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Oakland Forum on ‘Lessons of the Red States Teacher Strikes’ –A Report & Discussion

By Jack Gerson



Last Saturday (June 9), I attended the “Lessons of the Red States Teacher Strikes” forum featuring teacher leaders of the mass education strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky, and Arizona. The forum was held in Oakland, California at a local public high school (Oakland Tech) and was organized by the Oakland teachers union and co-sponsored by the San Francisco, Berkeley and Richmond (California) teachers unions. Here are my impressions and observations about this event (this is a first draft; I hope to polish and elaborate this, but probably not immediately.)

1. The speakers were inspiring, individually and collectively. The women – all four are women – were courageous, resolute, and

brilliant organizers. Most readers will probably already know this from the widespread coverage of the red state strikes. If not, I think that this summary, brief as it is, will make this clear.

2. The stated aim of the event was to learn how the red state organizers had carried out the most impressive labor actions in decades despite what had hitherto been considered insurmountable obstacles – weak state unions, anti-strike legislation, lack of collective bargaining, no dues checkoff – and to build on these to launch coordinated local and / or statewide actions in California. The organizers had anticipated filling Oakland Tech's 800-seat auditorium, and hoped for a large turnout from younger teachers and community, based on the overwhelmingly positive response to the red state strikes. But only somewhere between 200 and 300 showed up, very few under 50 years old. The majority were veteran Bay Area leftists.



3. In any event, the talks by the red state teacher leaders were inspirational as well as educational. They each talked about how they were able overcome anti-strike legislation and build mass strikes despite the weakness of state and local unions. In all three states – West Virginia, Kentucky, Arizona (and I believe that this was true in Oklahoma and North Carolina too) – the organizers worked outside of the formal union structures, using social media to reach out to, and build networks of, initially hundreds, then thousands, and now tens of thousands (For example: ongoing networks of 24,000 in West Virginia, and of 55,000 in Arizona.) Although the core of these organizations are schoolworkers and have developed networks of school leaders at the local and school levels, they don't restrict their membership to teachers: The networks include both union members and non-members; public

school teachers and charter school teachers; certificated staff (teachers) and classified staff (clericals, janitors, food service workers, etc.). They don't restrict themselves to traditional union issues, or even to strictly educational issues – for example, the West Virginia teachers demanded and won a 5% across the board pay increase for all West Virginia public employees, not just teachers, while one of the key issues taken up by the Kentucky movement is how to address gang violence.



In these ways, these organizations are breaking out of the insularity, conservatism, and bureaucratic inertia of virtually the entire union leadership at national, state, and even local levels. It's reminiscent of Occupy in Fall 2011; of the Spring 2011 Oakland bank campaign (where Oakland teachers and community allies campaigned to "Bail Out Schools Not Banks and End Foreclosures, culminating in occupation of Wells Fargo's downtown Oakland branch, where seven teachers were arrested (I was one of those seven); of the June / July 2012 sit-in to protest school closures at Oakland's Lakeview Elementary, organized by teachers, parents, and community. (For those who remember, it's reminiscent of the "struggle group" concept in the old IS circa 1970, which was counterposed to the traditional rank and file union caucus approach.) Importantly: it's not just posing the need for teacher unions to "reach out to the community", but rather the need for alternative forms of organization that can work inside and outside the union, uniting union members with non-members and with the community around demands that cut across traditional parochial / insular lines. But apparently local teacher union leaders are not taking away this lesson (for example, Oakland teacher union president-elect Keith Brown, who chaired the June 9 forum, began

his concluding remarks by observing that the key lesson to be learned from the speakers is that “we need to reach out to the community”. I barely was able to restrain myself from yelling out “Oh come on Keith, you’ve known that all along.”)

Rather, to reemphasize at the risk of redundancy: the key lesson here is the importance of building what could be called “classwide organizations” – organizations that operate inside and outside the workplace, that include union members and non-members, teachers and non-teachers; that take up educational and non-educational issues (e.g., environmental issues); etc.

An equally important lesson is to not be constrained by the fear of strikes being labeled “illegal”. If the organization is strong enough, with enough support among school workers and enough support in the community, the courts and the legislature are likely to fold – as they did in the red state strikes.



4. I think that the very weakness of their unions was a key to the strikes’ success. In states where teacher unions are strong, dues check-off is used to build full-time, often highly paid, central union staff whose worldview is closer to that of management than it is to the everyday worker. The officials and staffers far more often than not act as a brake on struggle, urging and, when they can, imposing a passive, legalistic strategy (at best). Case in point, the 3 million member National Education Association (NEA) and its largest affiliate, the 300,000-plus member California Teachers Association (CTA). CTA has used dues check-off (“the agency shop”) to funnel the bulk of member dues to its highly paid and privileged staff and officers. The hundreds of CTA staffers are paid nearly double the

salaries of classroom teachers. For decades, they, argued that “we’re too weak” to organize effectively against charter schools; that we have to “collaborate” with big business and with school management; that strikes can’t win, so we have to “compromise” (read: agree to rotten contracts), etc. They stacked the deck, taking the lead in negotiating contracts that expire at different times in different districts, and then turning around and arguing that coordinated strikes are a non-starter because contracts expire at different times. Militants who argued for even building local strikes were labeled “strike-happy”. Most “progressives” and “progressive caucuses” fell in line. A few examples:

- CTA pulled the plug on its 2003 initiative to reform California Proposition 13 to tax corporate property more heavily (they caved to pressure from the Chamber of Commerce, who behind the scenes threatened to go after dues check-off).
- CTA staff and the Oakland teacher union president meekly and unilaterally called off a strike with a bad, last minute deal in spring 2006. Four years later, CTA staff and a different OEA president postponed striking for months, and then limited it to one day with no follow-up (despite its being over 90% effective, and despite the school district having imposed rotten terms on the union.)
- The “progressive” leadership of the Los Angeles teachers union called off a walkout of tens of thousands of teachers when a judge issued an injunction with fines of \$1 million / day if they struck.
- In 2009, CTA sent staff from district to district, warning local unions to accept downsizing, including layoffs, in order to “protect our contractual gains” – i.e., wages and benefits.

The red state strikes show that there’s another way, a better way: organize to fight, for a classwide fight, an inclusive fight around classwide demands, rather than meek, legalistic acquiescence.

5. Two more points:

a. Mass media contrasts teacher salaries in California with those in the red states, and implies – or states outright – that strikes occurred in those states because teacher pay was so low. But when adjusted for inflation, average pay in California is not much higher than in, say, West Virginia – and average pay in several large urban districts (e.g., Oakland) is actually lower than

the average in the red states. Moreover, the red state strikes were not just about teacher pay: a key unifying demand was more money for education. The mass media implies that California and other “blue” states put much more money per capita into education than the red states. Not so. California, despite having the fifth largest economy in the world (behind only China, the U.S., Germany and Japan) is 41st of the 50 states in education spending per capita – well behind, for example, West Virginia.

b. The red state strikes blow apart the “lesser evil” argument in multiple ways: First, many strikers actually were / are Trump supporters, and see him as shaking up the status quo that has brought them lower wages, insecurity, raised their rents, taken away their homes, left their family members jobless and their children with poor prospects. Second, in blue states like California, the Democrats – far from being the opponents of privatization, charter schools and downsizing that they’ve been made out to be in the mass media, have been its advocates.



Take the example of Oakland, where I taught and was active in the teacher union. For the past 20 years, Oakland has been a laboratory for privatization: in 2003, the state put the Oakland public schools in receivership, a move orchestrated by Eli Broad (supported by his billionaire friends Reed Hastings and John Doerr) and his long-time ally, then-Oakland mayor and now California governor Jerry Brown; Broad, Bill Gates and company turned the Oakland schools into a laboratory for privatization: under the state takeover enrollment in charter schools more than quadrupled while enrollment in public schools fell by one-third; the state moved in ostensibly because of a \$37 million budget deficit, and left seven years later after tripling it – turning it into a \$110 million debt, which to this day the state insists that the district must repay in full

with interest; more than half the schools in Oakland were closed or reorganized, the libraries were shut down in nearly all middle schools and in several high schools, custodial workers were laid off, etc. Under the state takeover, Oakland had per capita double the rate of outsourcing to private contractors and double the administrative overhead of the average California school district.



While Oakland was a laboratory, the Democrats nearly everywhere supported the policies of downsizing, charter schools, test-based accountability, school closures, outsourcing, and privatization. The assault on public education was bipartisan – its most ardent advocates included Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy and California Congressman George Miller (the two leading proponents of the No Child Left Behind legislation), and President Barack Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan.

It's also important to consider that in the "red states" Republican legislators responded to mass pressure by at least partially caving, fearing that they'd lose their jobs and their legislative majorities in the next elections. But in "blue" California, the Republican Party has nearly collapsed in the most populous parts of the state. The Democrats have lockdown control of the state legislature as well as the governor, and they have little fear of losing same. So they feel little constraint to do more than pay lip service to education, and can be expected to continue the same policies that they have for decades: providing inadequate funding for education (again: California ranks 41st of the 50 states in that regard); supporting charter schools (or whatever comes down the pipe in place of charter schools, should the bloom come off that rose); supporting test-based accountability (or whatever repressive variant comes

down that pipe); supporting state takeovers of local school districts, thus taking control out of the hands of the public (just as charter schools do – they receive public funding but are privately controlled). Is it any wonder that so many working class folks have been repelled by the Democrats' austere neo-liberalism, and that at least some have turned to Trump?

6. Problems: Where do they go from here? They know that they need to consolidate their gains and to spread them nationally. But who can they reach out to? They look to who they see – ostensible “progressive” locals, like Oakland and San Francisco and Los Angeles. But the teacher leaders in the sponsoring locals have a past and present connection to CTA and its policies. And their own records.



It's important to see things as they really are. That can be a downer. So far too often, far too many leftists act as cheerleaders and, willfully or not, wind up contorting and distorting facts to fit their desires. Thus, Jeff Mackler, national secretary of the group Socialist Action, recently wrote an article hailing the Oakland teachers union (OEA) as the most militant teacher union in the country, saying that the union has launched five strikes over “the past decades”. Well, yes – if you go back far enough. But over the past 22 years, OEA has gone out for exactly one day, and the OEA officers and CTA staff resisted even that.

And OEA has been far from the worst – inadequate as it's been, it's still far better than most. Now, I don't want to write off the newly elected OEA leadership out of hand. But they – and the other local union officials – are not going to act much differently than in the past UNLESS there's an eruption from below. We certainly shouldn't look to CTA or NEA or AFT to take the lead – quite the opposite, as we've argued above. And I'm not hopeful about the local leaders, either. Maybe some will be on the right side – but I think that will happen because they will be reacting to motion from below, not taking the lead in unleashing it.



7. Meanwhile: How to proceed in places like Oakland, where the teacher union has been out of contract since last June. And in other California school districts – especially large urbans.

First: Build a network, if possible with contacts in every school in your district. This has been a foundation for building towards strikes in the past: in Chicago in 2012; in Arizona earlier this year; etc. In the past, this has been best done by releasing several teachers from classroom duties temporarily to go from school to school, holding school meetings, making contacts, identifying teachers who can act as shop stewards / representatives for their schools, etc. Based on the red state teacher experiences, this probably ought to be combined with social media outreach.

Second: Don't base everything on waiting for the state and local union leaderships to act. As one of the red state teacher leaders said on Saturday, "They're not our bosses. We're their bosses." Outline steps towards building a strike – including building a network with contacts in as many schools as possible, and reach out beyond union lines to non-members, teachers in other districts,

classified school workers, community members, etc. Reach out beyond narrow bread and butter issues, and even beyond simply educational issues. And be ready for state, national, and local leaders to get in the way, unless / until you've built sufficient strength. For example, they may say that coordinated strikes would be illegal when many districts are still bound by contractual no-strike clauses (CTA, NEA, AFT, etc. have for decades had a passive, legalistic approach. That's why there have been hardly any teacher strikes in California over the past twenty years. To repeat a point made earlier: Oakland, hailed as a model of teacher militancy by some "progressives", has struck for exactly one day since 1996.)



8. Finally, it's time to draw some hard conclusions about the state of the unions, and not just teacher unions. For decades, the unions have operated on the "team concept" – collaboration with management and the state. The international union leaderships have, for the most part, supported – even participated in – U.S. imperialism's exploitative international policies. At home, they have urged labor peace, acquiescing meekly to the bosses while turning a mailed fist towards rank and file militants. AFT President Randy Weingarten states this clearly in an open appeal to the ruling class to take the side of union leadership on the impending Janus court case, which if it carries would outlaw dues checkoff. Weingarten said:

"The funders backing the Janus case and the Supreme Court justices who want to eliminate collective bargaining with the hope that such a move would silence workers need only to look at West Virginia for what will happen if they get their way. A loss of collective bargaining would lead to more

activism and political action, not less. Collective bargaining exists as a way for workers and employers to peacefully solve labor relations.”

That’s a pretty clear statement of class collaboration, isn’t it? Weingarten says to the ruling class: “Look out, below. We union bureaucrats are what’s standing between you and the wrath of the masses.” In that regard, we should recall that the storied labor mass militancy of the 1930s was largely carried out, successfully, without collective bargaining and often “illegally”. And now the same is true for the red state teacher strikes. That should at least give us pause, and cause to think further about the deal that brought about labor peace at the end of the 1930s, exchanging collective bargaining and a piece of the pie for no-strike contracts, no-strike pledges, and permanent state intervention and regulation of labor.



Dues checkoff is double edged: the Janus case is part of a virulent right wing attempt to destroy unions, period. And this is something that we all need to oppose. But we need to be aware that if Janus is defeated, the union leaderships will continue with their course of using members’ dues to strengthen their bureaucratic stranglehold and to try to keep their foot on the neck of potential militant struggle. I think that the red state teacher strikes, and particularly their alternative forms of organizing and organization, inside and outside the unions, and their classwide membership and demands, poses an important alternative model. It’s one that we need to try to work with and deepen. We need to all look at ways to broaden and sustain such a model – hitherto, the model has been inspiring

during the upsurge (e.g., the first few months of Occupy) but has not endured. Unions, on the other hand, have been able to consolidate the gains won in strikes and other contract struggles – but have done so by strengthening a central bureaucracy and by more and more collaborating with management and integrating with the state.

Discussion

July 20

All,

I found Jack's essay to be an excellent review of the recent teachers' strikes and a look at where we go from here. I am in agreement with his general assessment of the situation and in particular of his criticisms of the mainstream unions and their increasing willingness to collaborate with school administrations. I had a couple of points I want to raise in response.

1. Jack is right that teachers have to move beyond a narrow perspective of demanding higher wages and better benefits to a broader social approach that can attract the support of the wider society and of parents in particular. The demand for smaller class sizes could be an important part of such a broader program. This is a demand that immediately helps teachers and students and should be widely popular. Of course, teachers need to demand substantial pay increases to make up for years of stagnant pay and falling real wages.

2. Smaller class sizes and higher pay for teachers cost money. Teacher militants need to start talking about the urgent need to tax the rich. Tackling the enormous income and wealth inequalities that characterize this system will lead directly to testing the limits of capitalism and the imperative necessity of creating a new society.

3. Jack mentions the need to bring charter schoolteachers into the network of grass-roots militants. This is probably correct but it raises a difficult question. Certainly one of the demands of militant teachers must be an end to all charter schools and their absorption

into the public school system. How do we square this with bringing teachers in these schools into the network of militants? Perhaps there should be a demand that teachers employed in the charter schools are given priority for jobs in the public school system.

4. The right to strike is a fundamental right and an important one. Of course, the recent strikes in West Virginia and elsewhere show that just because strikes are illegal does not mean that teachers cannot go on strike. It is certainly important to make that point and to push for strike action in states like California where strikes are banned. Nevertheless, laws do matter and a prime demand should be to make it legal for all public sector employees except those engaged directly in emergency work to go on strike without hindrance.

5. This leads to Jack's point on the Oakland local leadership. Given his description, I am very doubtful that this set will be significantly different than the previous ones. Taking office in a large local is a tricky proposition for radicals but for sure it should only be done when its members are ready to vote for and support a radical program. One point in such a program would be a refusal to endorse any candidate for public office who does not support the right of teachers and other public employees to strike.

Eric

July 20
Eric,

Thanks for these comments on Jack's essay. I agree with most of your points, but have questions about two of them:

1) You say, "...one of the demands of militant teachers must be an end to all charter schools and their absorption into the public school system." I understand that there are many problems with charter schools, including ways in which they undermine traditional public schools. That said, I am not convinced that an across-the-board insistence on making more uniform our deficient 'one-size-fits all' public school system is the way to go. I recognize that you would favor coupling this demand with other demands and proposals that would aim to create higher quality public schools, but I am

nonetheless unsure whether I support what might be an overly categorical approach. Further comments from you and others would be helpful here.

2) You raise that taking office in large (union) local is a tricky proposition, and should take place only when members are ready to support a radical program. You then say, 'One point in such a program would be a refusal to endorse any candidate for public office who does not support the right of teachers and other public employees to strike.' I recognize there is an implicit 'united front' approach here that I assume goes: "You may support voting for and working for the election of Democratic Party (and other) candidates, but let's at least agree that there should be no support for such candidates unless they support the right of teachers and other public employees to strike." I'd like to see some more discussion of this as well.

In solidarity,

Rod

July 20
All,

First of all, I want to thank Eric for his comments on my report on the Red State teacher strikes forum. I think that the points he raises are good ones, and worthy of further discussion. I'm going to try to take them up, and in the process of doing so to respond to Rod's response to Eric too.

I agree with Eric that we want to eliminate charter schools, and I have pushed for this for many years. I suspect that some on this list don't have detailed knowledge of charter schools and their impact, so I'm going to provide a brief summary here:

Charter schools receive public money but are privately run. In effect, they are backdoor vouchers — getting public money without public control. And charter schools are exempted from large parts of state education codes — from both bureaucratic regulations and from regulations protective of students and teachers. They have been a favored vehicle of the assault on public education and

heavily funded by Bill and Melinda Gates (Gates Foundation, Microsoft), Eli and Edythe Broad (Broad Foundation, Kaufman and Broad and AIG), Doris and Donald Fisher (Fisher Foundation; the Gap), the Walton Family (Walmart), etc, John Doerr (New School Venture Fund; Doerr is the leading venture capitalist in the Silicon Valley, and organized the initial funding for, among others, Google and Amazon); Reed Hastings (Netflix; Pure Software); etc. Oakland, where I taught for years, has been a laboratory for privatization of education in general and for charter schools in particular. Thus, when the state of California put the Oakland school district in receivership in 2003, the number of charter school students was quickly quadrupled (from 2,031 in 2003 to well over 8,000 by 2006), while the enrollment in public schools declined sharply (from 54,000 to 37,000). Charter school enrollment in Oakland has since increased to over 12,000, or about 1/3 of public school enrollment. Meanwhile, many public schools have been closed; many programs and services have been eliminated (libraries were closed in most middle schools and in several high schools; vocational programs were shut down in most high schools; adult education was cut by *95%* (not a typo), etc. It's generally acknowledged that the growth of charter schools has negatively impacted economies of scale for public schools, resulting in a negative downward spiral. In some cities, charter schools have become dominant (e.g., Detroit) or have even completely replaced public schools (New Orleans).

Here's the difficult part: So long as public education fails a significant number of students — and there is no question but that it fails many students of color in high poverty communities (especially black students, but also many white students, especially in rural and semi-rural areas) — then parents will look for anything that provides hope for their kids. Parents whose children are assigned to schools which are under-resourced, crowded, dirty, and unsafe (e.g., where their kids are bullied and where staff respond inadequately if at all) will be attracted to the nearby charter school that is reputed to be clean, safe, and give kids a better chance of success. Never mind that overall, public schools have been shown to on average outperform charter schools. Never mind that the above-average charter school almost surely cherry picks students for admission and/or forces out struggling students, is given heavy, one-off funding by the billionaires' foundations (funding which isn't

and won't be replicated at most charter schools, and therefore this model doesn't scale), etc.

How do we deal with the above? I think in three ways: First, we need to argue that public schools need to be freed of the arbitrary bureaucratic parts of state education codes that constrain authentic learning. And we have to insist that the protective parts of state education codes should be extended to students and staff at all schools — including charter schools (so long as they exist). Second, we need to argue — as Eric does — that all students need the opportunity to go to clean, safe, well-resourced schools with small class size and competent teachers. Finally, we need to reach out to charter school teachers, to draw them into common struggle (as was done successfully in the red state teacher strikes) — and as part of this we should not only advocate organizing them into teacher unions, but we should call for parity in compensation, benefits, working conditions and due process between public school teachers and charter school teachers. If charter schoolteachers' pay, benefits, and working conditions were on a par with public school teachers, much of the billionaires' enthusiasm for them would rapidly diminish. Then, we can campaign for converting charter schools to public schools, with all (qualified) teachers in those schools remaining in place.

I also agree with Eric that it's important to campaign for funding. In California, the most obvious target is to amend Proposition 13, making it into a split-roll tax that eliminates the huge tax loopholes afforded corporations without increasing taxes on homeowners. This could provide funding to decrease class size (by hiring more teachers) and overall improve school facilities and resources. But I think that we need to be clear and "say what is": while public education can be significantly improved — and we fight to improve it — we can't solve the problems of public education for all under capitalism. Student achievement, as has been repeatedly shown, is strongly correlated with family affluence level, and this remains a function of class and race. Poverty won't be eliminated under capitalism, and as a group poor students will always be at a disadvantage. We need to be clear on this and to explain to those who struggle alongside us that, unless we fight to reorganize all of society, no solution will work for all (and, as we have seen time and again, those parents whose kids remain in failed schools will be

susceptible to the next schemes that the corporate “reformers” send down the pipe.)

On taking office in teacher unions: this requires a full and separate discussion. I will say: there’s a lot of similarity here to the problem of electoralism in general. How does a radical leadership administer the union day to day, once in power? The problems facing teacher unions, and indeed education as a whole, can only be confronted successfully by mass movements organizing from below. In case after case, groups that take over unions find themselves acting like just another leadership, despite their better intentions — similarly to what happens when reformers (aka sewer socialists) are elected to run a municipality under capitalism.

We have had several examples of insurgent “rank and file caucuses” taking power in local unions, and sometimes even at the state or national level: the PEAC caucus had a majority of the executive board in the Los Angeles teacher union from about 2005 to 2011, and its successor caucus (Union Power) controls both the executive board and the presidency of that local. The CORE caucus has controlled the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) for the past seven years. Thirty years ago TDU briefly had a majority of the Teamsters executive board. Etc. In each case, the insurgent group moved rightwards, towards the center, after taking power. To take the most widely hailed example: the CORE-led CTU strike of September 2012 has been held up as a model of militant trade unionism ever since. But before, during, and after the strike, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel said that more than 50 schools would be shut down. Six months after the one-week strike ended, Emmanuel did indeed close over 50 strikes. CTU did nothing (other than a toothless march in the Loop). Today, CTU’s strategy seems to be to try to take over the Chicago City Council — by supporting, and in some case running as, Democrats.

I don’t want to claim that there’s a total equivalence between running for local union office and running for local government office. But there are strong similarities. In my own experience, I served in various local union positions (executive board, bargaining team, etc.) and concluded that I was spending all my time trying to push a boulder up a mountain, fighting the (class) collaborationist state union leadership and their allies in the local’s leadership, and that my time could be better spent trying to organize from the

outside in. And it was (maybe at some point I'll put up a post describing my experience with the 2009-2010 public education mass movement in the Bay Area; with the spring 2011 campaign to bail out schools not banks and end foreclosures; and with the 2011-2012 Occupy Oakland education committee which organized the 17-day sit-in at Lakeview Elementary to protest school closures.)

Jack

July 22

Jack and all,

Last night I reread your article on teachers' strikes. Very good. Comprehensive and comprehensible. I liked your emphasis on "seeing things as they really are" as we try to navigate the treacherous waters of capitalism.

I found the points about the sabotage of militant action by mainstream unions-- and the details about the alternative organizing model the red state strikers created-- particularly important. Being an IWW member, I appreciated the inclusive, non-hierarchical nature of their model, and the linking of teachers' issues with those of other public sector workers, and with social issues like gang violence.

Below is a link to a leaflet you have seen before that others on this list might be interested in. A local graphic artist and I put it together for the Scottish Education Workers Network, an organizing/outreach project of the Clydeside/Glasgow branch of the IWW. It is entitled Letting Go of the Status Quo... Teachers and Learners for a New Society.

I think the impetus for the leaflet was akin to what the red states teacher strikers were striving for: to encourage and enable greater solidarity within the working class. Too often workplace organizing and peace and justice campaigning seem to inhabit different worlds, with each thinking that their approach is the central and vital one for social change. Instead, we need each other, and the leaflet tries to show how our interdependence could be expressed. (Maybe I should see if one of the peace and justice activists around here would like to write a version from their point of view.)

It could be that similar attempts like this, along with discussions and ongoing outreach and mutual support, would be one path to broadening and sustaining organizing models that are independent of mainstream unions, and based on socialist principles and a vision of a new society.

We also need to build certain factors into alternative organizing, right from the start. These include clarity of purpose (principles and goals), networks, coalitions, and diversity and simultaneity of tactics. This last one is the hardest. But I think it is a useful concept, and guide to action—one that means keeping all these factors in our minds, hearts, and plans at the same time. Experimenting with structures for this would be interesting.

Susan

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July 25
All,

Rod raises an important but complicated issue in his response to what I wrote. To be clear, my own position is not only for a total break with the Democratic Party but a rejection of the program of the liberal Democrats as well as a rejection of the argument for a broad, non-socialist labor party or something along the lines of the Greens. As radicals, I believe wherever we are, including acting as teacher union militants, we should be taking this position..

The hard part is developing a radical program that bridges the gap between our vision of a future society and the immediate situation. This is not an easy task. In this context, I suggested that one point of such a program for those involved in conflicts within a local teachers union would be the demand that the local not endorse any candidates who were not prepared to back the legalizing of public sector worker strikes. Many years ago, when actually confronted with this problem, I raised this issue and found that the candidate involved immediately dropped her plans to solicit our endorsement.

This was in Massachusetts. Jack knows more about the current scene in California, but my guess is that there would be very few Democrats interested in an endorsement on this basis.

In any case, this would only be one point of a broader radical program. Further points might be the demand for smaller class sizes, the ending of state wide tests for students prior to graduation and the end of all funding to charter and public schools. These are all demands that most progressive teachers would support so the push would be to say that as local leaders we will take these demands seriously by trying to win them through direct action but we will also not support candidates who do not support this educational vision. Needless to say, it will be obvious that this requires the rejection of the Democratic Party and we should explicitly say this.

Jack touches on a broader issue, our relation to the existing unions. I entirely agree with him about TDU. An entirely wasted effort that went nowhere. This is not just a tactical question. Underlying the TDU approach was the belief that the existing unions could be reformed, that electing a new leadership would resolve the problem. In reality, we need an entirely different form of workplace organization, one that is decentralized and where there are only a few full-time officials, paid at the rate of an average worker in that union, and where power rests with militants at the point of production.

The IWW in its heyday was such a union. Now it would seem that what is needed for a start is a network of militants acting independently of the union. The recent teacher strikes are an example but here in Britain we have recently had an even more organized protest within the higher ed union (UCU). Militants defeated a sell-out by the union leadership and then went on to form a network. This network discussed forming an independent union but for now remains within the existing framework but in total hostility to the leadership.

Again, in this context, militants need a program that goes beyond a more confrontational approach to management.

Finally, Susan raises another difficult problem. The Left is fragmented, with some activists working at the workplace and others on single-issue campaigns such as those opposing militarism. The two groups seem to work in a vacuum rather than as part of a broader movement for fundamental change. Susan's leaflet is a step in breaking down that fragmentation but there needs to be more networks such as the Utopian where we can talk together and try to overcome the fragmentation.

Eric

July 25

Eric and all,

I hope to reply more fully to Eric's thoughtful post soon. For now, though:

1. Public worker strikes aren't illegal in California. There's the usual ritual though: the union has to be out of contract and have gone through a ritual conducted by the Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) — impasse, mediation, fact-finding panel — which is designed to maximize collaboration between management (the state) and the union leadership (especially the state union leadership), and note that the state has double representation (as management and as the 'neutral' mediators and fact-finding panel chairs). So strikes don't occur too frequently — although there have been several at the University of California (Tanya was instrumental in many of these). Five years ago there was a BART (regional rail) strike. The longest and most militant over the past several decades was the Oakland teacher union (OEA) strike in 1996, which lasted nearly six weeks and was responsible for statewide class size reduction in public schools. [Following the OEA 1996 strike, the Gates and Broad Foundations poured money and people into Oakland, facilitating the state takeover of the Oakland schools in 1996, a gross increase in charter school enrollment, cuts in public school programs and staffing, etc. The OEA leadership, under the guidance of the state teacher union (CTA), pushed back against militant response — OEA has struck only once since 1996, and that was a one-day strike in April 2010).

2. I agree completely with your characterization of TDU, and in particular with your observation that the goal needs to be a different form of workplace organization, rather than reforming the existing unions (I tried to get at some of this in my report on the red state teacher strikes).

3. One thing that I've been thinking about, and hope that others have thoughts about, is how to approach the fact that when we call for funding public education — or for national health service, or other public programs — it is usually done in such a way that it will be delivered by, and thus in the process strengthen, the role of the state (that is, the bourgeois state). I have some ideas here, but would very much like to hear what others think.

Best,
Jack

Thoughts on Anarchy—A Personal Perspective

By Judy G.



(I have been working on a book for fifty years or more. That's a long time. Anyone who sticks with it will realize that i think we humans are in a dire situation. Personal relationships are disappearing at the same time that degradation of our Mother Earth is accelerating. In what follows i present a brief summary of my vision for a way forward.)

As a life-long activist, the question that comes naturally to my mind is, "What can be done?" Many solutions have been suggested:

- Various electoral programs have been proposed. The Democrats try to convince us that solutions lie in the direction of governmental and other social programs that more equitably distribute resources—healthcare, income, justice, education, food and such. Unfortunately, they have never been able to overcome the fact that all such programs are

designed to treat everyone as if they are the same and are administered by individuals who are strangers to each other.¹



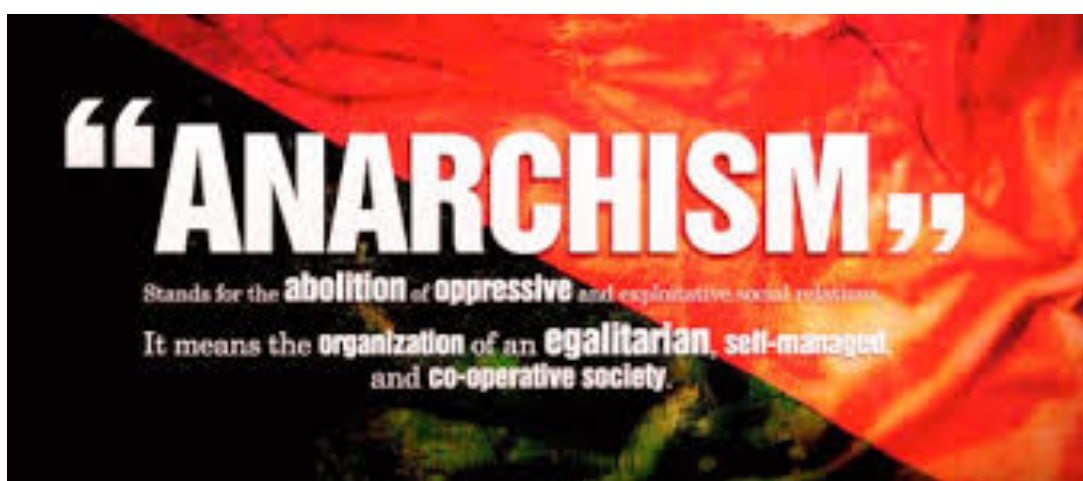
The Republicans seem to believe that the cream has risen to the top and that those who control the corporate system are naturally superior and, given free rein, will make the right choices for the future. The evidence seems to me to be conclusive that they are wrong. These are the people who have and do promote an economic system that allows those who own the resources, no matter how they have obtained them, to use and abuse those resources so as to maximize power for themselves, no matter the cost to others and to our Mother.



Others vying for political/electoral power in the U. S. are variations on the theme: more or less ecologically destructive capitalism, more or less libertarian capitalism, more or less equal distribution of the fruits of the capitalist system. But it

¹ I remember being astonished when my academic mentor, Merrill Jackson, told me that in some judicial systems the goal was to find potential judges who knew best the parties to the legal action. Unlike in the U. S. system, where judges are expected/required to recuse themselves if they know the parties.

seems to me that no matter what form it takes, capitalism is primarily part of the problem. It teaches people to continually use more resources in order to make more products in order to make more profit. It teaches people to rely on wage labor to produce goods and services. As Marx correctly pointed out, wage labor leads to conflict between the owners of the means of production, who want to maximize their profits by minimizing what they pay “their” workers, and workers, who want to maximize their wages in order to live more comfortably. And everybody treats everybody else as a means to an end.



Whether “progressive” or “conservative”, the above solutions assume the viability of capitalism as the economic system in the U. S.

- Socialism and Communism have long been posited as solutions to the problems created or exacerbated by capitalism. The thing that is missing in all of these putative solutions is that whether capitalist, socialist, or communist, these governing systems are all based on bureaucratic stranger relationships: that is, on relationships that are partial, instrumental, based on explicit or implicit roles, and, as history has repeatedly shown, tend toward the creation of an elite that believes in its own ethical and intellectual superiority and, thus, legitimacy.

In other words, all of the above systems depend on the existence of a state, whether it is conservative or liberal and capitalist or

socialist or communist, each attempts to define the type of state it supports and defends. The appeal of anarchy, to me is that it eschews the existence of a state.



Now, i think it is self-evident that some people are more intelligent than others: are quicker to learn, quicker to gain insights, and quicker to develop consciousness of the nature of situations. Nonetheless, it seems to me that when people have been given the right to rule over others they have ultimately abused that power.

So, the question arises: is it simply in the nature of human beings that people take advantage of others? Is that just what we do? The answer, i think, is, no. It's not in our nature if there are exceptions; and what i learned in the study of social science is that there are exceptions. Those exceptions exist in what anthropologists call "tribes". I learned to define a tribe as "a group of kinfolk descended from a group of kinfolk in an unbroken line forever." We humans have spent about 95% of our time on earth living in tribes. The majority of societies on earth today are tribes. And i think history shows people fighting like hell to remain in tribes.

To me the primary appeal of anarchy is that it envisions the possibility of social organizations based on personal relationships. I see it as a way to organize social relations on a personal basis. It's a way to make decisions based on discussions among the people, who trust that viable directions/solutions will emerge from their personal interaction. I understand it to be essentially non-hierarchical.

Years ago, i read a book by the anthropologist Dorothy Lee called *Freedom and Culture*. It was a revelation because she described

cultures and meanings that i had never encountered in my white, middleclass upbringing. One thing she talked about was the Native American notion that “the chief stands with the people.” She said that many people encountering native peoples think that the “chief rules the people.” Not so, says Lee. The picture she paints is of the kin group talking over their challenges until a consensus emerges and is articulated by someone who has been listening careful to everyone and taking into account their viewpoints and their needs.

Some have argued that in many African and Polynesian tribes the chief does, indeed, *rule* the people. I have never seen evidence of this being true and would be grateful to see it—as it is always good, in my experience, to have one’s ignorance corrected.

Whether liberal democracies, fundamentalist theocracies, socialist or communist bureaucracies, the thing all other governmental forms have in common is that they are based on stranger relationships. If my social science colleagues and our forbearers are right, personal relationships are essentially different from stranger relationships and they produce essentially different types of people and societies.



As i detail at some length in my book, personal relationships are based on familiarity such that each one in the relationship knows the other well, knows them as whole people, perceives them to be unique, and feels them to be a part of one’s self. In contrast, stranger relationships exist among individuals who have only partial, role-based relationships with each other and the relationships themselves are instrumental. Even when one is doing it “for his/her own good” one can manipulate strangers.

Several things impressed me about what i read in the issue of Utopia Magazine that Jon sent to me. One was that the writers of the articles seemed to be fundamentally interested in what each other were saying—not in scoring ideological or intellectual points.

No one seemed to be afraid of saying that they didn't know something. And the writing was personal and specific, not abstract and highfalutin'.

The mainstream media usually dismiss Anarchists as bomb-throwers who have no substantial contribution to make to political discourse. This should not be surprising, as the establishment owns the mainstream media.

On the contrary, anarchists seem to me to be the people most open to ideas that are compatible with my own thinking. Personal relationships are the most meaningful aspect of human life. We are a culture increasingly dependent on stranger relationships. For many of us, material possessions have become the symbol of our worth and the substitute for our personal relationships. We are drowning in our stuff—our material possessions and our garbage. We spend so much time looking at screens that we are forgetting how to hold conversations. This is particularly dangerous for children who have not yet learned to converse. Loneliness and depression are epidemic, and the suicide rate is steadily rising. We have dumped so much minute plastic in the oceans that it is killing sea life. Ice caps are melting and coastlines are flooding. And the poor fool in the White House is so intent on proving that he is important that he is willing to sacrifice our country, indeed the future of us and our children on the bonfire of his vanity.



Whom do you trust? Until we have familiarity with each other, until we know each other as whole people, until we become part of each other's identity we don't know whom we can trust.

Politics is a strange business. It's about power—about giving power to people we don't really know and can't really trust. In this so-called democracy, we are asked to trust politicians on the basis of

media propaganda, sound bites, and campaign speeches. I have had the experience of working with people for years, face-to-face, before i discovered they had been stabbing me in the back.

Anarchy is the only political approach i know that has the potential to be based on person-to-person relationships and is, therefore, the only one that appeals to me.

This brings me to the topic of strategy and tactics. My thoughts on strategy are two-fold. Firstly, i would like to see us always working toward creating communities, that is, networks of personal relationships, that are capable of sustaining the people when this whole house of cards collapses. Secondly, i think the less we cooperate with and participate in the bureaucratic planning system the more we will weaken it and strengthen ourselves. The one thing the system can't abide is non-participation. Who's going to do the work? Can you picture any of the 1% cleaning their own toilets?

This does raise the question of electoral politics. I am of two minds on that. On the one hand, i agree that to vote is only to encourage them. On the other, elections *do* have consequences; and, too often, it's the least privileged among us who pay the price when the least progressive of the capitalist parties are successful at the ballot box. I agree with Ron that people have to make up their own minds about that.

Tactically, i think there are many choices. I gravitate toward education, consciousness raising and skill development.

1. Education, i think, has two major components. The first is the basics taught in grammar school. Reading, writing, and arithmetic. Without them, one is lost in the modern world. A young man sometimes works for me in my garden who cannot do the arithmetic to determine if i am paying him correctly or not. I *do*, but he must take it on faith. What does one do in a modern urban setting if one cannot read a sign or fill out a job application? Beyond the basics, it's my belief/prejudice that the better understanding one has of history, the better off one is. Our present society did not emerge full-blown, from nowhere and from nothing. It developed from particular social situations, from particular people and particular cultural meanings. If, for example, one knows nothing about the history of so-called "race" in America, one could be led to

believe that African Americans are just bellyachin'--when nothing could be further from the truth. Without understanding the history of the European conquest of North America, one might think that the right to decide who can live here, on this stolen land, is legitimately in the hands of those who control the present political boundaries.

2. I have a rather simple-minded view of consciousness. I think it is the ability to perceive relationships between and among social phenomena. For example, to be conscious of white skin privilege is to be aware of the ways in which one's well-being is due to the exploitation or subjugation of another. Other examples: one could be said to be conscious of the interrelationship between wage stagnation and extreme wealth inequality, or among gerrymandered voting districts, corporate control of elections, and Republican control of state legislatures. In light of this perspective, i think that it behooves us to continually be about the task of raising consciousness, our own, each other's, and that of the people with whom we engage in political/social/cultural discussion and analysis. As we realize relationships it's a good thing to share those realizations and to check their validity with others.



3. When i speak of skill development as a tactic, i am thinking of learning and teaching practical skills that help people to survive when, for one reason or another, they do not have others to call on. Growing food, cooking, maintaining clothing, basic first aid, helping those who cannot help themselves (particularly the young, the old, and the infirm), are all practical skills that must be mastered within any community that is going to thrive. By learning them and teaching them

we nurture self-confidence and encourage ourselves and each other to take on and meet other challenges. Feelings of powerlessness are dangerous to our self-esteem.

The Enemy

It has taken me too long, to realize that we are really in a zero-sum game. My Christian upbringing leads me to want to love my neighbors and those who would spitefully use me. But, unfortunately, this isn't about my actual neighbors. This is about people who would never dream of living in my neighborhood. To them it would be a nightmare. This is about people who will stop at nothing, *nothing*, to maintain their power and social position. This is about the Koch Brothers, the DeVoses, that poor fool in the White House, and others too numerous to mention, many whose names we don't even know.



It's about people who oppose U. N. resolutions recommending breast-feeding over corporate-produced formulas. It's about people who refuse to permanently prevent Asian carp from entering the Great Lakes (the thirsty world's largest single supply of fresh water). It's about people who deny healthcare, healthful food, clean air and education to others just because those others are poor. It's about people who feel they have the right to choose whether other women should have abortions, whether voting rights can be denied to others, whether soldiers should be sent into battle to protect oil supplies, and whether climate change should be taken seriously. These are people who will stop at nothing; they are merciless.

Maybe i am self-deluded. Undoubtedly i am self-deluded. (The problem with self-delusion being that one cannot see one's own.) But i still think that both strategically and tactically the wise course

is non-violence. To be the change we want to see in the world. I have said for years that i think it is revolutionary in America to be non-violent. And that the system will bring itself down. Our job is to find ways to get as many of our people out of it as possible before it collapses. By “our people” i mean those who are capable of empathy.

We humans are complicated creatures. Each of us is imprinted by our own experience. The world doesn’t mean exactly the same thing to any two of us. And none of us is completely evil just as none of us is completely good. I think we need to find ways to build communities that enable us, as the old song says, to “accentuate the positive.” I don’t believe we can ever eliminate the negative, but we can identify it, shine a spotlight on it, and minimize it. I know that’s possible because i am a Detrouiter and i spend my life among numbers of people who do all they can to eliminate racism) That’s not an easy thing to do in America, and we Detrouiters don’t get enough credit for the degree to which we accomplish that.



The urban agriculture community, of which i am a part, is as fine a group of people as i have known in my seventy-four years. People meet each other as persons, each of whom is unique and important in his or her own right. It’s a safe place to be where people freely help each other, share resources, and truly love to spend time together—working or playing. In fact, there are lots of times when we can truly be said to be doing both.

I regularly eat in a restaurant that is located in the most racist city i have ever known—Dearborn, Michigan. Yet even parts of Dearborn are turning around, and the M & M Café is a good example of what can happen as it does. The owners are a Polish and Lebanese couple who have been welcoming customers of all ethnicities and feeding them healthful², delicious food for thirty-five years. They have provided the nucleus around which a multi-racial, multi-cultural clientele has formed. I don't know of another eating establishment anywhere as comfortable or diverse.

A couple of days a week i go to Fitness Works. It's gym in Detroit that is predominantly African-American, is run by African-Americans and could not be more welcoming to my lily-white self. Again, i am treated as a person, not a thing. It really has become a happy place for me. It's true there are a few there who treat me as white, but very few.

Being an aging, overweight, diabetic female, i have my share of health issues, which i take to the Henry Ford Health System. My primary care physician is an African-American Christian. I assume my ophthalmologist is a Jew. (I'm going by his last name; the subject has never come up.) My psychiatrist is from Pakistan and my Physical Therapist, Endocrinologist, and Ob/Gyn are all from India. (I don't know who's Muslim and who's Hindu or whatever.) And the vast majority of nurses, nurse practitioners, and other support staff are African-American. Although it is a large, bureaucratic organization there are people in it who are capable of treating their patients as persons, not as numbers. I can't imagine getting better healthcare anywhere.

The point here is that diversity is possible and desirable. We can just get along—as Rodney King wanted. Humans are capable of it; but, again, it's a matter of accentuating the positive and meeting people where they are. We live in a culture that increasingly emphasizes and is dependent upon stranger relationships. Persons³ are disappearing as individuals⁴ become more numerous.

² Well, maybe the carrot cake isn't so healthful, but it certainly is delicious.

³ Those whose identities have been formed in personal relationships.

⁴ Those whose identities have been formed in stranger relationships.

There is a tendency in American culture, exemplified best by the Republican Party that encourages us to hate and fear and to be suspicious of one another. It teaches us to take advantage of one another and to embrace ideology and ignore science. As long as we are kept apart and ignorant of each other's humanity, those who control the show will remain in charge and will continue to sell us down the river until there is nothing left to sell, and the river is so polluted that the fish can't even live in it.

I think our response to climate change must wash away capitalism, materialism, and bureaucracy. We can no longer afford to use resources that are not badly needed by the people. We can no longer afford to allow material acquisition to be a substitute for personal relationships. And we can no longer afford rule by bureaucrats looking for advantages for themselves.

It is, indeed, a life or death struggle for our species. It makes me very sad to think our amazing species may cause its own extinction.



Explorations in the Russian Revolution —An Anarchist Interpretation—

Part IV: Lenin's Vision of the Bolshevik State

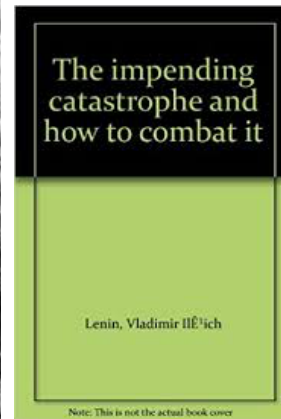
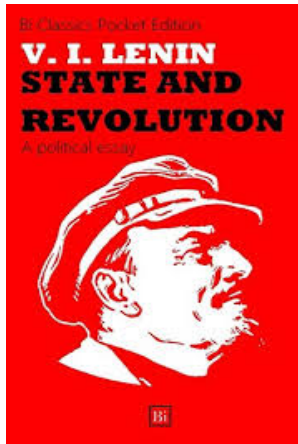
By Ron Tabor



When the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government in Russia and seized state power on October 25, 1917, they established what they variously called a "Workers' and Peasants' Government", a "Government of the Workers and Poor Peasants", and a "Government of the Workers and Laboring Peasants." In theoretical terms, they considered it to be the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat."

Revolutionary Marxists of various kinds consider the early Bolshevik regime to have been a "workers' democracy" which, had it not had to contend with the counterrevolutionary and imperialist forces arrayed against it and had proletarian revolutions broken out in Europe as the Bolsheviks predicted, would have led Russia to become a truly democratic socialist society. This assessment is based, to a considerable degree, on their interpretation of Lenin's

conception of the state the Bolsheviks aimed to establish, as laid out in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*, and in other writings written in the summer and fall of 1917.



It is my contention, however, that, even had events evolved as Lenin and the other Bolsheviks expected, the outcome would not have been a democratic workers' government but instead a bureaucratic, authoritarian, even totalitarian, regime similar to the one that actually emerged. This is because I believe that Lenin's conception of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is itself bureaucratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian. To see this, it will be necessary to look closely at *The State and Revolution* and at the other works in which Lenin laid out his plan. However, to make sense of them, we first need to look at the theoretical background in the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that served as Lenin's point of departure and on which he based his own conception.

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat – Marx' and Engels' View

As many people know, both the term and the concept of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" were coined by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. The notion was central to their revolutionary program and strategy, and clearly differentiated their views from those of other socialist thinkers, particularly, the anarchists.

Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat evolved over time. However, two major phases can be identified, divided by the Paris Commune of 1871. In the first period (from late 1847 to early 1871), while Marx and Engels insisted that the

proletariat/working class should seize political power, they left vague the actions the workers needed to take vis a vis the existing, capitalist, state; specifically, they left open the idea that the workers might be able to take over the capitalist state and use it for their own purposes. In the aftermath of the Commune, however, their views on this and related questions became much more defined. (This pertained to the countries of continental Europe. Marx and Engels continued to believe that in England and the United States, where, in their view, there were no militarist cliques and the state bureaucracies were small, the workers might be able to come to power peacefully, through the electoral process). So important was the Commune to the development of their position that Marx and Engels saw fit to make a correction to *The Communist Manifesto*, written 25 years before. In what Lenin

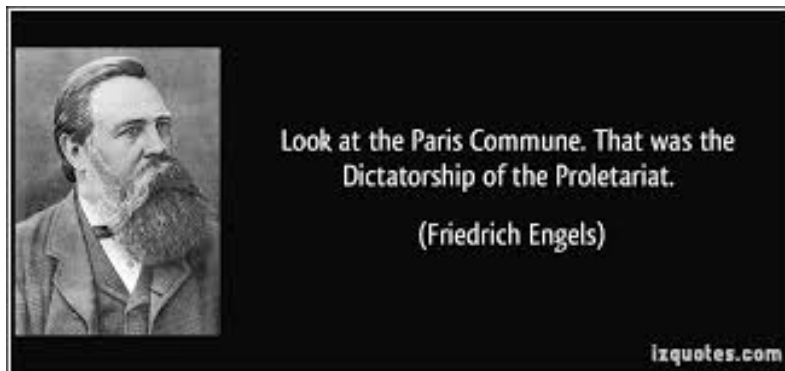


described as the "last preface to the new German edition of the Manifesto, dated June 24, 1872", Marx and Engels wrote: "...One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes'...." (*The State and Revolution*, Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 25, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p. 414.) The words in single quotation marks are from Marx's book on the Commune, *The Civil War in France*. (Note: In the interests of convenience, throughout this article, I have eliminated the emphases, printed in italics, that Marx, Engels, and Lenin often utilized in their writings.)

In what follows, I will present and analyze what I consider to be Marx' and Engels' mature, post-Commune, position, since this is the one on which Lenin based his own conception.

Marx and Engels believed that the fundamental strategic task of the working class in any given country is to seize state power, smash the capitalist state (particularly its bureaucratic and military apparatuses), and replace it with a state of its own, what they called the “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat.” Although Marx and Engels did not describe this proletarian state in great detail, they did make their overall notion of it clear. At the risk of simplification, I will list its central characteristics:

1. The establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat is inevitable; it is the logical and necessary outcome of the class struggle under capitalism (and all history). Or, as Marx wrote: “... the class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat....” (Marx, letter to Weydemeyer, *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 411.)



2. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a state. Although four years after the Paris Commune, Engels proposed, in a private letter to August Bebel, the leader of German Social Democrats, that was only made public in 1911 (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 440.), that he, Marx, and their followers refer to the post-revolutionary state as a “community”, Marx and Engels publicly remained loyal to their previous terminology: the “dictatorship of the proletariat” is (and has to be) a state.
3. The principal tasks of this dictatorship are to suppress the capitalists (and, where they still exist, the other oppressing classes), nationalize the means of production, and proceed to construct the class-less and state-less communist society.
4. The dictatorship of the proletariat is centralized, based on the nationalization of the means of production. Under it, the

workers are to move toward the establishment of a planned economy (although Marx and Engels never clarified their views about who is to do the planning and according to what principles such planning is to occur).

5. The dictatorship of the proletariat is democratic. It represents, in Marx' and Engels' various phrases, a "state of the armed workers", the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", and the "establishment of democracy." Its establishment means to "win the battle of democracy." (*The Communist Manifesto*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 402.) Because of this, the dictatorship of the proletariat is not a state "in the proper sense of the term." All previous states were instruments of tiny minorities that ruled over, oppressed, and exploited the vast majority. In contrast, the dictatorship of the proletariat is an instrument of the vast majority, who will use it to suppress the former ruling minority and to establish the conditions for the emergence of communism.



6. The dictatorship of the proletariat is not only democratic in this general sense; it also entails democratic decision-making by the workers themselves.
7. Marx and Engels based their mature conception of the proletarian dictatorship on the experience of the Paris Commune. The Commune was established in the aftermath of the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and in the context of the political and economic disarray the conflict brought in its wake. Facing starvation, in March 1871 the workers and other plebian elements of Paris, led by the

Central Committee of the National Guard, rose up, seized control of the city, and ruled it for over two months (March 18-May 28). Eventually, the city was invaded by the French army, and in extremely brutal fighting, the Commune was overthrown and the Communards massacred. (One recent estimate is that 10,000 were killed: *La Commune de 1871*, by Jacques Rougerie, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 2014). While it lasted, the Commune consisted of municipal councilors elected by universal (male) suffrage from the various wards of Paris. It was a working, not a parliamentary, body, handling both legislative and executive tasks, thus eliminating a professional state bureaucracy. All its members were workers or what Marx called "acknowledged representatives of the working class." Various "commissions" were established to manage the affairs of the city. All officials, including the councilors and the judicial and educational functionaries, were paid no more than an average worker's salary; they were all elected, responsible, and subject to immediate recall. The Commune passed decrees abolishing the standing army and the police. All male residents of Paris were required to join the National Guard, thus establishing a workers' militia. The Commune took other radical steps, such as the complete separation of church and state, the abolition of the death penalty, the establishment of a 10-hour workday, and the abolition of night work for bakers.

8. Seen in the context of this history, the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" to describe the proletarian state has a somewhat metaphoric and essentialist character. Since, according to Marxist theory, all states are, at bottom (that is, in their essence), dictatorships of one class to rule over others, the state the workers establish is (essentially) a dictatorship. Thus, Marx and Engels' use of the term "dictatorship of the proletariat" did not mean that, in their view, the proletarian state was to be a dictatorship of one party or one person.

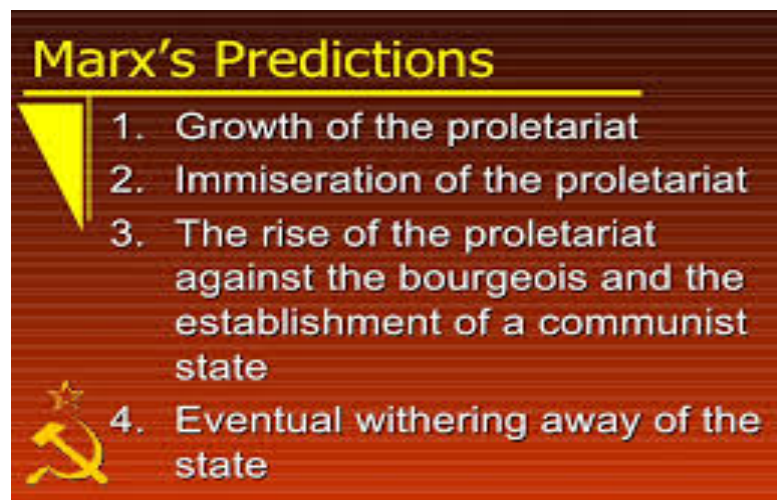
9. According to Marx' and Engels' projection, in the first stage of communist society, the workers (and everybody else, who, because of the nationalization of the means of production, have become workers) are to be paid according to the principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work." In other words, all members of society are to receive salaries that are proportionate to how much they produce. This principle (basically, piece-work) is a carryover from and a legacy of capitalist society; it is a form of what Marx and Engels called "bourgeois right." (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 465.) Although on a formal level, the principle represents equality and, hence, justice, on a more concrete level, it is unfair and unjust, since people's abilities and needs differ. Moreover, according to Marx and Engels, for as long as the workers need to enforce this principle, they require a state to do so.



10. Eventually, as the collective and planned economy becomes increasingly productive, as relative scarcity and the division between mental and manual labor are overcome, and as the habits of collective and cooperative life become ingrained in the population, society moves toward the establishment of full communism. This class-less and state-less society will be based on the principle: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."
11. As this occurs, the proletarian state "withers away." The state is not dismantled or abolished; it dies of its own accord.

Critical Remarks on Marx' and Engels' Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

From an anarchist point of view, there are serious problems with Marx' and Engels' perspective. The most obvious one is this: Marxists insist that the only way to abolish the state (in general) is by smashing the existing (capitalist) state and replacing it with a new, proletarian, one. Moreover, this new state is to be extremely centralized and powerful, since it will be based on the nationalization of the entirety of society's means of production and on the fact that, as a revolutionary dictatorship, it will not be bound by any legal norms. Once established and the old ruling classes eliminated, this revolutionary dictatorship will, according to Marx' and Engels' theory, eventually "wither away." Those of us who do



Marx's Predictions

1. Growth of the proletariat
2. Immiseration of the proletariat
3. The rise of the proletariat against the bourgeois and the establishment of a communist state
4. Eventual withering away of the state

not subscribe to the Marxist variant of Hegelian dialectics might be permitted to be skeptical. And, so it seems to me, the results of history bear out this skepticism. The outcomes of all Marxist-led revolutions have not been the elimination of the state, one of the proclaimed goals of Marxists, but the establishment of monstrous state-dominated regimes that attempted not only to manage all the economic, social, and political affairs of society but also to control the thought processes of each and every one of their citizens. To begin to grasp why and how this happened, it is worth looking at Marx' and Engels' notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat in more detail.

First, Marx' and Engels' attempt to appropriate the legacy of the Paris Commune is questionable, on several grounds.

1. The uprising that created the Commune was not carried out by the "proletariat", in the Marxist sense of the term. Such a proletariat, that is, an army of mostly unskilled laborers employed in large industrial establishments, hardly existed in France at the time and was not to exist on any significant scale for at least two decades. Instead, the vast majority of Parisian workers were skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers working in small workshops, work crews, or as individual artisans. Moreover, in carrying out the insurrection, such workers were joined by other lower-class elements, including small businesspersons. Among the leaders of the Commune were intellectuals of a variety of ideological persuasions, including radical republicans, reformist and revolutionary socialists, and different types of anarchists; very few, if any, of these figures were Marxists.



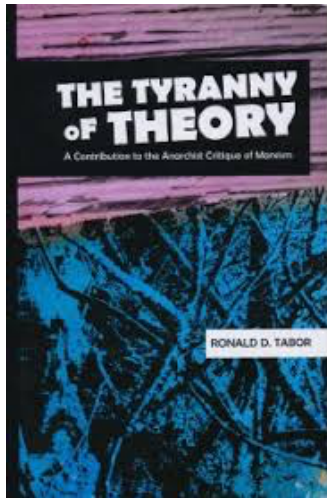
2. The Commune did not, in fact, smash the bourgeois state (although, judging from its own structure, it is reasonable to assume that it would have if it could have). During the course of the war, the French government had abandoned Paris and established itself first in Bordeaux, in the southwest of the country, and then in Versailles, the residence of the French monarchs from the time of Louis XIV, located about 20 miles northwest of Paris. The government continued to rule the part of the country that was not under occupation by the Prussian army through the centralized bureaucratic apparatus that

remained intact. Most important, the government retained full control of the army, which would eventually, under the watchful eyes of the Prussian army that surrounded most of Paris, invade the city and overthrow the Commune.

3. The Commune did not nationalize the means of production. It had no power outside of Paris, and even within the city, it left economic establishments in the hands of their owners. The closest it came to nationalizing property was to authorize workers in enterprises that had been abandoned by their owners to take over and run them cooperatively.
4. The political vision of the Commune, to the degree that it had time to elaborate one, was decidedly decentralist, specifically, a network of regional and local communes, down to the level of the villages, each of which was to have maximum local autonomy. This reflected the fact that key leaders of the Commune were followers of the mutualist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and other anarchists, who advocated this type of decentralized social structure. In contrast, Marx and Engels were militant centralists, reflecting their view that the logic of capitalist development was to concentrate and centralize the means of production in ever fewer hands and eventually under the control of the state. In their writings on the Commune, Marx and Engels fudged this crucial issue. Although they admitted that, in the Communards' sketch of their plan for the political structure of the country, "very few" tasks were to be left to the central government, they simply asserted that this was consistent with centralism because "national unity was not to be broken." (Marx, *The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 427.)
5. All this suggests that, despite Marx' and Engels' claims, the Commune was not quite the model of the "dictatorship of the proletariat", as they conceived it.

Second, the notion that the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat (or, in fact, any other event in history) is inevitable is absurd. It reflects an archaic conception of science that, in light of the development of quantum mechanics, modern genetics, and other scientific developments, can no longer be reasonably

sustained. It is also (as I discuss in my book, *The Tyranny of Theory, A Contribution to the Anarchist Critique of Marxism*) one of the main sources of the authoritarianism and totalitarianism that characterizes Marxist ideology and the Marxist movement as a whole.



Third, the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a state that embodies the direct and democratic rule of the entire working class is a contradiction in terms. As a centralized apparatus, particularly one that is as centralized as the “dictatorship of the proletariat” in Marx’ and Engels’ conception, the state can only be controlled by a minority. The state represents - indeed, is the very embodiment of - the existence of a political division of labor in society, that between a minority which rules and a majority that is ruled. As a result, to the degree that the proletarian dictatorship is a state is the degree to which it does not and cannot embody the rule of the entire working class; and to the degree that it does embody the rule of the entire working class is the degree to which it is not a state. Thus, a “dictatorship of the proletariat” that is a state can, at best, represent the rule of a minority of the working class, or more likely, a party that claims to represent the working class - supported, perhaps, by a layer of the working class - over the majority of that class.

Fourth, even if we (temporarily) disregard this point, Marx’ and Engels’ notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat rests on a problematic conception of democracy. In fact, it rests on two contradictory conceptions of democracy that are never made explicit and are never clearly separated. On the one hand, Marx and Engels appear to accept what is perhaps the most basic notion of

the term, that is, that all members of a given society have an equal right to control the political and other processes of that society. On the other hand, Marx and Engels seem to argue that, by virtue of its historic destiny (the notion that the working class is ordained, by the dynamics of capitalism and, more broadly, by the laws of history, to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat), the working class is the historic embodiment of social progress, and therefore the very establishment of working-class rule, in the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, necessarily establishes democracy. The contradiction between these two conceptions is blurred by the fact that, in Marx' and Engels' view, the dynamics of capitalism will eventually turn the vast majority of people of a given society into proletarians, members of the working class. As this process develops, the two notions of democracy will tend to converge, thus eliminating, or appearing to eliminate, the contradiction between them. In other words, as the working class becomes the overwhelming majority of society, establishing the "dictatorship of the proletariat" means the "establishment of democracy" in the traditional sense of the term.



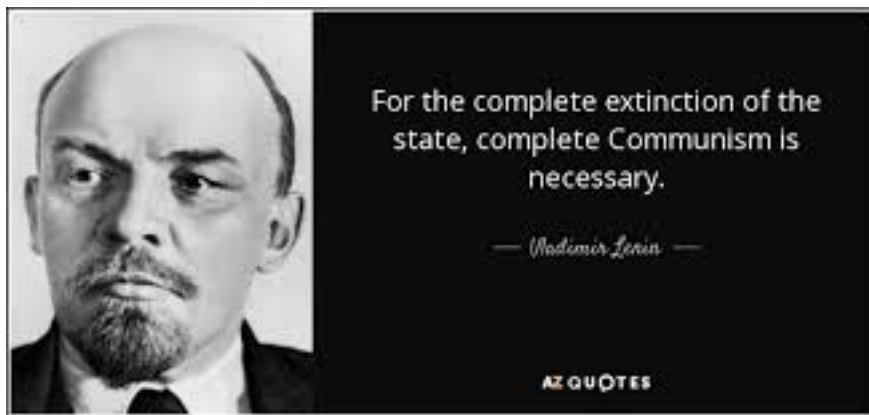
But this raises several questions: What happens in countries in which the majority of the people are not workers? Does the establishment of the dictatorship of proletariat in those societies still represent "establishing (or winning the battle of) democracy"? Does the working class in such countries have the right, by virtue of its historic destiny, to establish its dictatorship over the rest (the majority) of the population, even if that majority does not want to be ruled by the proletariat? Also, is the establishment of such a dictatorship justified on the grounds that it represent a "higher

form" of democracy than the conception of democracy as "one person one vote"? At the time Marx and Engels wrote, the proletariat was a small minority of the world's population, concentrated mostly in the countries of northwestern Europe, in fact, mostly in one, Great Britain. The majority of the world's population were then peasants, that is, small farmers. (It has only been relatively recently that the majority of the global population has become proletarian, even in a very broad sense of the term.) Yet, Marx and Engels called for an international socialist revolution. Does this entail the establishment of the international rule of the proletarian minority over the peasants and other members of the non-proletarian majority? And is this to be justified by the Marxian claim that Marxism is scientific, that the establishment of international communism is inevitable, and that the working class is the historical embodiment of social progress? Marx and Engels believed that the peasants are incapable of leading themselves and must inevitably come under the tutelage of an urban class, either the capitalists or the workers. In his writings on the Commune, Marx wrote that "The Communal Constitution would have brought the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and there secured to them, in the town working men, the natural trustees of their interests." (*The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 431.) Elsewhere, Marx and Engels argued that the workers, once in power, would lead the peasants toward socialism by demonstrating the economic advantages of modern agriculture, based on the latest agronomic techniques and machine technology, that socialism, with its large-scale collective means of production, would make possible. But what if the peasants do not wish to come under the "intellectual lead" of the workers and/or otherwise be "led" toward socialism, or at least not toward the form of socialism advocated by Marxists, specifically, one in which all property would be owned and controlled by the state?

Fifth, Marx' and Engels' phraseology concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat is extremely vague and ambiguous, at times even contradictory. This ambiguity centers on two interrelated issues: First, is the "dictatorship of the proletariat" a state or isn't it? On the one hand, Marx and Engels insisted throughout their political careers that the workers have to seize political power and take control over or establish a state. (This was one of the main points of contention in their disputes with Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin, and

other anarchists that ultimately led to a split in and the eventual demise of the First International and continued beyond that.) On the other hand, Marx and Engels claimed that this state is not a state in the "proper sense of the term"; it is a state that is in the process of becoming a non-state, a state that is "withering away." Second, when, precisely, does the "dictatorship of the proletariat" start to "wither away" and how long does such "withering" take? Some of Marx' and Engels' formulations imply that the process begins immediately upon the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship and proceeds rather rapidly. Elsewhere, their phrasing implies that they believe the state will linger on for a considerable period of time. In one place, Engels suggests that it will take an indefinite period, requiring a "generation reared in new, free social conditions", before the state will completely disappear. (Preface, dated March 18, 1891, to the third edition of *The Civil War in France*, in *The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 453.) In fact, in Engels' book, *Herr Duhring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Duhring)*, such ambiguities seem to occur in the very same passage:

"The proletariat seizes state power and turns the means of production into state property to begin with. But thereby it abolishes itself as the proletariat, abolishes all class distinctions, and abolishes also the state as state."



But:

"The first act by which the state really comes forward as the representative of the whole of society – the taking possession of the means of production in the name of society – is also its last independent act as a state. State interference in social relations becomes, in one domain after another, superfluous, and then dies down of itself. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things, and by the conduct of processes of

production. The state is not 'abolished'. It withers away." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 395-6)

This kind of vague, ambiguous, and contradictory terminology can be found throughout Marx' and Engels' writings; it is, in fact, a crucial, though unacknowledged, characteristic of their thinking. For example, they insisted that "social being determines social consciousness"; but they also contended that consciousness is not merely a passive reflex of social development but reacts back upon that process. Similarly, they argued that while the economic base determines the superstructure, the superstructure reacts upon the base; as Engels once put it, the economic base determines the superstructure (and hence the evolution of the entire society) only in the "last analysis." On a more philosophical level, Marx and Engels imply that history is simultaneously contingent, and therefore open and unpredictable, and determined, and therefore predictable. On these and other questions, Marx and Engels want to "have their cake and eat it, too", or to put it differently, to walk on both sides of the street at the same time.

All this reflects the Hegelian background and substratum of Marx' and Engels' worldview. The essence of Hegel's philosophical project was to synthesize freedom and necessity. And, in fact, Marx and Engels claimed to have done the same thing, but on a materialist and therefore scientific basis, in contrast to Hegel's avowed idealism. Engels, quoting Hegel's dictum, described freedom as the "recognition (or appreciation) of necessity." At the least, these vague, ambiguous, and contradictory concepts reflect Marx' and Engels' intellectual sloppiness and irresponsibility (some might call it dishonesty). But such ambiguities serve a crucial purpose, one that has been revealed throughout the history of Marxism. The libertarian-sounding phrases serve as ideological cover for a profoundly authoritarian, even totalitarian, content, specifically, Marx' and Engels' claim that their conception of socialism is scientific; that their views represent the "true" consciousness of the proletariat, and therefore that all other conceptions of socialism represent mere ideologies - "false" or "petit bourgeois" consciousness - and are therefore wrong. Beyond serving as ideological cover, Marx' and Engels' vague, ambiguous, and contradictory phraseology also enables Marxists to refuse to accept responsibility for both Marxian theory and the historical results of Marxists' practice. When critics point to the many examples of Marx'

and Engels' determinist terminology (for example, their frequent use of the terms "inevitably", "inexorably", and "necessarily"), Marxist apologists can always point to the (far fewer) phrases that imply the opposite. Likewise, when critics argue that Marxism must take responsibility for the horrors that have been wrought by Marxists, the apologists generally place the blame elsewhere, usually on "objective conditions."

Most relevant to our discussion, Marx' and Engels' ambiguous formulations concerning the dictatorship of the proletariat lead to the paradox that while Marxists insist that they are militant opponents of the state (after all, one of their proclaimed long-term goals is to eliminate it entirely), in the short and medium run, they advocate building up the state, both under capitalism, and even more so, after the proletarian revolution. In this way, Marx' and Engels' claim that, after the dictatorship of the proletariat is established, the state will automatically "wither away" serves to obscure what is a profoundly statist theory and practice. While in theory, Marxists are against the state and call for its elimination, in practice, they are militantly pro-state. This is not conscious deception. Marxists truly believe that the more thoroughly they build up the state, and the sooner that state eliminates the capitalists and the other oppressing class, takes over all property, and crushes all resistance, the sooner the state will disappear. (We're still waiting.)

Sixth, the determinist character of Marxist theory is revealed in Marx' and Engels' insistence that, during what they called the first stage of communism ("socialism"), the workers will be paid according to the principle, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his work." But, one might ask: Who says so? How do Marx and Engels know this? Who and/or what decides that this is what will happen? Is this, too, inevitable? Yet, if the dictatorship of the proletariat is really the "proletariat organized as the ruling class", if it really means the "establishment of democracy", why can't the workers decide, collectively and democratically, how they will be paid, or, better said, according to what principle they will pay themselves? Why are they obligated to be paid according to what Marx and Engels explicitly claim is a bourgeois principle? Moreover, why do they need a state to enforce this? And who is to control this state and enforce this principle? From the standpoint of Marxism, the basis for Marx's assertions on these (and on other)

questions is that all this is the expression of the “laws” of history as they will be expressed in the transition from capitalism to socialism, with socialism bearing the scars of its origins. Consequently, in this view, even after the socialist revolution, even after the establishment of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (the “proletariat organized as the ruling class”, the “establishment of democracy”, winning “the battle of democracy”), history is still determined. In other words, social development is still governed by historical laws that guarantee that, regardless of the workers’ consciousness or desires, they will continue to be paid according to bourgeois norms, norms that will be enforced by a state. In this conception, even after the socialist revolution, which one would think (and hope) should be an act of consummate freedom, the workers are not free; they are governed by – indeed, are the mindless playthings of – historical necessity. It seems that only at the very end of this long, historically-ordained process are the workers to be free. In this conception, then, freedom is determined. But how can freedom be the result of determinism? In a world that is determined, there is not, cannot be, and never will be, true freedom. Is it any wonder that when people who hold to such views come to power and seize control of a state, moreover, a state that controls all of society’s means of production, what they will build will not be a free society, but instead a totalitarian nightmare? (You don’t understand comrade, it’s dialectical.)



Finally, to return to my initial point, why on Earth would a state, a revolutionary dictatorship that owns and controls all of society’s means of production, “wither away”? Even at their most minimal, states are ramified organizational apparatuses that are staffed by real people. Isn’t it possible, even rather probable, that, once in

power, the people who occupy positions in the state would struggle to hold onto these positions and seek to concentrate even more power in their hands? Wouldn't this be even more likely the more centralized, and hence the more powerful, the state apparatus is? And isn't this what happened in Russia in the aftermath of the October Revolution?

With all this as background, we can now proceed to an examination of Lenin's views.

Lenin's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

V. I. Lenin, the founder and leader of the Bolshevik Party, saw himself, and always tried to present himself, as the faithful follower of Marx and Engels. In fact, where he differed from other Marxists, he insisted that he, and only he, was the true interpreter of Marxism and that everyone else was a "renegade", in fact, a promoter of "petty bourgeois ideology." This was certainly the case with his conception of the "dictatorship of the proletariat." Lenin's views on this and related questions were most concisely expressed in his pamphlet, *The State and Revolution*. This work was written during July and early August of 1917, while Lenin was in hiding after the semi-insurrectional July Days and the government repression that followed it; it was published in early 1918, after the Bolsheviks had seized power. Lenin's concern in writing *The State and Revolution* was to establish the Marxist *bona fides* of the Bolshevik strategy of overthrowing the Provisional Government, smashing the existing (Tsarist/bourgeois) state, and building a new, proletarian, state based on the soviets. In other words, Lenin wrote *The State and Revolution* to demonstrate that the Bolshevik-led revolution was to be a true proletarian socialist revolution and, in fact, the fulfillment of Marxism.

Consistent with this, *The State and Revolution* has two interrelated polemical thrusts. The most important was to debunk the Mensheviks' claim, which they based on Marx' and Engels' early, and vague, formulations on the state, that their policy of supporting and taking positions in the Provisional Government was the correct interpretation of the Marxian strategy. The other was to differentiate the Bolsheviks' views from those of the anarchists, who demanded the immediate abolition of the state.

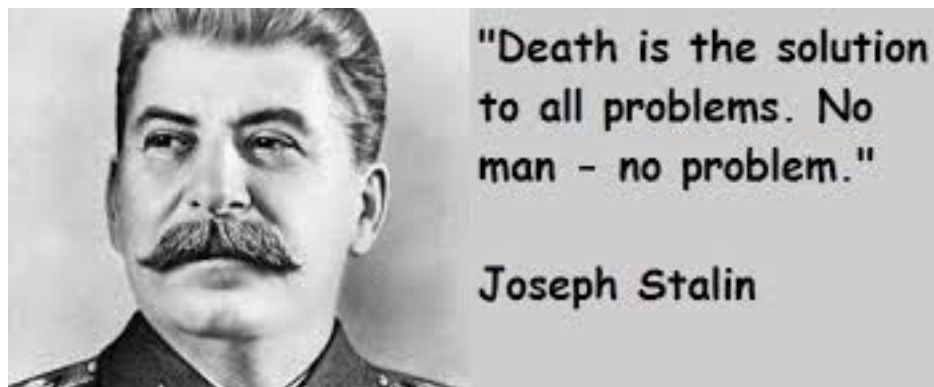
In its outlines, the conception Lenin lays out in *The State and Revolution* and in his other writings of the period is consistent with the position advanced by Marx and Engels in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. However, he does elaborate on Marx' and Engels' views and extends them to what I see as their logical conclusions. Here is my attempt at a summary:

1. Lenin insisted that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the fundamental concept of Marxism: "A Marxist is solely someone who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 412.)



2. Lenin noted that the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is the dictatorship of a "single class."
3. Lenin proposed that, in the context of the conditions prevailing in Russia at the time (1917), the soviet, rather than the commune, should be the fundamental organizational form of the proletarian dictatorship in Russia, specifically, that the national network of soviets constitute the basic structure of the Bolshevik state.
4. Like Marx and Engels, Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would do away with a standing army and a separate police force, both of which would be replaced by the "armed workers."

5. Lenin claimed that after the workers smash the old bureaucratic machine, they need to construct a new "bureaucratic machinery", which will, he believed, make possible the gradual abolition of all bureaucracy. By way of explanation, Lenin wrote, "We are not utopians, we do not 'dream' of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination.... No, we want the socialist revolution with people as they are now, with people who cannot dispense with subordination, control, and 'foremen' and accountants. This subordination, however, must be to the armed vanguard of all the exploited and working people, i.e., to the proletariat." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 425-6.)



6. Lenin's model for how he proposes to organize the Russian economy under the dictatorship of the proletariat was the German postal service, which he described as a "business organized along the lines of a state capitalist monopoly." "To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service so that all technicians, foremen and accountants, as well as all officials, shall receive salaries no higher than a workman's wage, all under the control and leadership of the armed proletariat - this is our immediate aim." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 426-7.) Elsewhere, he writes: "[T]he vital and burning question of present-day politics" is "the expropriation of the capitalists, the conversion of all citizens into workers and other employees of one huge 'syndicate' - the whole state -and the complete subordination of the entire work of this syndicate to a genuinely democratic state, the

state of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 470.)

7. Lenin contended that one of the main purposes of this "bureaucratic machinery" would be the establishment of the "strictest accounting and control" over the production, distribution, and consumption of economic goods. This, in turn, would require the centralized and compulsory organization of all economic life in Russia. Lenin believed that the combined political, economic, and organizational structure of the dictatorship of the proletariat in Russia would be the embodiment of the "most consistent democratic centralism and, moreover, proletarian centralism." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., pp. 429-430.)



8. Lenin claimed that the dictatorship of the proletariat" would be based on "iron discipline."
9. Lenin recognized that the state that continues to exist during the first phase of communism (socialism) and that enforces "bourgeois right" in the distribution of consumer goods is, in fact, a bourgeois state. "Of course, bourgeois right in regard to the distribution of consumer goods inevitably presupposes the existence of the bourgeois state, for right is nothing without an apparatus capable of enforcing the observance of the standards of right.

"It follows that under communism there remains for a time not only bourgeois right, but even the bourgeois state, without the bourgeoisie!" (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 471.) In other words, the "dictatorship of the proletariat", in Lenin's conception, is a bourgeois state, although one controlled by the armed workers.

10. Lenin argued that the dictatorship of the proletariat and the bureaucratic machinery through which it manages the economy can be controlled from below by the workers and peasants, not only through the soviets, but also through the other mass democratic organizations, such as the trade unions, and through periodic conferences of the employees of the various enterprises where they worked. Such rank and file control would also be made effective by the fact that all functionaries would be paid no more than an average worker's salary and be subject to immediate recall.
11. Lenin believed that the dictatorship of the proletariat would last for the "entire historical period which separates capitalism from 'classless society', from communism." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 413.) This period will be one of "unprecedentedly violent class struggle in unprecedentedly acute forms." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 412.) Consistent with this, Lenin admits that the "withering away" of the state "will obviously be a lengthy process." (*The State and Revolution*, op. cit., p. 457.)

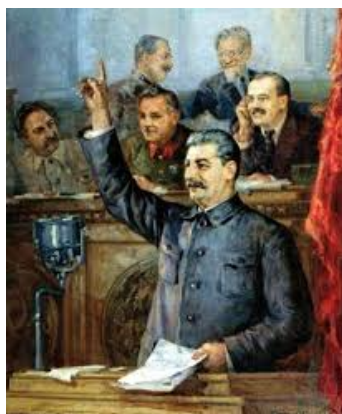


12. Finally, Lenin argued that the Russian working class, even though it represented only a tiny minority of the

population of the country, could and had to seize power and establish its revolutionary dictatorship, as the first stage of an international socialist revolution. In his conception, the workers in Russia, where political conditions were ripe, would start the revolution, which would, as political conditions matured elsewhere, shortly be followed by revolutions in Germany and other countries of Western Europe.

Critical Remarks on Lenin's Conception of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

First, although the soviets have often been touted by Marxists as an intrinsically democratic and proletarian structure, this is not quite the case. As I discussed in earlier articles, the soviets were not the purely spontaneous creations of the workers, soldiers, and peasants; they were also, at the least, semi-hierarchical in structure. While, under certain circumstances, they might have served as the basis for a truly worker- and peasant-run society, they might also, under other circumstances, have served as the basis for the establishment of the rule of revolutionary intellectuals and bureaucrats over the workers, peasants, and other members of society. A great deal depended on whether the soviets retained the fluid and highly de-centralized structure they had in the period between the February Revolution and the October Insurrection or whether they were centralized and thus turned into an organizational apparatus under the control of the Bolshevik Party. And, as we have seen, the Bolsheviks were fervent advocates of centralization.



Second, although Marx and Engels insisted that the working class, in the aftermath of a successful proletarian revolution, needed to

establish a state, they did not, to my knowledge, ever explicitly state that the workers should create a new "bureaucratic machinery." However, in light of Marx' and Engels' discussions of the continued existence of the state after the workers' insurrection and, in particular, their insistence that the workers need a state to enforce the "bourgeois right" of being paid according to one's work, this was, I believe, a reasonable deduction on Lenin's part.

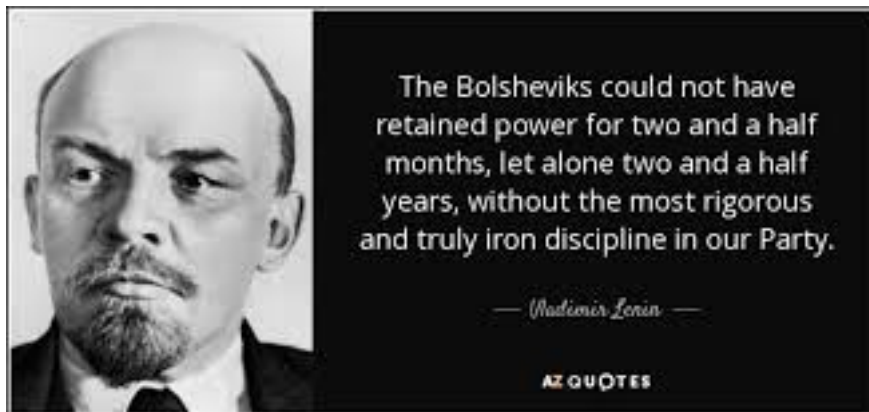
Third, Lenin's conviction that one of the main tasks of the "bureaucratic machinery" that the workers, upon their seizure of power, needed to set up was to establish the strictest "accounting and control" of the economy, was also a logical deduction of Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat. In Marx' and Engels' view, one of the advantages of socialism, as they conceived it, was that under such a system, the economy could be planned. Specifically, establishing a centrally planned economy was the main way that society, under the rule of the working class, would eliminate the "anarchy of production" that was characteristic of capitalism and which was one of the chief causes of the periodic, and extremely destructive, crises that plagued the system. In fact, Lenin had a fairly specific conception of what this "bureaucratic machinery" would look like. In his pamphlet, *The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, which was written after *The State and Revolution* but before the October Insurrection, Lenin laid out his main ideas. These included a series of compulsory measures directed not only against the capitalists and the bankers, such as the nationalization of the banks and the compulsory formation of industrial syndicates, which were to be united in one national syndicate, but also against all other classes, including the peasants and workers. Among these latter measures were: the compulsory unionization of all members of society; the compulsory organization of all members of society into consumer cooperatives; the insistence that all members of society be subject to compulsory labor, or what Lenin called "universal labor conscription." (*The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat It*, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Volume 25, op. cit., p. 359.) The result would be the formation of a nation-wide administrative/bureaucratic apparatus that, in Lenin's view, would be under the direct control of the soviets and the other mass democratic organizations of the workers and the peasants.

The need to establish the “strictest accounting and control” over the production, distribution, and sale of all goods, “down to the last pood (36.11 lbs.) of grain”, was a constant refrain of Lenin’s in the period leading up to and after the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power. But imagine what this means! Russia at that time was (and still is today) an enormous country, by far, the largest in the world. From north to south, it covers five distinct geographic belts (for those who are interested: tundra, taiga, forest, steppe, and desert) and, at the time of the revolution, 11 time zones. (In contrast, the continental United States has four.) To establish the “strictest accounting and control” over the production, distribution, and sale of all goods (down to the last pood of grain) in a country as large as this would require a bureaucratic apparatus of enormous proportions, far larger than the Tsarist state bureaucracy Lenin



pledged to smash, one staffed by tens of thousands of people who would have to handle (fill out and sign) enormous quantities of paper forms. Lenin argued that, under the control of the soviets, the job of ensuring the “strictest accounting and control” could be reduced to such simple tasks that even an ordinary worker could perform them. But in this he was either delusional or dishonest. As he well knew, many workers (and a majority of the peasants) were neither literate nor numerate, and many of those who were literate and numerate were barely so. Also, establishing and maintaining the “strictest accounting and control” over the production, distribution, and sale of goods would require, not part-time workers, splitting their time between their regular jobs and their soviet tasks (and subject to immediate recall), as Lenin described, but full-time state officials (that is, bureaucrats), many if not most of whom, at least in the early stages of the revolutionary regime, would be former Tsarist office-holders or members of the

intelligentsia. (Of course, after some period of time, during which the new government would educate the population, such officials might well be recruited from among the workers and even the peasants, but eventually, such individuals would become, in their life-style and their social attitudes, not workers at the bench or peasants tilling their fields, but full-time bureaucrats. In fact, such a "proletarian" and "peasant" bureaucracy did emerge in Russia. It was to provide the mass base for Stalin and his regime.) And, I would argue, this would be the case even if proletarian revolutions did break out in Western Europe and were both able and willing to provide substantial economic aid to economically underdeveloped Russia. Moreover, establishing the "strictest accounting and control" would require not merely keeping track of all economic products (down to the last pood of grain), but also keeping tabs on all the human beings involved in the production, distribution, and sale of these products. It would thus be a logical, and short, step to the establishment of internal passports, workbooks, and other measures designed to restrict the independent movement of the population, including the workers and peasants themselves.



Fourth, Lenin believed that for the revolution to succeed, the workers would require "iron discipline." In the immediate aftermath of the October seizure of power, Lenin praised the workers for the unity, solidarity, and discipline they had displayed in carrying out the revolution. Like his insistence on the need to establish the "strictest accounting and control," this was a theme Lenin kept returning to in the months after October. And it, too, was a reasonable deduction from the writings of Marx and Engels. One of the chief reasons why Marx and Engels considered the proletariat to be the only consistently revolutionary class, the only class capable of overthrowing capitalism and establishing socialism, is that they

believed that the working class, in contrast to the peasants and other non-proletarian classes, would be trained in collective action and disciplined by the capitalist production process itself, which they saw as moving toward the formation of ever-larger industrial establishments employing ever-larger armies of workers. Such “proletarian discipline” would be instilled, for example, by the requirement that the workers be at their work stations, and begin and end work, at precise times and by the need to subordinate their labor to the “iron” rhythms of assembly lines and other production mechanisms. Yet, discipline is a double-edged concept. To be more precise, self-discipline (or voluntary discipline) is one thing; discipline that is externally imposed is quite another. What might start out as self-discipline, can, under certain circumstances, morph into something else, namely, the tyranny of those at the top of a political and economic hierarchy over those beneath them, and especially over those at the bottom.



Fifth, Lenin’s belief that the transition from capitalism to the classless society of communism would take an entire historical period, which he elsewhere described as an “epoch of wars and revolutions”, implies that, in his view, the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Russia and in other countries, would last for a long period of time, indeed, for an entire historical epoch. If so, then the dictatorship, based on the new “bureaucratic machinery”, that the armed workers are to create and control, would not be the temporary, almost fleeting, phenomenon that seems to be implied by some of Marx’ and Engels’ (and even Lenin’s) vague and ambiguous formulations – a state that is “not a state in the proper sense of the term”, a state that is in the process of “withering away” – but a long-standing, bureaucratic state apparatus, a kind of mass, hierarchical, combat organization, that, Lenin believed, the

proletariat would wield in its fateful struggle against the capitalists and the other oppressing classes. Can anyone but a confirmed (and dogmatically-blinded) Leninist seriously believe that such a militaristic apparatus, based on "democratic centralism", "iron discipline", and strict subordination, could actually be controlled by the broad layers of the workers, that is, by the working class as a whole? Isn't it much more likely to be controlled by those who sit at the top of this enormous, nation-wide, "bureaucratic machinery", specifically, in the case of Russia, the Bolshevik Party, and in fact, by the leaders of the party? And isn't it possible, even likely, that if political and economic developments did not proceed as envisioned by the Bolshevik leaders, this apparatus would be used not only against the capitalists, the landlords, and their allies and hangers-on, but also against those members of the oppressed classes, the peasants and even the working class itself, who do not agree to subordinate themselves to the "iron discipline" of the leaders, who do not agree to obediently follow the policies, decrees, and orders of the supposedly "proletarian" leadership?



Finally, Lenin's insistence that the Russian workers had to seize power in Russia, a semi-medieval society whose capitalist economy was still in its infancy, represented a substantial departure from what was then Marxist orthodoxy, specifically, the conception adopted by the Second (or "Socialist") International under Engels' intellectual leadership. This position was that the proletarian revolution would and had to occur first in the advanced capitalist countries in which the economic, social, and political conditions were ripe for the establishment of socialist society. These conditions were, first, the existence of modern industry based on the most advanced technology, in which the process of the concentration and centralization of capital was highly advanced, and in which the trusts and the state had already introduced elements of economic planning. Only in such economies would it be feasible to nationalize

the means of production and move to a centrally planned economy. Only this, in turn, would make possible the rapid development of the means of production that would eventually eliminate relative scarcity, the material basis for the competitive, dog-eat-dog, social relations that characterize capitalism. And only this would make possible overcoming the divisions between mental and manual labor and between town and country, and thus lay the basis for a planned, cooperative, communist society. The second condition necessary for the establishment of socialism was implied by the first, specifically, the existence of an industrial working class that would constitute the majority, or close to a majority, of society, and which would be disciplined by working cooperatively in large industrial enterprises and politically educated and steeled in the class struggle that would lead up to the proletarian socialist revolution. Eventually, on a state-by-state basis, the international capitalist system would be overthrown and communism established



on a world scale. This orthodox perspective suggests that the workers in countries in which capitalism is not fully developed should not attempt to carry out socialist revolutions but should instead seek to support bourgeois revolutions in which the capitalist class would seize power, establish bourgeois states, and create the conditions for the freest and fullest development of capitalism. Only after a considerable period of time, during which capitalist production would create the economic prerequisites for establishing socialism, should the workers in these countries attempt to carry out socialist revolutions and seize power for themselves. (This was the perspective of the Mensheviks.)

Lenin's strategy was a radical (it would probably be more accurate to say "revolutionary") break with this perspective. (In fact, Lenin's approach, in broad outline, was first raised by Leon Trotsky and Parvus [Alexander Helphand], at the time of the 1905 revolution, under the term "the permanent revolution.") Lenin based his new

perspective on his analysis of the capitalism of his day, as laid out in his pamphlet, *Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, written in 1916. Without going into details, it is sufficient to say that Lenin believed that, beginning with (and as exemplified by) World War I, the capitalist system had entered into a profound, systemic, international crisis. Such a crisis would make possible, not gradual, state-by-state proletarian revolutions, but more or less simultaneous revolutions in a number of countries and eventually on a world scale. In this context and because of the unique political circumstances in Russia, Lenin saw the Russian workers as leading the way politically, seizing state power and establishing their dictatorship, and seeking to hold on until proletarian revolutions broke out in Germany and in other advanced capitalist countries, eventually leading to a truly international revolutionary transformation of society.



Yet, in putting forth this daring strategy, Lenin was proposing, in fact, to establish, even if only temporarily, a revolutionary dictatorship of a small minority of the population of Russia over the rest of the Russian people. This undemocratic situation was to be mitigated by Lenin's belief that the proletarian dictatorship would be able to count on the at-least passive support of the majority of the peasants, who constituted over 80% of Russia's population. Yet, Lenin knew that this support, already tenuous, would be temporary, because he recognized that the peasants, deeply attached to the land that they and their families had farmed for generations, were likely to be militant opponents of the Bolsheviks' (and in fact all Marxists') conception of socialism – the complete and total ownership and control of the economy, down to the "last pood of grain", by the state. (Although in 1917, Lenin did promise not to expropriate the small peasants, in light of the long-standing Marxist commitment to the complete centralization of the means of production in the hands of the state, the peasants might have had good reasons to be suspicious.) To make matters worse, the

Russian working class did not even constitute a majority of the population in the cities.* So, right from the beginning, even under the most ideal circumstances, that is, the entire working class united behind the Bolshevik strategy (which was never in fact the case), establishing the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in Russia meant constructing a dictatorship of a tiny minority over the majority of the urban population and the even larger majority of the peasants, in other words, over the vast majority of the people of the country. This was to be justified by the Marxist proposition that the proletariat is the only consistently revolutionary class, that it is a class that is destined, by its position within capitalist society and by the "laws of motion" of that system, to overthrow capitalism and establish international socialism. In Lenin's view, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, even in circumstances in which it did not constitute the majority of the population, meant, by definition, the "establishment of democracy."



(*Some statistics: In 1917, the population of Russia was 182 million, 85% of whom lived in rural areas. The total number of workers employed in industry and mining was 3.4 million. The population of Petrograd, the capital and the country's largest city, was 2.4 million, of whom roughly 400,000 were industrial workers. Source: S. A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories, 1917- 1918*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.)

Conclusion

It has been my purpose that show that Lenin's conception of the state the Bolsheviks intended to establish once they had seized state power does not represent the libertarian proletarian vision that it has often been claimed to be. It is not a state in the process of "withering away." It is not a state that is "no longer a state in the proper sense of the term." It is not a vision of a flexible, decentralized, truly democratic political arrangement that might have

enabled the Russian workers, peasants, and people of Russia to cooperatively manage the economy and all of society. Instead, basing himself on Marx' and Engels' conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, particularly their insistence that this required the centralization of all the means of production in the hands of the state, and his belief in the scientific nature - and hence, certainty - of Marxism, Lenin envisioned building a massive, nation-wide bureaucratic apparatus. This "bureaucratic machinery", built around the soviets and other popular organizations and supposedly controlled from below, would be organized on militaristic principles - "strict subordination" and "iron discipline" - with the workers as shock troops, and would manage a completely centralized state-owned economy: all citizens reduced to employees of one national syndicate, organized along the lines of a state-capitalist monopoly. With this apparatus as an organizational extension of the Bolshevik Party and based on the principle of "democratic centralism", Lenin aimed to establish the "strictest accounting and control" over the entire Russian economy and also, as the logical implication of his conception, to impose "iron discipline" over the entire population of the country. This was a vision of a mass, and highly disciplined, proletarian army, with Lenin, the only correct interpreter of Marxism and hence the embodiment of true "proletarian consciousness", as commander-in-chief. Even under the best of circumstances, this would have been a blueprint for a bureaucratic nightmare: a state capitalist monstrosity presenting itself as "proletarian." In the concrete circumstances of Russia at the time, that is, over three years of war; a collapsing economy (factories idle, people fleeing the cities, millions on the road trying to survive as best they could); the breakdown of social life (an explosion of crime, rampant vigilantism, an orgy of alcoholism); and looming famine - Lenin's vision was a recipe for disaster.



It is only by the abolition of the State, by the conquest of perfect liberty by the individual, by free agreement, association, and absolute free federation that we can reach Communism — the possession in common of our social inheritance, and the production in common of all riches.

(Peter Kropotkin)

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