

BUILDING BEYOND ELECTIONS



DEMOCRACY

The core assumption of our political system is that the government represents the will of the people and that this will is expressed through elections. Because of this, political parties are the most important organisations in mainstream politics and many people do not get involved in politics beyond voting. Most people do not even know what politics looks like outside of trying to win elections and those wanting progressive social change rely on parties like Labour, the Greens, or the Liberal Democrats.

This pamphlet will argue that this approach to politics is not enough to achieve lasting progressive change, that our political system does not work the way it is described, and that our votes are worth far less than we are led to believe. Instead, we need to build stronger organisations in our workplaces and communities, and with these organisations we can change society regardless of who is in government and no matter how hard they try to resist change.

MAJORITIES

The first problem with our democracy is that even a perfect democracy can only represent the interests of the majority of the population. This is a problem in a world where one of the main social problems we face is the oppression of minorities. There is no reason to expect that a majority will not be racist, sexist, homophobic, unreasonable, or simply mistaken in its understanding of the general interest. If a majority supports the oppression or exploitation of a particular minority, as has often happened, then a democratic vote does not protect that minority, instead it empowers the majority to impose its will.

However, even majority rule would be an improvement over the current system. In Britain the average percentage of votes needed to win an election since World War Two has been only 43%. If the entire population is taken into account, not just those who both could and did vote, the average percentage needed to win an election since World War Two is only 23%, with the lowest being 16% in 2005. Political parties do not even have to represent a majority in order to gain power. This means a political party representing only a minority of the population can take power and run society in the interests of that minority at the expense of everyone else.

Worse still, within our current economic system not all political support is equal, because material wealth is unequal. The support of a homeless person or a poor gig worker is not the same as the support of a rich factory owner or a media baron. The poor can cast their vote, but the rich can give a political party large sums of money, spread their message, and have far more impact in an election. The rich can also afford to be better informed than the poor, employing their own experts and setting up their own think tanks, while the poor often have to rely on the mainstream media to understand politics. This media is owned by the rich and represents their interests. As long the rich exist, they will always have far more influence on politics than just the vote they cast at the ballot box.

POLITICIANS

Many people have an intuitive grasp that our current political system is not as democratic as it claims to be, and that democracy does not necessarily guarantee that a political party will govern in the interests of everyone. However, people often hope that if we elect the right politician, they will work in the general interest despite the fact that they only need the support of a minority to gain power.

However, politicians do not get to do whatever they feel is best for everyone. They are in competition with each other for power and they must be efficient in how they build support and reward their supporters, or they will lose elections. If a politician only needs the support of a minority to win an election, it makes the most sense to dedicate as many resources as possible into pleasing that minority. Those resources have to come from the parts of society outside of the politician's support base. Often the ideal of governing in the interests of everyone conflicts with reality that a successful politician needs to screw over most people in order buy the support of powerful factions like the rich.

This is made even worse by the fact that, most of the time, politicians are not democratically accountable even to their supporters. They have to gain that support once every few years in order to hold a particular office, but once they have that power they can act how they please. If an elected official does something that voters disagree with, voters have no immediate power to stop them and they must wait until the next election. An elected official can break all of their promises, start a pointless war, tax us into poverty, and set the police on us if we complain, and unless it is an election year we have no way to hold them to account. Our "democracy" is a system in which we get to change dictator every few years.

BUREAUCRATS AND BUSINESS

The modern centralised "democratic" state suffers from another problem; it is too large and too complex to ever be truly democratic. The central state handles so many decisions that we would not have enough time in the day to vote on everything, let alone educate ourselves on the issues behind each vote and discuss them across the country. Under the current political system only certain important decisions can come to a vote, and the rest have to be handled by specialists who we hope will act in the general interest.

This means that most of the actual governing of the country is not done by elected officials, but by a vast and unelected bureaucracy of administrators, technical specialists, and hired goons. Even the limited democratic oversight we have is often lost in the scale and complexity of this bureaucracy; whatever an elected official may want to do, it must be interpreted and implemented through many layers of bureaucratic hierarchy.

Not only does the state bureaucracy have far more day-to-day influence on the government we live under than who we vote for, but so do businesses and their rich owners. While a politician may have to worry about getting at coalition of common voters on side once every few years, they have to cooperate constantly with the capitalists who ultimately own and run most of the economy.

These capitalists not only provide support for individual politicians through direct donations, but also through promising to expand their operations in a politician's constituency, providing jobs and injecting money into the local economy. They can also offer to part finance or help run government projects. They can even offer politicians cushy jobs that will make them rich when they leave politics.

More broadly, the capitalists run much of the economy as a class. Without the cooperation of the rich, the government loses a vital lever it needs to control and exploit the economy. This means that government policy is forever worried about making the country a "safe place for

business” and not scaring away rich investors, while the rest of us are expected to put up with low wages and crumbling services.

THE GENERAL INTEREST

Up until now I have repeatedly used the term “general interest” because it is a concept that underpins democracy. Democracy assumes that there is a general interest within any given state, and so there a common frame of reference that voters and the government can use to make decisions that serve everyone. However, this assumption is false.

The interests of capitalists are often in conflict with the interests of everyone else. The capitalist class can gain more wealth and better protect that wealth if they pay workers as little as they can, gives us the fewest benefits possible, and pays as little tax as possible. Meanwhile the rest of us would like to be well paid and well treated for our work, and would like key services to be well funded from the collective wealth of society.

The interests of the state and its bureaucracy also clash with those of everyone else. Elected officials need to get resources from somewhere in order to please their supporters, and the bureaucracy itself needs both information on, and the obedience of, the population in order to function. The state always has an incentive to extract as much wealth as it can from its subjects, to become more and more invasive, and to build more and more effective methods of control over us. Our own interests are often the opposite; we would rather live as free as possible and not be used as a piggy bank to keep a politician’s cronies rich and happy.

There can only be such a thing as the “general interest” when the power of some is not built on the obedience of others, and the wealth of some is not built on the work of others. Given the structure of our society, the interests of the rich and powerful are inherently in conflict with the interests of everyone else. When someone uses the term “general interest” they have either not thought about the above, or are deliberately trying to hide this conflict.

I will no longer use the term “general interest”, because it often does not exist. Instead I will speak of the interests of the great class of people who have to either work in order to build the power of the state and the wealth of capital, or are left dependent on the benevolence of the wealthy and powerful to survive; the working class. This is the class of people that produce the real wealth of society, and which the current ruling class exploits in order to maintain their own power. The current system is designed to keep the working class powerless so that exploitation can continue. This is the class that I, and likely you, are part of.

ALTERNATIVES

The “democratic” state is not really that democratic, democracy itself does not protect minorities, and the very concept of a general interest we can discover by majority vote is a myth in a society in which a class of rich and powerful people exist at the expense of the working class. Putting all our hopes in such a “democratic” state is dangerous and historically has resulted only in disappointment. We need a better way of asserting our interests outside of elections and party politics.

One way to achieve this is by organising in our workplaces, where we have the power to bring the economy to a halt in order to get what we want. The rich use their control over the economy to influence the state, but they only wield that power because workers are not organised enough to take it from them. Every workplace relies on the obedience of its workers to their employer in order to function, and will grind to a halt in the face of strikes and slow downs. This is a power that we can use to get ourselves higher wages, lower hours, and better conditions regardless of who won the last election.

Another way to build the society we want is by organising in our community to directly serve our interests when they are ignored by those in power. This includes tactics like rent strikes and non-payment campaigns that prevent the rich and powerful from exploiting us, along with building institutions of mutual aid and self help to solve our own problems. Such institutions can rebuild the social fabric of working class areas that have had the bonds of community destroyed by the demands of capitalism and the government.

Such organisations must start local and small, dealing with problems like an abusive boss at an individual workplace or providing aid to a specific community. However, as more such organisations are set up, they can cooperate to achieve greater change; organising strikes not just to raise pay in one workplace, but across an entire industry, or even striking across the entire economy in order to fight unjust laws, or organising across multiple communities to pool resources to build the infrastructure we need as the government increasingly ignores us.

ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM

In building such organisations we need to avoid creating a structure in which one person or group of people, even if they are elected, sits at the top the organisation and dictates to everyone else what to do. We need to build these organisations on mutual agreement and consensus so that no one is ignored. We also need to build them from the bottom up, with each local organisation running its own affairs, based on the knowledge and understanding of those who actually live and work within that local area, so that we can avoid creating a new unaccountable bureaucracy. Both the mainstream trade union movement and many mainstream charities have failed to do this, and have instead created new bosses and new bureaucracies which exploit the working class instead of fighting for our interests.

But we must also build networks of communication and cooperation between local organisations so that they can act jointly and achieve wider changes. This is how we can build a movement that can fight for working class interests regardless of who is in government and regardless of what is profitable for capitalists. We do not have to wait five years to show our dissatisfaction by voting, instead we can put pressure on capitalists and governments whenever they harm us and build our own solutions to our problems. If we build, from the bottom up, a web of workplace and community organisation across the entire country, then we will no longer need the government or capitalists to run our lives for us; we could simply take over workplaces and infrastructure for ourselves in a revolution that genuinely put society and its collective wealth under the control of the workers who create and maintain it.

This approach to politics has a name. Because it is critical of all forms of rulership and seeks to organise without resorting to that rulership, it is anarchist, which literally means without (an) rulers (archy). Because it seeks to build working class power through organisations in the workplace and the community, it is syndicalist, which comes from the French word for a workers' union. Together, these two ideas form Anarcho-Syndicalism.



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