing the established order (or rather the established disorder) as eminently unstable.” [Words of a Rebel, p. 203] As regards the social revolution, he argues that “a decisive blow will have to be administered to private property: from the beginning, the workers will have to proceed to take over all social wealth so as to put it into common ownership. This revolution can only be carried out by the workers themselves.” In order to do this, the masses have to build their own organisation as the “great mass of workers will not only have to constitute itself outside the bourgeoisie... it will have to take action of its own during the period which will precede the revolution... and this sort of action can only be carried out when a strong **workers’ organisation** exists.” This meant, of course, it was “the mass of workers we have to seek to organise. We... have to submerge ourselves in the organisation of the people... When the mass of workers is organised and we are with it to strengthen its revolutionary idea, to make the spirit of revolt against capital germinate there... then it will be the social revolution.” [quoted by Caroline Cahm, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 153-4]

He saw the class struggle in terms of “a multitude of acts of revolt in all countries, under all possible conditions: first, individual revolt against capital and State; then collective revolt - strikes and working-class insurrections - both preparing, in men’s minds as in actions, a revolt of the masses, a revolution.” Clearly, the mass, collective nature of social change was not lost on Kropotkin who pointed to a “multitude of risings of working masses and peasants” as a positive sign. Strikes, he argued, “were once ‘a war of folded arms’” but now were “easily turning to revolt, and sometimes taking the proportions of vast insurrections.” [Anarchism, p. 144]

Kropotkin could not have been clearer. Somewhat ironically, given Stack’s assertions, Kropotkin explicitly opposed the Marxism of his time (Social Democracy) precisely **because** it had “moved away from a pure labour movement, in the sense of a direct struggle against capitalists by means of strikes, unions, and so forth.” The Marxists, he stated, opposed strikes and unions because they “diverted forces from electoral agitation” while anarchists “reject[ed] a narrowly political struggle [and] inevitably became a more revolutionary party, both in theory and in practice.” [The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings, pp. 207-8, p. 208 and p. 209]

movement - from Haymarket in 1887 through Francisco Ferrer in 1909 to Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 - were killed in the class struggle. The great partisans of anarchist warfare - from Emiliano Zapata through Nestor Makhno to Buenaventura Durruti - were all fighting in the class struggle.

“So... class struggle in anarchism... [and] its importance in the anarchist movement is incontrovertible.” [The Anarchist Past and other essays, pp. 60-2]

Anyone even remotely aware of anarchism and its history could not fail to notice that class struggle plays a key role in anarchist theory, particularly (but not exclusively) in its revolutionary form. To assert otherwise is simply to lie about anarchism. Sadly, Marxists have been known to make such an assertion.

For example, Pat Stack of the British SWP argued that anarchists “dismiss... the importance of the collective nature of change” and so “downplays the centrality of the working class” in the revolutionary process. This, he argues, means that for anarchism the working class “is not the key to change.” He stresses that for Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin “revolutions were not about... collective struggle or advance” and that anarchism “despises the collectivity.” Amazingly he argues that for Kropotkin, “far from seeing class conflict as the dynamic for social change as Marx did, saw co-operation being at the root of the social process.” Therefore, “[i]t follows that if class conflict is not the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means. Therefore everything from riot to bomb, and all that might become between the two, was legitimate when ranged against the state, each with equal merit.” [“Anarchy in the UK?”, *Socialist Review*, no. 246] Needless to say, he makes the usual exception for anarcho-sindicalists, thereby showing his total ignorance of anarchism **and** syndicalism (see section H.2.8).

Assertions like these are simply incredible. It is hard to believe that anyone who is a leading member of a Leninist party could write such nonsense which suggests that Stack is aware of the truth and simply decides to ignore it. All in all, it is **very** easy to refute these assertions. All we have to do is, unlike Stack, to quote from the works of Bakunin, Kropotkin and other anarchists. Even the briefest familiarity with the writings of revolutionary anarchism would soon convince the reader that Stack really does not know what he is talking about.

Take, for example, Bakunin. Rather than reject class conflict, collective struggle or the key role of the working class, Bakunin based his political ideas on all three. As he put it, there was, “between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, an irreconcilable antagonism which results inevitably from their respective stations in life.” He stressed that “war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable” and would only end with the “abolition of the bourgeoisie as a distinct class.” In order for the worker to “become strong” he “must unite” with other workers in “the union of all local and national workers’ associations into a world-wide association, **the great International Working-Men’s Association.**” It was only “through practice and collective experience” and “the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle [that] will bring [the worker] more to recog-

nise his [or her] true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes.” There was “but a single path, that of **emancipation through practical action**” which “has only one meaning. It means workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means **trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds.**” Then, “when the revolution - brought about by the force of circumstances - breaks out, the International will be a real force and know what it has to do”, namely to “take the revolution into its own hands” and become “an earnest international organisation of workers’ associations from all countries” which will be “capable of replacing this departing political world of States and bourgeoisie.” [The Basic Bakunin, pp. 97-8, p. 103 and p. 110]

Hardly the words of a man who rejected class conflict, the working class and the collective nature of change! Nor is this an isolated argument from Bakunin, it recurs continuously throughout Bakunin’s works. For Bakunin, the “initiative in the new movement will belong to the people... in Western Europe, to the city and factory workers - in Russia, Poland, and most of the Slavic countries, to the peasants.” However, “in order that the peasants rise up, it is absolutely necessary that the initiative in this revolutionary movement be taken up by the city workers... who combine in themselves the instincts, ideas, and conscious will of the Social Revolution.” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, p. 375] Similarly, he argued that “equality” was the “aim” of the International Workers’ Association and “the organisation of the working class its strength, the unification of the proletariat the world over... its weapon, its only policy.” He stressed that “to create a people’s force capable of crushing the military and civil force of the State, it is necessary to organise the proletariat.” [quoted by K.J. Kenafick, Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx, p. 95 and p. 254]

Strikes played a very important role in Bakunin’s ideas (as they do in all revolutionary anarchist thought). He saw the strike as “the beginnings of the social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie... Strikes are a valuable instrument from two points of view. Firstly, they electrify the masses... awaken in them the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie... secondly they help immensely to provoke and establish between the workers of all trades, localities and countries the consciousness and very fact of solidarity: a twofold action, both negative and positive, which tends to constitute directly the new world of the proletariat, opposing it almost in an absolute way to the bourgeois world.” [quoted by Caroline Cahm, Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886, pp. 216-217] For Bakunin, strikes train workers for social revolution as they “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.” [The Political Philosophy of Bakunin, pp. 384-5]

The revolution would be “an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward.” [Statism and Anarchy, p. 179] As we argue in section I.2.3, the very process of collective class struggle would, for Bakunin and other anarchists, create the basis of a free society. Thus, in Bakunin’s

eyes, the “future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.” [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, p. 206]

In other words, the basic structure created by the revolution would be based on the working classes own combat organisations, as created in their struggles against oppression and exploitation. The link between present and future would be labour unions (workers’ associations), which played the key role of both the means to abolish capitalism and the state and as the framework of a socialist society. For Bakunin, the “very essence of socialism” lies in “the irrepressible conflict between the workers and the exploiters of labour.” A “living, powerful, socialist movement” can “be made a reality only by the awakened revolutionary consciousness, the collective will, and the organisation of the working masses themselves.” [Bakunin on Anarchism, p. 191 and p. 212] Therefore, it was essential to “[o]rganise always more and more the practical militant international solidarity of the toilers of all trades and of all countries, and remember... you will find an immense, an irresistible force in this universal collectivity.” Hence Bakunin’s support for self-discipline within self-managed organisations, which came directly from his awareness of the **collective** nature of social change: “Today, in revolutionary action as in labour itself, collectivism must replace individualism. Understand clearly that in organising yourselves you will be stronger than all the political leaders in the world.” [quoted by Kenafick, Op. Cit., p. 291 and p. 244]

All of which is quite impressive for someone who was a founding father of a theory which, according to Stack, downplayed the “centrality of the working class,” argued that the working class was “not the key to change,” dismissed “the importance of the collective nature of change” as well as “collective struggle or advance” and “despises the collectivity”! Clearly, to argue that Bakunin held any of these views simply shows that the person making such statements does not have a clue what they are talking about.

The same, needless to say, applies to all revolutionary anarchists. Kropotkin built upon Bakunin’s arguments and, like him, based his politics on collective working class struggle and organisation. He consistently stressed that “the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers’ organisations which carry on the **direct** struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector - the State.” Such struggle, “better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.” [Evolution and Environment, pp. 82-3] In his article on “Anarchism” for the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Kropotkin stressed that anarchists “have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.” [Anarchism, p. 287]