

Anarchist Political School

Reform or revolution?

"THE UNITY OF THE CHICKEN AND THE ROACH
HAPPENS IN THE BELLY OF THE CHICKEN."
~HAITIAN PROVERB



Capital is the fundamental enemy of the working class.
Compromising with capital will never lead to emancipation.

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Reform

Capitalism is killing workers and the planet. The climate crisis is wreaking havoc on the biosphere, many capitalist powers are beating the drums of war, colonial entities across the globe are waging genocide against Indigenous populations, and workers are oppressed and exploited everywhere.

Reformists argue that we should make incremental reforms to life under capitalism. They believe it is enough to slowly make things better. Wouldn't it be nice if we could make public transport and university free, invest in better bike lanes, make housing more affordable, spend less on war, and fully transition to renewable energy?

In Australia, reformists in the Greens and on the left of Labor point to the so-called 'social democracies' of Sweden and Norway. But even in these states, capitalists have overwhelming control over property and workplaces. Production is still based on profit and endless growth. Fossil fuels are still dug up and shipped overseas. The Global South is still pillaged through imperialism. Billions are still spent on weapons for the military and on enforcing racist border policies. And workers still have to submit themselves to capitalists on a daily basis, having little say in how their work is done.

Globally, millions of workers die each year from a lack of proper healthcare and nutrition, and from dangerous work

and exploitation. Capitalism inevitably generates inequality, exploitation, and the unsustainable destruction of the ecosystems our lives depend on. There is no just, sustainable, or cuddly version of capitalism.

Anarchists do not just want to make capitalism nicer. We aim to create a society without bosses, governments or domination of any other kind. We want to abolish the causes of poverty, destruction, and exploitation. Far more people are killed in the ongoing wars and genocides fuelled by the capitalists of today than have ever been killed in the bloodiest of revolutions.

We want a society based upon the principles of liberty, equality and solidarity. We want production to be controlled by workers, on the basis of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need”. In short, we advocate for an advanced industrial and technological communism, which should be harnessed under workers’ control, in a system of sustainable production to meet human wants and needs.

This is what we mean by a free communist society. In order to achieve a society like this, we must abolish both capitalism and the state.

Discuss

Do you think a free communist society is possible?

Electoralism

Reformists think that we can change capitalism by electing the right people. The Greens, the Labor Party, and other social democrats believe they can win elections, and then use the power of government to make reforms and reel in the destructive actions of the capitalist class.

More radical reformists think that there is even a parliamentary road to socialism. They say that all we need to do is keep voting socialists into parliament—and eventually—as these socialist politicians pass ever more reforms, we will get communism.

It really would be nice if we could win an election and establish communism. But capitalism and the state don't work like that.

Even if it were possible to win an election as an anarchist or communist with the goal of abolishing capitalism, any sincere anti-capitalist would quickly run into hostile resistance.

Whenever a government's policy threatens profitability or growth, capitalists use their legal ownership and control over the economy to force governments to back down.

When a party or politician acts in a way that the capitalist class doesn't like, capitalists use their control over the

media to go on the attack. Capitalists own the newspapers, televisions, think tanks, radio, and social media platforms. They will reliably use these propaganda tools to demonise any attempt to act against their interests.

When this is not enough, capitalists will threaten the economy of a capitalist state. Capitalists can withhold investment or send their money into hiding overseas. This is called a **capital strike**. Capitalists will drive up unemployment and prices, crash currencies, and cause economic chaos in order to destabilise an unfriendly government.

When these legal means fail, capitalists are happy to throw out the rulebook. The capitalist class will back coups, invasions, or the rise of fascism when their economic interests are truly threatened.

Discuss

What recent examples can you think of where the ruling class has used their resources to crush electoral opposition to their interests?

Case Study: Salvador Allende

(ah-YEHN-deh: ll = y)

Take the example of Salvador Allende. In 1970 in Chile, riding a wave of popular unrest, in conditions which

threatened to break out into revolution, Allende was elected President. He promised to implement major reforms and was an outspoken socialist. Both the local capitalists and the US government totally opposed Allende's reforms, but Allende had a democratic mandate, so he thought he could govern safely.

But the ruling class wasn't just going to sit still and watch their wealth and power be dismantled. When Allende refused to change course in the face of an economic crisis, the military staged a coup with the full support of the United States. Facing capture and execution, Allende committed suicide. General Augusto Pinochet (*pee-noh-CHEH^T*) then came to power and implemented an authoritarian military dictatorship.

Pinochet's military junta (*HOON-tah*) rounded up Leftists, who had been disarmed by Allende's non-revolutionary government, to be shot. Pinochet implemented capital's emergency override on democracy.

The process of contesting elections changes socialists for the worse and Allende was a prime example. Even without the active resistance of capitalists, socialists in parliament often get caught up in getting themselves re-elected and clinging to power, rather than concentrating their focus on workers' struggle. In order to win elections, socialists often water down their politics to get more votes and maintain their position in parliament. To consolidate

and preserve their authority once in government, socialists in parliament strip power from the workers.

Many socialists agree with our critique of reformism, but argue that socialists in parliament could have a platform to denounce capitalism. The process of engaging in elections, however, has evidently turned mass working-class movements with revolutionary potential into toothless election campaigns. They have distracted workers from realising their own power and convinced them to rely on others to make change for them.

The entire system of parliamentary democracy is set up to consume, co-op, defang, and demobilise radical struggle, ultimately leaving society vulnerable to hostile takeover. Far beyond even Salvador Allende, history has shown us that socialists don't conquer parliament, but instead parliament reliably conquers socialists.

Discuss

The ruling class can use their resources to crush any electoral challenge to their power, as they did with Allende. But they can also mobilise against revolutionaries engaging outside of the parliamentary system. So what advantage is gained by abstaining from electoralism?

Case Study: Gough Whitlam

Parliamentary democracy is the preferred form of rule for capitalism, because the capitalists are the first ruling class in history too big to meet in a single palace. They need a parliament to work out what they think.

But, as evidenced by Allende, they're prepared to dispense with it in a crisis. Many similar governments around the world have been elected with a mandate for vigorous reforms, only to find themselves tossed out of office once they had lost the support of capitalists.

We've even seen it happen here in Australia.

In 1972, after 23 years of Liberal government, Labor was elected under the leadership of Gough Whitlam, on a platform of progressive reform. Whitlam was no communist, but he was elected during a time of immense political unrest.

The Australian union movement was at its peak with more strikes than ever before, resistance to the Vietnam war was mounting and there were huge movements for women's liberation, and Aboriginal rights. The working class was confident and militant.

These waves of revolt forced Whitlam to push through reform after reform: free tertiary education, abolition of the

White Australia policy, increased pensions, Medibank, and no-fault divorce.

But when the economy hit problems, working class militancy grew even stronger and Whitlam was unable to reel things in. Workers were on strike for over 6 million cumulative working days in 1974. Things were getting too scary for *all* capitalists.

Capitalists decided enough was enough and began to stop investing their money into Australia and its businesses. The Liberals broke convention by blocking the supply of funds to the government in the Senate. And ultimately, the unelected Governor-General resolved the crisis by simply sacking Whitlam, with the backing of the US. With the economy in tatters and the media unanimously behind them, the Liberals won the ensuing election.

Discuss

What does the example of Gough Whitlam demonstrate about the way reforms are won in practice?

Reforms, Not Reformism!

Despite our critique of reformism, anarchists still passionately engage in the struggle for reforms. There is simply no good argument that workers and the oppressed

should not fight to make their lives under capitalism more bearable.

That said, we are against *reformism*—the belief that the capitalist system can be improved into a more just form. Anarchists engage in the struggle for reforms as part of a broader revolutionary strategy. But what is of utmost importance to us is *how* we go about fighting for reforms.

If we rely on politicians, NGOs, or activists in balaclavas to fight for change, we reinforce the passivity of the vast majority of the working class. We exalt a handful of people to be the change-makers and ignore the collective power we have as a class.

If, instead, we take collective action ourselves, we not only have significantly more power to change the world, but we also change ourselves in the process.

This is why anarchists advocate for **direct action** to win reforms: rallies, occupations, strikes, and so on. Direct action builds up the confidence of workers to fight for a better world. It compels workers to take initiative in their own liberation and it builds up working-class solidarity.

Through direct action, workers build an understanding of their role in making society run. When a strike brings a workplace to a standstill, workers can see exactly who does all the work. When a rally brings out thousands, workers can see just how much support there is for their

struggle. Direct action therefore demonstrates to workers the power of a united working class, especially when it results in the bosses or the government conceding to their demands.

Discuss

Some anarchists and communists argue that we shouldn't engage in the struggle for reforms. They argue reforms only prop up capitalism by alleviating workers' demands. What do you think?

Means and Ends

But, we hear you say, socialist revolutions don't work in practice! They have always ended in disaster with authoritarian governments taking control, leaving the vast majority of people little better than they were before the revolution!

There is a kernel of truth in this sentiment. A true social revolution that reorganises all existing social relationships has never come to full fruition. In fact, all attempted socialist revolutions have merely substituted prior ruling classes with new ones.

Anarchists argue that this has occurred because of a failure to choose the right means to get the ends we want. Marx argued that, once the capitalist state has been abolished by workers' revolution, a new kind of 'workers'

state' would temporarily be required, but that it would later 'wither away' as all remnants of the old ruling class power disappeared.

As a result, Marxists end up advocating the kind of state which has always maintained class society: a centralised body, alienated from workers control, with the power to make and enforce laws from above. Anarchists oppose this because we argue that the means you use determine the ends you reach. Zoe Baker¹ explains this concept in more depth as follows:

“People who want to and are able to reproduce a communist society will not magically come into existence. A communist society can only emerge through a social revolution that abolishes capitalism and therefore will have to be created by the people who presently live under capitalism. ...

Revolutionaries therefore have to use means that are constituted by forms of practice that will actually transform individuals into the kinds of people who will be able to and want to create the end goal of communism. If revolutionaries make the mistake of using the wrong or inappropriate means, then they will produce people who will create a different society to the one they initially intended. ...

¹Extract from *Means and Ends: The Anarchist Critique of Seizing State Power*

The state, like all social structures, is constituted by forms of human activity and so participating in the state produces and reproduces particular kinds of people and particular kinds of social relations. This occurs irrespective of the intentions or goals of people because what matters is the nature of the social structure they are participating in and the forms of activity this social structure is constituted by and reproduced through. ...

Those who wield state power will therefore engage in forms of human activity that will over time transform them into oppressors of the working class who are concerned with reproducing and expanding their power over other people. ...

Socialists who enter the state may initially fervently desire the abolition of capitalism and the state but 'new relationships and conditions change them little by little' until they betray the cause whilst telling themselves that they are advancing it."

Discuss

Some Marxists argue that a revolutionary society needs a police force, prisons, and surveillance in order to prevent reactionaries from organising a counter-revolution. What do you think?

The Working Class

For all of their power, the capitalist class is vulnerable, because it's us, the working class, the vast majority of society, which produces everything we rely on to keep society going. Capitalists would lose all their power if the working class seized control over the economy for themselves.

As such, anarchists believe that it is the working class, and *only* the working class, that can make a revolution. The working class has no interest in maintaining capitalism and every interest in ending it. No other group within capitalism has the numbers or is in the structural position to separate the ruling class from the source of its power, and co-operate in the self-management of production without bosses or politicians.

The working class must overcome divisions of nationality, gender, religion, sexuality, and race. These structures of oppression create divisions within the working class. Divisions of all kinds are the enemy of working-class solidarity and undermine our ability to fight for a better world. These divisions therefore cannot simply be papered over, ignored, or relegated to 'secondary status' in the pursuit of false unity.

We fight against these oppressions not only because they are morally wrong and have no place in a revolution, but

also because we cannot have a revolution unless we unite the working class across all its divisions, and fight *together* in a shared struggle against all oppression and exploitation. This is what we mean by the phrase “touch one, touch all”.

Discuss

Some capitalists, politicians and NGOs may appear sympathetic to struggles of the working class. Should we work with them to fight against oppression?