



THROUGH CLASS UNITY AND RESISTANCE

Freedom

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Free or Donation

Freedom without Socialism is Privilege, Injustice
Socialism without Freedom is Slavery, Brutality - BAKUNIN

Against Parliament - For Anarchism

Why Anarchists Oppose Parliament

We are constantly told that we live in a free society. The guarantee of this "freedom" is said to be the parliamentary system. This allows us to elect representatives who govern the country in our name, and who are answerable to us. That, at least, is the theory.

This system had its beginnings in England in a body that only represented feudal nobles, and evolved into one which represented land-owning and agricultural interests more generally. There was no pretence that it was democratic, i.e. representing the will of all the people. By the 19th century, with the development of industrial capitalism, the newly-rich owners of factories and mills lacked political power to match their economic strength.

Agitation for an extension of the franchise produced the so-called Great Reform Act of 1832, which only granted the right to vote to property-owners like the industrialists despite their reliance on working-class support during the long campaign. The working class continued to have no significant economic or political voice. Consequences of this situation were the working class fight for the vote in the Chartist movement and the growth of trade unions. Most significant, in terms of an independent class outlook, was the development during the rest of the century of various forms of socialism, communism and anarchism.

Government: the Way to Freedom?

Anarchists, because of their belief in the strength of voluntary co-operation and mutual aid, were (and are) opposed to the coercive power of government on principle. They therefore denied the notion that the working class should work to extend the franchise and then vote its own representatives into power, convinced that this could only ever achieve domination by a minority.

However the idea was spread by others (often socialists from the middle class) that capitalism and the many laws required to sustain it could eventually be legislated away

once enough working class parliamentary seats had been gained. Similarly a socialist system, using the power of the State in the working class' favour, could then be introduced by Acts of Parliament.

Strangely, one of the reasons for taking this line was precisely the repressive capabilities which the capitalist State had built up. Only anarchists anticipated that such standard governmental tools as courts, prisons, police and troops, whoever commanded them, would end up preserving a society of inequality and exploitation, not abolishing it. But parliamentary socialists, believing that any attempt at revolution must resolve itself to the advantage of the ruling class, took a gradual, reformist approach. By patient

legal changes, a socialist utopia would be arrived at, and no-one hurt or aggrieved in the process. Typical of

this outlook were the Fabians, an early socialist think-tank still influential in the Labour Party.

Many believed in the reasonableness of such sentiments. With the

gradual winning of the vote by all of the working

class, subsequent

history has too

often revolved

around workers giving up their power by

electing "representatives". The fallacy has been that, by ceding

power to someone or some party claiming to represent you, your interests and those of others like you will be the chief concern of those representatives. This

idea has legitimised the election of full-time union officials as well as politicians. It has proved untrue on two counts.

Short of the actual statement of the class of industrialists, bankers, stockbrokers, etc., political representatives are driven to make deals with these people, whose prime aim is to preserve and expand their social and economic privileges, not give them up. And these representatives themselves, when not born into the ruling-class (making connections and assumptions at elite schools and university to last a lifetime), sooner rather than later adopt its attitudes. Supposedly working class MPs lose touch with their original background, just as do those elected primarily as women; and for the same reasons.

The Ruling Class

What is it that makes such attitudes so easy to adopt? It stems from the fact that, once existing in a world of large salaries, consultancies and bribes, chauffeurs and private secretaries; politicians become largely divorced from life as most of us experience it. They are also both more and less informed than most people. On one hand, privy to information and the making of decisions that will affect millions, with only a selected portion of that information available for what is laughably termed public debate.

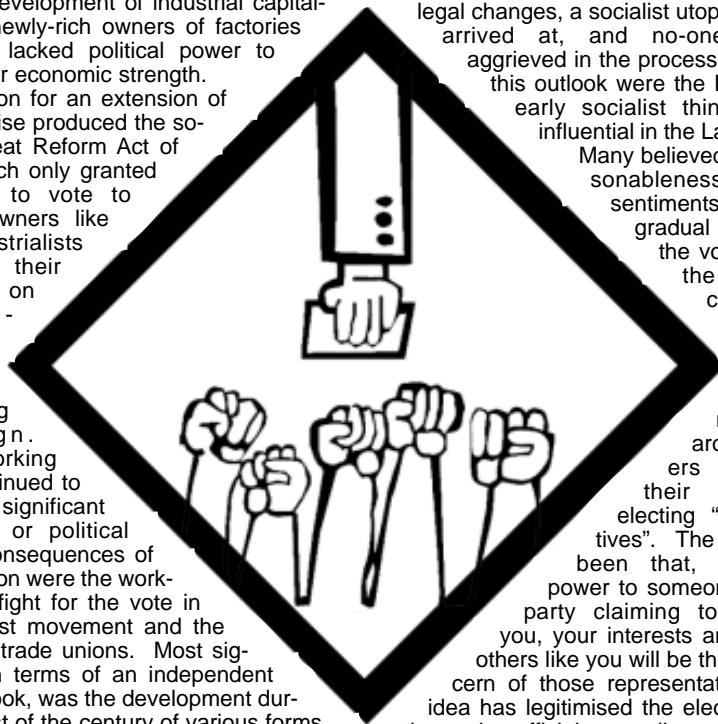
On the other, living in ignorance of everyday life and having their information filtered via civil servants, lobbyists and journalists. The contempt for the public thus encouraged is plain in the constant necessity for leaks to enable us to know much at all of this world. There is in addition a basic condescension on the part of politicians, in their assumption that some people (i.e. themselves and their economic counterparts) are best suited to making the major decisions on how society should run its affairs.

The debates about MPs' pay, with the outcome of increases of 26% (whilst urging 3% or less on everyone else), are especially significant in revealing this gulf between government and the governed. Once, the argument was that Parliament would work for the working class through the election of working class representatives, on the basis of common interest and experience. Now it was said that MPs' wages had to be raised by huge amounts in order to attract the right calibre of person, who would otherwise be lost to a managerial position in industry.

Exactly so. MPs and ministers are political middle managers, and their gaze is so frequently turned to the City and the Bosses organisations like the Chamber of Labour (and their international equivalents, such as the Council of Ministers of the European Union, the World Trade Organisation and the IMF) because these are the people to whom they are really accountable. For their part, they exert firm central control via local councils and also by means of placeperson-packed quangos (unelected bodies like hospital trust boards, responsible for spending millions in public funds). This in turn exposes the hollowness of "local democracy".

Despite the form of a democratic political process which allegedly includes us all, the impotence of national governments before the activities of transnational companies (otherwise known as globalisation or neo-liberalism) has meant that its content has increasingly become concerned simply with devising ways to improve the lot of the well-off or ease their worries.

Since its election in May 1997, the Labour government in England has been at pains to stress how business-friendly it is



both to domestic and foreign investors. The proof has been in such measures as its appointments of businesspeople to head various commissions on aspects of the Welfare State (e.g. the ex-chief of Barclays Bank in charge of a commission on benefits!), its harassment of the unemployed and the setting of a minimum wage based on what bosses wish to pay rather than what workers need.

The other parties now believe in only the mildest reforms of unfettered capitalism, based on the further belief that nothing but a capitalist system is workable. And this conviction unites all of the main political parties - hence the growing ease with which they swap members. This is the essential "choice" of which they make so much.

None of the above comments should be mistaken for any nationalistic stance. Anarchists are quite clear that the injustices suffered by the working class are common across the globe. Indeed it is this common character that helps create a working class that is international, for all its local variations, and makes the need to unite across national boundaries ever more urgent.

And this despite the fact that bosses and politicians still play up national differences in order to maintain weakness and division amongst the world's workers. Those who today complain about Brussels' interference should simply ask themselves, is a British boss or politician so preferable?

The idea that they are somehow more under our control or more sympathetic is a gross fallacy. No, it is having a ruling class at all that is the root problem, whether its members are of the same nationality or not.

A Free Society?

For those who cannot be pacified by material goods (or at least the hope of them), the other side of the democratic picture is coercion. This goes both for those who have an insecure hold on work, housing or education, and those who dissent. With the continuing legal and technical tooling-up of the police, detailed and linked government databases, Internet and mobile phone monitoring, and the widespread use of CCTV, all the means for a totally authoritarian system are coming into place. Freedom is reduced to mere consumerism.

Crime is the alleged justification for these measures. Anything that might indict the role that the propaganda and pressures of a capitalist world play is disregarded as an excuse for individual weakness. More than this, in a system where the market is held to be supreme, any assertion of the interests of the working class that is not thoroughly diluted by politicians and union bureaucrats itself becomes defined as bordering on crime. Thus the outlawing or restriction of strikes, demonstrations, picketing, etc.

The point that we have reached today

The role of Zabalaza Books is to make Anarchist literature cheaply available to working and poor people in southern Africa. However, no idea is of any use unless it is rooted in, and influences in a positive way, the practical experiences of ordinary people. Our actions and ideas are to try influence the class struggle. However, we do so as equals, not as self-appointed "leaders" or "vanguards". We do not aim to "seize power" on behalf of the workers and poor - to make ourselves the new privileged ruling minority.

Instead, we urge everyone to fully and directly control and manage their own struggles and organisations and to make their own decisions. As Anarchists, we try to develop and extend the class struggle for improvements and reforms within Capitalism into an openly revolutionary movement aiming to replace the present system - while, at the same time, fighting the day-to-day struggle in an Anarchist way.

The struggle will be long and hard, but worth it. We at Zabalaza Books are committed to developing a movement that will create this New World. Join Us... *We have a World to Win!*

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reveals the basic fallacy that has always underlain the parliamentary road. This is that the working class can make continuing and permanent gains while another class dominates it economically and politically. The "finest hour" of parliamentary socialism in the post-1945 nationalisations and creation of the National Health Service in England continued to preserve managerial chains of command and had no idea of how to counteract the harmful inroads of market capitalism other than through subsidies. This may have cushioned the workforces against unemployment for some decades, but by now the truth is plain: the ruling class drive for profit is the supreme value in a capitalist world. If this means a return to sweatshops, disregard for the health and safety of workers and excessive hours of work, this is the price to be paid to compete in a global market. In the case of public services it means either their abandonment in privatisation, or severe limitations being placed upon their expenditure. The same point is true of all such areas that have been the object of reform by Parliament: if they can be clawed back for profits sake, they will be.



Freedom of Choice

Most political parties offer some variant of managing capitalism politically. Ultimately this is to resign ourselves to continuing stressful work, unemployment, discrimination, pollution and wars, whether over natural resources (as in the Gulf War) or regional political influence (as in the Lesotho).

Naturally, policies for this management vary, as do the gestures towards social justice. But although certain specific policies will change, there are ideological limits to each party, which preserve continuity. Thus today's ANC, while being more explicitly pro-business in its outlook than its early 1980s model, is in both cases part of a tradition that has never envisaged any more than the taming of the market, rather than its abolition.

Similarly, its commitment to reformation of the economy will only mean that we can elect more of our oppressors, instead of their simply inheriting the right to do so.

Similar examples could be given for all of the parties. They adapt, change rhetoric, symbols, even their names, but they never

shift so much that their own self-importance (the "need" for them or other bosses) is put in doubt.

Those claiming to be socialist (rather than social democratic) or communist, while perhaps committed to economic equality, see political equality as a goal that is much further off. They, of course, will benignly rule us in the meantime. Thus they end up on a par with the others, who always seek to offer "strong leadership" when not merely "representing" us.

Anarchist Apathy?

It is often argued that those like anarchists who deliberately refuse to vote in elections are apathetic, and have no right to comment on political affairs if they do not participate in the approved manner. Anarchists vigorously deny this. Even the politicians profess to be disturbed at the mounting lack of participation in the "democratic process", a worldwide phenomenon.

There are now MPs arguing that voting should be made compulsory: so much for freedom of choice! Anarchists in fact argue for constant and general involvement in politics, that is, all of the questions (work, food, housing, transport, education, etc.) which affect our lives.

Apathy - and despair- are the by-products of a vote every few years and the chance to sign the occasional petition to Parliament. They do not come from the refusal to be mocked in a farce. As anarchist-communists, then, we are opposed to parliamentary democracy and capitalism. Neither can we be satisfied with the end of one and not the other. For example, capitalism can thrive in all kinds of political environments but it will still produce similar misery and injustice.

We conclude by outlining some of our positive views of a world in which they have both been superseded. Our starting-point is that individual freedom is best realised in a society without domination, brought together instead by voluntary co-operation and association. The needs of the individual and the needs of society are in a constant tension, but they stand the best chance of being harmonised in a world that has seen the abolition of classes. This means an end to the power of anyone to dominate, either economically or politically. Power would instead be diffused.

One hundred years ago, anarchists chiefly argued against the working class taking the parliamentary road on a theoretical level. Today we have all too much experience to confirm their original insight that freedom; equality and well-being are not to be achieved via that route. In the 21st century it is more than time to leave behind the political illusions that littered the 20th. This pamphlet is a contribution to the exposure of one still deeply-rooted.