

Libertarian communism: an introduction



Assembly at the worker-run Zanon factory in Argentina

A short introduction to what we at libcom.org refer to as communism or libertarian communism, what it is and why we think it is a good idea.

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Introduction

When we speak of communism we are talking about two things. Firstly as a way of organising society based on the principle of 'from each according to ability, to each according to need', and secondly as the real movement towards such a society in the world right now. Here we will address these, starting with the latter, the less well-known meaning.

The real movement

In our [introduction to capitalism](#) we describe the capitalist economy and point out how the needs of capital - for profit and accumulation - are opposed to our needs as [working class](#) people.

Employers try to cut wages, cut [pensions](#), cut jobs, increase working hours, speed up work and damage the [environment](#). And when we can, we resist because the conditions we live under in this economy push us into asserting our needs against capital.

So when we do this: when we cooperate, when we use [direct action](#) and solidarity to assert our needs, like when we organise [strike action](#) or [work to rule](#) against pay cuts or higher workloads, we begin to lay the foundations of a new type of society.

A society based on cooperation, solidarity and meeting human needs - a communist society.

[Communism as a movement](#), therefore, is the ever-present trend of cooperation, mutual aid, direct action and resistance of the working class in capitalist society.

At times this trend has encompassed huge numbers of the working class, in huge waves of social unrest and workplace militancy, such as during the [labour rebellions across the British Caribbean in the 1930s](#), the postwar strike waves in [America](#), Japan and [across Africa](#), the [Italian Hot Autumn of 1969](#), the [British Winter of Discontent in 1978](#), the [1987 Great Workers' Struggle in South Korea](#), the [2001 Argentinian uprising](#) or the [anti-austerity resistance in Greece since 2010](#).

Sometimes this social unrest has even resulted in the explosion of revolutionary events. For example in [Haiti 1794](#), [Paris 1871](#), [Mexico 1910](#), [Russia 1917](#), [Italy 1919-1920](#), [Ukraine 1921](#), [Spain 1936](#), [Hungary 1956](#), [France 1968](#), [Portugal 1974](#) and the [1994 Zapatista uprising](#). These are just some of the occasions when the working class has tried, through collective action, to reshape society in our own interests, rather than the bosses'.

To each according to need...

There is no shortage in the world of politicians or political groups claiming to have ready-made blueprints for creating a fairer society. However, communism is not something which can be decreed into being by political parties or individual politicians but must be created, through mass participation and experimentation, by workers ourselves.

It is therefore worth pointing out at this stage that 'communism' has nothing in common with the [former USSR](#) or present-day Cuba or North Korea. These are essentially capitalist societies with only one capitalist: the state. And it equally has nothing to do with China, whose ruling party calls itself 'communist' while overseeing one of the world's most successful capitalist nations.

However, in the various revolutionary events throughout history (some of which mentioned previously), working class people have experimented with different aspects of putting communism into practice. In doing so, they laid down principles for how a communist society could be organised as well as practical examples of what is possible when we act together in our class interests.

Without bosses

Instead of ownership or control of the means of production - land, factories, offices and so on - being in the hands of private individuals or the state, a communist society is based on the common ownership and control of those means. And instead of production for exchange and profit, communism means production to meet human needs, including the need for a safe environment.

Already today, it is us workers who produce everything and run all the services necessary for life. We lay the roads, build the homes, drive the trains, care for the sick, raise the children, make the food, design the products, make the clothes and teach the next generation.

And every worker knows that often the bosses hinder us more than they help.

Examples abound demonstrating that workers can effectively run workplaces themselves. And in fact can do so better than hierarchically organised workplaces.

One recent example are the factories taken over during the [2001 uprising in Argentina](#), when one-third of the country's industry was put under [workers' control](#). And historically, there have been even bigger and more widespread examples.

For example during the [Spanish civil war](#) in 1936, the [majority of industries in revolutionary Spain were taken over and run collectively by the workers](#). Where it was possible [in some areas workers pushed closer to a communist society](#), abolishing money or distributing non-scarce goods for free.



Mechanics in revolutionary Spain 1936

In [Seattle in 1919 during the general strike](#) the city was taken over and run by the workers. In [Russia in 1917, workers took over the factories](#), before the [Bolsheviks returned the authority of the bosses](#).

Without wages

Communism also means a [moneyless](#) society where our activity - and its products - no longer take the form of things to be bought and sold.

The principal concern most people hold as to whether a communist society could is asking if humans really can produce enough for us to survive without the implicit threat of destitution, enforced by the wage system.

However, there is ample evidence demonstrating that we do not need the threat of destitution or starvation hanging over us in order to engage in productive activity.

For most of human history, we have not had money or wage labour, however necessary tasks still got done.

In hunter-gatherer societies, for example, which were [overwhelmingly peaceful and egalitarian](#) there was [no distinction between work and play](#).

Even today, huge amounts of necessary work is done for free. In the UK, for example, despite working long hours people (mostly women) also carry out [over three hours unpaid housework every day](#). On top of this, nearly [10% of people also carry out unpaid care work](#) and [25% of adults in England carry out voluntary work at least once a month](#). Globally, the [value of unpaid labour to the economy was an estimated \\$11 trillion a year](#) in 2011.

Almost every useful type of work you can think of is also done by some people for free, not as "work" for wages, demonstrating that they are not strictly necessary. Growing food, looking after children, playing music, fixing cars, sweeping, talking to people about their problems, caring for the sick, computer programming, making clothes, designing products... the list is endless.

Studies show that [money is not an effective motivator for good performance](#) at complex tasks. People having the [freedom and control](#) to do what they want how they want, and having a constructive, socially useful reason for doing so is the best motivator.

Things like the [free software movement](#), too, demonstrate how non-hierarchical, collective organisation for a socially useful goal can be superior to hierarchical organisation for profit and that people don't need wages to be motivated to produce.

And without the profit motive, any technological advancement which makes a work process more efficient, instead of just laying workers off and making those remaining work harder (like happens at present), we can all just work a little less and have more free time. See our [introduction to work](#) for more information.

Without a state

In our [introduction to the state](#) we define government as "an organisation controlled and run by a small minority of people... [with] the ability within a given area to make political and legal decisions - and to enforce them, with violence if necessary."

With no division between employers and workers, and rich and poor, there is no longer a need for a body of organised violence controlled by a small number of people, like [the police](#), to protect the property of the rich and enforce poverty, wage labour and even starvation on everyone else. And with no need to accumulate capital or make profit there is no longer the need for armies to capture new markets and new resources.

Of course there will still be a need to protect the population from antisocial or violent individuals. But this can be done in a localised and democratic way, by a mandated, rotating and recallable body, rather than by an [unaccountable police force whose brutality and even murders](#) almost always go unpunished.

To make collective decisions, instead of "representative democracy" which governs most countries at present we propose direct democracy. True democracy is more than the right to elect a handful of (often rich) individuals to make political decisions for us for a few years, while other decisions are made unaccountably in corporate boardrooms led by the "tyranny of the market".

We can control our struggles ourselves, from our [groups of workmates](#) up through workplace and community [assemblies](#) and we can come together to coordinate across huge geographical areas using communications technology and [workers' councils](#) with mandated and recallable delegates.

And as we can organise our struggles, we can also eventually organise society ourselves, as the working class has done before at times. For instance, during the [1956 Hungarian uprising](#), [workers' councils were set up](#) to organise the running of society as workers demanded a socialism based on working class democracy. And more recently, since [the uprising in 1994, the Chiapas region of Mexico](#) has been run independently from the state through direct democracy with no leaders and where public servants' terms are limited to two weeks.



Zapatista rebels in Chiapas

Conclusion

Many people may think that communism sounds like a good idea but doubt it would work in practice. However first it is worth asking "does capitalism work?"

As billions live in dire poverty amidst unimaginable wealth, and we hurtle relentlessly towards environmental catastrophe we believe the answer is a resounding "no". And while no system will be perfect, we believe there is ample evidence that a communist society would function far better than our current capitalist one for the majority of people - even for the rich who often aren't happy despite their wealth.

A [communist society](#) won't be without problems. But it will resolve the major issues we face today, like widespread poverty and ecological devastation, freeing us to tackle much more interesting problems.

Instead of the need to work more, produce more and accumulate more, we can instead focus on how to work less, make what work we **need** to do more enjoyable, have more fun, more happiness and more joy.

Instead of measuring the success of a society by GDP, we can measure it by well-being and happiness. Instead of relating to each other as 'staff', 'customers', 'supervisors' or 'competitors', we can relate to each other as human beings.

Those of us reading and writing this may never live to see a fully libertarian communist society. But even so communism as the real movement - the everyday fight to assert our needs against those of capital - improves our lives in the here and now, and gives us a better chance of protecting living and working conditions, as well as the planet, for ourselves and future generations. Indeed,

it is communism as the real movement - that is, the everyday struggles to defend and improve our conditions today - that lays the foundations for communism as a free and equal society.

What we call this movement has, in different times and places, been called 'anarchist communism', 'libertarian communism' or simply 'socialism' or 'communism'. What matters, however, is not the name or ideological label but its existence, not just as a future ideal but as the living embodiment of our needs, our desires and our spirit of resistance in our everyday lives. This spirit of resistance exists, and has always existed, in every society and under every regime where there is injustice and exploitation; so then, does the possibility for a world based on freedom and equality for all.

More information

- [Capitalism and communism - Gilles Dauvé](#) - a detailed explanation of communism as the emergence of real human community and the antithesis of capitalism.
- [Work Community Politics War - prole.info](#) - an excellent introductory illustrated guide to libertarian communism and capitalism.
- [A world without money: communism - The friends of 4 million young workers](#) - text discussing libertarian communism and in particular the necessity of communism being a moneyless system.
- [Parecon or libertarian communism?](#) - a debate between the libcom group and advocates of a "participatory society", which clearly explains the arguments in favour of an economic system based on "to each according to need".
- [The soul of man \(sic\) under socialism - Oscar Wilde](#) - the famous writer and poet's key text outlining his personal vision for a libertarian communist society, and its implications for personal freedom and potential.
- [Collectives in the Spanish revolution - Gaston Leval](#) - book examining the constructive achievements of the Spanish revolution, in which large parts of the country were run by the working class.
- [From mass strike to new society - Jeremy Brecher](#) - excellent text looking at the transition from mass strikes to a libertarian communist society, in particular examining historical examples in Spain, Italy and Russia.
- [The conquest of bread](#) and [Fields, factories and workshops - Peter Kropotkin](#) - two classic texts by the Russian anarchist communist which, while now dated are still invaluable. The former is an examination of what needs to be done and how in a communist society, the second spells out how such a society could be organised.

Book traversal links for Libertarian communism: an introduction

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Steven.

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Submitted by Steven. on May 13, 2014

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