

# WE SHOULD RUN OUR COMMUNITIES



## MEANS OF SURVIVAL

The majority of people are reliant on a web of different organisations and infrastructure in order to live full and happy lives. We need access to hospitals, transport, waste disposal, water, electricity, and many other municipal services in order to live. Many of us do not own our own homes, but rent them from a landlord or local council. Even those who own a home or small business are reliant on the financial system that provides mortgages and other loans.

The organisations that run this infrastructure can be corrupt, cruel, and uncaring. Landlords, businesses, and government departments often treat us with contempt, providing poor services and using them to control us. In the face of these problems, people look to politicians for help. This pamphlet will argue that politicians can never live up to their promises, and that we need to follow a more radical path if we want services and infrastructure that serve our desires instead of the whims of the rich and powerful.

## COGS IN THE MACHINE

Many of the organisations that provide us with services are private businesses which exist to make money for their capitalist owners, and any business that fails to make a profit can expect to be shut down by its owners or go bankrupt. This profit motive often conflicts with what we want and need as service users. Using cheap materials or lowering wages saves money, while charging as much as they can get away with brings more money in. This means businesses often provide shoddy infrastructure and services in order to make more profit; overpriced, built cheaply, and run by overworked and underpaid staff. Our needs are met only so long as they make rich people even richer.

Right now, housing is the most obvious example of this exploitation. Much of our housing stock does not exist to provide people with a safe and comfortable place to live, but instead to make money for landlords. Many of us are expected to live in poverty and squalor in order to maintain the profits of those who exploit us. This capitalist logic applies to any service run by private business, from price gouging train companies to water companies that spew sewage into our waterways.

The common reaction to capitalist profiteering is to demand that the government better regulate capitalism or directly run a service or piece of infrastructure. However, the state is designed to enable politicians to manage society as they see fit and this requires that governments be able to ignore or overrule the desires of their subjects. The state might provide a working transport network or high quality social housing if doing so serves the objectives of the ruling political party, but it does not have to provide those things. Even elected politicians can ignore most of the promises they made to get elected and rule however they want until the next election.

While the state is not directly motivated by profit, governments also have reasons to run services as cheaply as possible and charge as much as they can through direct service fees

or taxation. Resources saved from underpaying their workers or using cheap materials can be used by governments to pursue other political ends. The drive for state “efficiency” often involves making the lives of workers or service users worse.

## **THE DEATH OF COMMUNITY**

The current situation in which large impersonal organisations such as corporations or government departments run most key services and infrastructure also leads to a hollowing out of our society. Social bonds between individuals and groups are weak; people no longer really talk to or understand the people who live next to them, and we are all generally isolated and disempowered. Since human beings are inherently social animals, failing social bonds can be just as damaging to us as failing services. Our society is suffering an epidemic of loneliness, depression, paranoia, and meaninglessness.

For most of human history, the people who relied on shared services and infrastructure also took an active role in organising and maintaining them. From bands of hunter-gatherers sharing food and tools, to village communes collectively managing the land they relied on for their survival, to citizen assemblies coming together to discuss problems in their city and organise the running of civic infrastructure. In such circumstances community was something that arose naturally out of the fact that people had to talk to each other and cooperate to maintain shared resources.

In a society in which everyone is an isolated consumer or service user that relies on a distant business owner or politician, there is no reason for us to build strong social bonds with our neighbours. If anything, we all become competitors for the attention of our rulers, and the people around us are not people we can cooperate with for our mutual benefit but potential threats. This toxic situation undermines the very basis of human society.

## **FOR OUR OWN GOOD**

Our disempowerment, isolation, and lack of control over key parts of our own lives is often justified on the basis that normal people are too ignorant to run our own services and infrastructure, and that it needs to be run by experts. It is claimed that it would be a disaster if the average person got a real say on these topics.

However, our society has not been subordinated to the knowledge of experts. Instead, both our society and our experts have been subordinated to the politicians and capitalists who actually make the final decisions on how infrastructure and services are run. They do not necessarily know any more about how to run key infrastructure than you or I. While they may have better access to formal knowledge on these topics, they are still detached from both the experiences of the people and communities that rely on them and the knowledge of the front line workers who actually build and maintain services and infrastructure.

This has not only meant that key infrastructure has been managed based on the need for the rich to get richer and for politicians to keep their grip on power instead of serving the desires of those who rely on it, but it has also often left experts frustrated and burnt out as their advice is ignored or manipulated in favour of a quick profit or political expediency.

## **A SOCIETY IMPOSED**

These problems go back to the very founding of the state and capitalism. The state likes to pretend it is the result of a social agreement between its subjects, and capitalism likes to pretend that it is the natural result of people working and trading outside the state, but both of

these claims are false. The state was built on conquest, and the states that exist today, their borders, and their powers have nothing to do with any agreement between their subjects and everything to do with the ability of the state to violently impose itself on the territory and people it claims to own.

Likewise, capitalism was imposed from the top down upon us, often with the use of state violence to break up previous forms of organisation. Even today many big businesses rely on state subsidies and state regulation for much of their profit, funded by taxation and enforced by the police. Capitalists have always been the main beneficiaries of state welfare, and in exchange capitalism has helped fund the state. State and capital form a unified alliance over their subjects and workers.

Such violent imposition can not lead to a society that serves the desires of all its members, as the very use of imposition requires the suppression of those desires. Within our current society, the vast majority of us are nothing but tools to be used by state and capital to empower political and economic rulers. The services and infrastructure they offer are based on what they need from us, not what we desire for ourselves, and state and capital will leave us in poverty and despair if that is what suits their own interests.

## **BUILDING OUR OWN POWER**

The core of the problem with our current society is that people are not in direct control of the services and infrastructure that they need in order to live dignified and fulfilling lives. Those who use a service have both the most direct interest in ensuring that it runs well and the most direct knowledge of how well it serves them, whereas politicians and capitalists are detached from these concerns and motivated by power and profit. Since we also rely on those services to live, whoever controls those services can use them to control us. When we have no control over the necessities of life, we are left dependent and voiceless and can be exploited and oppressed.

Democracy is often raised as the solution to this problem, but even a perfect democracy would still leave minorities at the mercy of the majority, and no government has ever come close to a perfect democracy. We do not have a say in the day to day running of either the government or the businesses that we rely on; at best, we get to vote every few years or take our custom to a different business. We get to choose our masters, but we do not get to be free.

True empowerment can only come from direct control; people collectively running the services and infrastructure we rely on. Preferably getting as close to consensus as possible on all decisions instead of allowing majorities to overrule minorities. Instead of being imposed from the top down, this needs to be agreed from the bottom up, with individual neighbourhoods collectively running what they can at a local level and entering into agreements and federations with each other in order to run larger projects that serve cities, regions, countries, and international communities. Such organisation can still make use of expert advice, just as state and capital do today, but instead of answering to power and profit, experts will answer to the desires of the people.

Any movement to create a free society in which services and infrastructure serve their users instead of being tools of control will have to give up on the idea of obedience and rulership as acceptable methods of organisation. If we only replace one set of top down rulers with another, we will recreate the problems that we suffer today. This mistake has been the death of many previous attempts at change, from political parties to charities to mainstream trade unions. We must build organisations in which no one, not even elected officials or majorities, have the ability to rule over other people. We must organise on the basis of free association and mutual agreement and avoid recreating systems of control and exploitation.

## **ANARCHO-SYNDICALISM**

A movement to put everyday people in direct control of society can not use the state or capitalism to achieve its aims. The power and wealth of politicians and capitalists comes from the disempowerment and poverty of their subjects and workers, so the state and capitalists can be expected to oppose any project that tries to change that balance of power. We need to build an egalitarian and bottom up organisation outside of state and capital.

This can not be done all at once. In the current situation of widespread isolation, disempowerment, and social fragmentation, we must start small. Organising a rent strike in a single block of flats to force landlords to lower rents or perform needed repairs, or organising a consumer cooperative in a single neighbourhood to supply food and other necessities at low prices, are two examples of the kind of small scale organising that is both possible right now and can bring immediate improvements to the lives of their members.

However, the ultimate objective of any tenants' union should not only be to fight for better treatment from landlords, but to abolish landlords and put occupants in control of their homes. Likewise, the ultimate objective of any consumer cooperative should not just be to help people survive poverty, but to replace the current unjust system of distribution and end poverty. In order to do this, local groups need to grow, multiply, and form alliances, networks, and federations with other groups fighting for the exploited and oppressed, such as workplace unions and migrants' rights groups. Such groups often also have legitimate claims to a say in the running of services and infrastructure. Working together, such an alliance could grow to functionally control the entire economy and defend itself from any attempt to suppress it. This would render our current ruling class powerless and irrelevant, and would be a real revolution.

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 rejects the use of the state for political change and 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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