

Red & Black Notes

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The World Is Our Picket Line

Workers Of All Countries Unite

Since almost the beginning of the workers' movement there have been those who have pronounced the disappearance of class and class struggle. Time and time again sociologists, pop psychologists and even trade unionists and socialists have dismissed notions of class as "quaint" and "old fashioned." Unfortunately for the advocates of this viewpoint, too many people are confronted with the reality of their everyday lives to deny the existence of class.

People such as the Liverpool dockworkers, on strike for over eighteen months against their employer and against their own union. The Detroit printworkers, on strike for two years against the *Detroit News* and *Free Press*. Korean workers and students locked in a seemingly endless conflict with the Korean state. For these militants and millions like them around the globe, in places that never made headlines, class and class struggle are not "quaint" abstract categories, but life and death struggles.

While it is clear that we are not on the verge of a general insurgency to overthrow the capitalist system there is a vast reservoir of untapped anger: Against the government; against the rich; against the established structures. No one it seems is in favour

of the status quo.

Capitalism has changed dramatically over the course of its existence and these changes have not by-passed working people. The current "restructuring" is the result of the failure of Keynesianism to deal with the fundamental problems of the capitalist economy. The statist detour practiced by capital, and regrettably followed by much of the left, is over and capital has turned to the unregulated market as its new savior. For working people the question is not can capitalism be reformed to our advantage, but can we still afford to follow reformist practices? If "Globalization" is the watchword of the capitalist class, then why not a globalization of class struggle?

Democracy: Can't We Do Any Better Than That?

The decision of Jean Chretien to ask the Canadian electorate for a new mandate only three and a half years into his term brought mixed results for his Liberal Party. On June 2 1997 voters gave Chretien's party the narrowest of majorities. With a mere 39% of the vote, the Liberals received 155 seats, 101 of these in Ontario! The rest of the election also saw regional distribution: The Reform Party in the west; the Progressive Conservatives in Quebec and the Maritimes; the Bloc Québécois in Quebec and the New Democratic Party spread thinly across the country.

Despite the usual noises made the vindication of the democratic process there was widespread cynicism about the election. This contempt was reflected in the turnout, down from 72% in 1993 to a mere 67%. Although voting levels

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have not dipped to the levels in the United States where no one believes that elections make a difference to their lives, many reacted to the election call with indifference. A feature story about the election appearing on E-day in the *Globe & Mail* showed many residents of St. Catharines, Ontario unconcerned about the election. Where there was not indifference there was outrage. For the residents of Manitoba, in the midst of the worst flooding in decades, the election call was another example of the disdain with which politicians treat their "subjects."

Yet if some accepted the "two minutes of illusory power" offered them by a benevolent Federal government, across the country, many people carried out actions against the ballot. In Montreal people undertook a campaign against the vote under the slogan "Votez Bien, Votez Rien [Vote Well, Vote For Nothing]." 10,000 pamphlets and posters were distributed in Laurier Ste-Marie on this theme. On June 2nd unknown individuals decorated a number of buses bearing election propaganda with the same message. When BQ leader Giles Duceppe showed up to vote, he was greeted by militants chanting "Ni Canada, Ni Quebec, Ni Patrie, Ni Etat." [No Canada, No Quebec, No Homeland, No State]. Protesters later explained to waiting cameramen the virtues of not voting, as well as the need for self-management and the necessity of the destruction of the state. It was not reported whether Mr. Duceppe spoiled his ballot in response to the efforts of his constituents.

In Vancouver several people took a similarly direct approach to the question of the ballot. Ballots were destroyed by turning them into confetti and one spirited protester actually set fire to his ballot! Poll clerks seemed unaware that according to Elections Canada this is a criminal offense, leading to speculation that the clerks realized that elections make little difference to government.

In Calgary several people ran a campaign to spoil ballots, correctly observing that there was no choice to be made. The choice between voting and not voting them making very little difference to the outcome. *Red & Black Notes* distributed a leaflet

pointing out the consequences of voting. (This leaflet is available. Contact us at the e-mail listed below)



Organization or Spontaneity?

The following article by Mick Larkin is reprinted from *Solidarity* #11, (Spring 1986).

The first meeting of County Durham Miners' Support Group after the strike began was quite an event. Faced with the question "How do we organize from now on?", an assembly of about a hundred people, mostly ordinary workers decided to adopt the classic anarchist structure, a sovereign assembly which mandates a co-ordinating body without executive powers. Obviously, I was overjoyed; but sadly, there's been a lot of backsliding since then.

It seems that the ideas we are trying to promote (such as participation and grass-roots control) are becoming popular, even taken for granted, but once they are put into practice it seems to bring out all sorts of contradictions which people aren't willing to deal with. For example the question of delegates being subject to the mandate of the assembly seems simply enough; but in practice this comes down to someone having to say "Excuse me, Mary, I think that's out of line with what we decided last week/ last month - see it says in the minutes for March 23 ...", etc. It seems to me that this is out of keeping with the working-class traits we so rightly admire such as spontaneity and 'earthiness'; in other words it all seems a bit cerebral.

Anyway, even if we could persuade people to adopt this approach to organization, do we really want to live in a world where people are always referring to motions carried, alterations to paragraph three line six, and so on?

Now there are no doubt reasons people can come up with as to why this is not really a problem,

but in my experience, to say that we can trust in spontaneous self-organization doesn't take into account that well-known phenomenon, the tyranny of structurelessness.. One example of this, which I've run into a lot, goes like this. Imagine someone suggests a new way of dealing with a situation (and obviously we're going to need plenty of them). What often happens is that this suggestion throws people a bit and there's a silence. The people who are content with the status quo, and therefore quite articulate within it and respected by many people, don't bother to take up the suggestion and discuss it. Instead they suggest a more familiar alternative, volunteer to carry it out, and then change the subject on the assumption that the lack of dissent means that this is what people want. It often is, but only because that's what they're familiar with. The original suggestion is lost almost without anyone noticing it, unless the person who raised it in the first place stops the meeting, which requires a certain amount of confidence, and asks to go back to it. Obviously this seems pedantic; "spontaneity" has thus worked in favour of the articulate elite and the anarchist gets labeled "bureaucratic."

"Relying on people's spontaneous common sense" can thus result in a debased form of volunteerism where it's understood that certain people write the leaflets, the assembly's final approval becomes a formal "rubber stamp", and the majority sink into passivity. To an outside observer, the action may seem to be a grass-roots decision; but I for one have now become very suspicious when I hear that a certain group has spontaneously developed an anarchist-type organization. If you scratch the surface you may find a leading militant behind it all.

All this seems quite a dilemma to me. We tend to think of a self-managed society as the kind of place where cleaners can argue the toss about developments in the third world, where the milkman has a say in town planning, and people generally think for themselves and get involved. But could it be that this would become ridiculously pedantic and boring? Have we been developing our utopias while ignoring the realities of human psychology, such as

the fact that people have a limited attention span, find it difficult to be open in large groups, don't want to be making choices all day, and have better things to do than decide what the graphic on a leaflet is to look like? If we try to promote a simplistic conception of the "sovereign assembly", where, for example, all one hundred people try to write a leaflet, this will quickly be seen as impractical and rejected. So instead, we have to develop a more subtle approach which relates to what people are really like. Rather than just identifying a problem and leaving it at that (something I find a bit annoying in other people's articles), I'm going to try and suggest some ways this might be achieved.

I think it basically comes down to looking at things differently. It's a well-known fact that we abstract the infinite variations in the world around us and filter them through a particular, limited interpretation. This is inevitable, but sometimes it leads us to set up unnecessary dilemmas.

For example, there are three basic ways to write a leaflet. The worst is to leave it to the experts. The most impractical is for a whole group to try to do it at the same time. The most usual (in groups where anarchist forms of organization have developed) is to mandate someone to draw up a draft, then submit it to the group for possible alterations. This last is not so bad so far as it goes, but it's very susceptible to degeneration if, for example, the usual people always get asked to do the draft. Many people are not confident enough to voice their opinions in a large meeting - the draft is often just read out and people are expected to make comments upon it off the cuff. A big step forward in terms of participation would be achieved if it were realized that the involvement of the group is vital in the initial creative stage of the process if everyone is to feel it is "their leaflet." This is much easier to achieve if we realize that projects get formulated through different levels of detail. Although one hundred people cannot write one leaflet, they can sketch out the basic concepts they want included, then give it to delegates to draw up. If this kind of outlook were accepted, we would not get into the situation which often now occurs, where

people try to get into the detail of a leaflet en masse, realize it's not on, and leave it to a few people to draft; by which stage much boring time has been wasted and people are starting to get pissed off with the idea of participation.

Obviously people should be expected to share their skills and positions rotated to help people build up their confidence. Various people, especially feminists, have done a lot of work on breaking down meetings into smaller groups, so we need to consider what aspects of this are worth taking on. Finally we should try to promote the idea that a large number of copies are to be made of any draft leaflets, etc., and distributed before the meeting so that people have a chance to formulate clearly what they want changed.

So that's a start, maybe. No very earth-shattering concepts there, I'll agree, but I don't think that's really what we're in need of. What is required is a practical reworking of the structures that exist inside and outside, so that they are as efficient as possible for the new purposes we want to put them to.

This concept of anarchism may seem pedantic, and I'd be only too pleased if someone could persuade me that such rigour is all unnecessary, but experience suggests that there is a real need to develop effective forms of organization which counter *all* kinds of elitism. Otherwise "spontaneity" becomes the tyranny of structurelessness and participation is about the most boring thing you can imagine.

Who We Are; What We Want

In the first issue of *Red & Black Notes* we stated that "we reject capitalism in favour of a libertarian socialist society." While no detailed exposition of our political perspectives exists at this time we are in general agreement with the network that produces *Collective Action Notes*, a Baltimore based newspaper that documents workers struggles and circulates texts from what was once called the "ultra-left." In subsequent issues we will attempt to expand upon our perspectives.

In approaching questions of class struggles we are also informed by the perspectives of the now-defunct *Root & Branch* collective:

1) that every social movement is, above all, a response of those who comprise it to the social conditions they face. The development of socialism depends on their recognition that their needs can be met only when, collectively, they take control of their own activity; 2) that every social movement expresses the development of this recognition through its activities. It is such activities - foreshadowing the complete self-determination which is the hallmark of a socialist society - which we want to aid and encourage; 3) that the objective of a radical movement is the direct control of social institutions by those whose activities comprise them. The efforts of any organization to substitute its control of society for this direct control is a distortion of this movement; 4) that attempts to impose intellectual orthodoxy, fixed ideas, or abstract slogans upon these social movements only serve to dissipate and hinder them.

At the present time there is no mailing address for *Red & Black Notes*, something we hope to rectify in the near future. For the time being please write to *CAN* at the address below. We can be reached via e-mail at nfettes@freenet.calgary.ab.ca or by phone at (403) 263-2963

or contact:

Collective Action Notes POB 22962 Baltimore, MD 21203, USA

E-Mail: cansv@igc.apc.org or [www: http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/2379](http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/2379)

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