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# The communist left and internationalist anarchism, Part 1: What we have in common

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For a few years now, certain anarchist individuals or groups and the ICC have overcome a number of barriers by daring to discuss in an open and fraternal way. Mutual indifference or rejection between anarchism and marxism have given way to a will to discuss, to understand the positions of the other, and to honestly define points of agreement and disagreement.

In Mexico, this new spirit made it possible for a joint leaflet to be signed by two anarchist groups (GSL and PAM[1]) and an organisation of the communist left, the ICC. In France, recently, the CNT-AIT in Toulouse invited the ICC to make a presentation at one of its public meetings[2]. In Germany as well links are being made.

On the basis of this dynamic, the ICC has begun working seriously on the history of internationalism in the anarchist movement. During the course of 2009 we published a series of articles under the heading 'Anarchists and imperialist war' [3]. Our aim was to show that with each imperialist conflict, part of the anarchists was able to avoid the trap of nationalism and defend proletarian internationalism. We showed that these comrades continued to work for the revolution and for the world working class despite being surrounded by chauvinism and the barbarity of war.

When you know the importance that the ICC attaches to internationalism, which is a real frontier separating revolutionaries who genuinely fight for the emancipation of humanity from those who have betrayed the proletarian struggle, these articles were not only an intransigent critique of the pro-war anarchists but also and above all a salute to the internationalist anarchists!

However, our intentions were not always well perceived. For a while this series met with a frosty reception in some quarters. On the one hand, some anarchists saw the articles as an outright attack on their movement. On the other hand, some sympathisers of the communist left and of the ICC did not understand our efforts to find a "rapprochement with the anarchists"[4].

Aside from certain errors in our articles which may have irritated some people[5], these apparently contradictory criticisms actually share the same roots. They reveal the difficulties in seeing the essential elements which bring revolutionaries together, above and beyond their disagreements.

## Going beyond labels

Those who identify with the struggle for the revolution have traditionally been classed in two categories: the marxists and the anarchists. And there are indeed important divergences between them:

- Centralism/federalism

- Materialism/idealism
- Period of transition or 'immediate abolition of the state'
- Recognition or denunciation of the October 1917 revolution and of the Bolshevik party

All these questions are certainly very important. It is our responsibility not to avoid them, and to debate them openly. But still, for the ICC, they do not demarcate "two camps". Concretely, our organisation, which is marxist, considers that it is fighting for the proletariat on the same side as the internationalist anarchist militants and against the 'Communist' and Maoist parties which also claim to be marxist. Why?

Within capitalist society, there are two basic camps: the camp of the bourgeoisie and the camp of the working class. We denounce and combat all the political organisations which belong to the former. We discuss, often in a sharp but always a fraternal manner, and seek to cooperate with, all the members of the second. But under the same label of 'marxist' there are genuinely bourgeois and reactionary organisations. The same goes for the 'anarchist' label.

This is not just rhetoric. History is full of examples of 'marxist' or 'anarchist' organisations who have claimed with hand on heart to be defending the proletariat, while in reality stabbing it in the back. German social democracy called itself 'marxist' in 1919 when it was assassinating Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and thousands of workers. The Stalinist parties bloodily crushed the workers' uprisings in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956 in the name of 'communism' and 'marxism' (in fact, in the interests of the imperialist bloc led by the USSR). In Spain, in 1937, the leaders of the CNT, by participating in the government, served as a cover for the Stalinist murderers who repressed and massacred thousands of ...anarchist revolutionaries. Today, in France for example, the same name 'CNT' covers two anarchist organisations, one which defends authentically revolutionary positions (CNT-AIT) and another which is purely 'reformist' and reactionary (the CNT 'Vignoles')<sup>[6]</sup>.

Identifying the false friends who hide behind labels is thus a vital task.

But we should not fall into the opposite trap and believe that we are alone in the world, the exclusive holders of 'revolutionary truth'. Communist militants are still very thin on the ground today and there is nothing more harmful than isolation. We therefore have to fight against the tendency to stand up for your own 'chapel', your own 'family' (whether marxist or anarchist), against the shop-keeper's spirit which has nothing to do with the politics of the working class. Revolutionaries are not in competition with each other. Divergences, disagreements, however profound they may be, are a source of enrichment for class consciousness when they are discussed openly and sincerely. Creating links and debating on an international scale are absolute necessities.

But for this to happen, we have to know how to distinguish between revolutionaries (who defend the perspective of the overthrow of capitalism by the proletariat) and reactionaries (those who, in one way or another, help to perpetuate this system), without fixating on the label of 'marxist' or 'anarchist'.

### **What unites marxists and internationalist anarchists**

For the ICC, there are fundamental criteria which distinguish bourgeois from proletarian organisations.

Supporting the combat of the working class against capitalism means both fighting exploitation in an immediate way (during strikes for example) while never losing sight of what's at stake in this struggle on the historical level: the overthrow of this system of exploitation by revolution. To do this, an organisation must never give its support, even in a 'critical' or 'tactical' way, or in the name of the 'lesser evil', to a sector of the bourgeoisie - whether the 'democratic' bourgeoisie against the 'fascist' bourgeoisie, or the left against the right, or the Palestinian bourgeoisie against the Israeli bourgeoisie, etc. Such an approach has two concrete implications:

1. Rejecting any electoral support or cooperation with parties which manage the capitalist system or defend this or that form of this system (social democracy, Stalinism, 'Chavismo', etc)
2. Above all, during any war, it means maintaining an intransigent internationalism, refusing to choose between this or that imperialist camp. During the First World War as during all the imperialist wars of the 20th century, all those organisations who supported any of the warring camps abandoned the terrain of internationalism, betrayed the working class and were definitively integrated into the camp of the bourgeoisie[7].

These criteria, outlined here very briefly, explain why the ICC sees certain anarchists as comrades in the struggle, why it wants to discuss and cooperate with them while virulently denouncing other anarchist organisations. For example, we have cooperated with the KRAS (the section of the anarcho-syndicalist International Workers' Association in Russia), by publishing and welcoming its internationalist declarations on war, notably the war in Chechnya. The ICC considers that these anarchists, despite our differences with them, are an authentic part of the proletarian camp. They clearly demarcate themselves from all the anarchists and 'Communists' (like the Communist parties, the Maoists or Trotskyists) who defend internationalism in theory but oppose it in practice by defending one belligerent against the other in imperialist wars. We should not forget that in 1914, when the First World War broke out, and in 1917, when the Russian revolution took place, the majority of the 'marxists' of social democracy took the side of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat, whereas the Spanish CNT denounced the imperialist war and supported the revolution. During the revolutionary movements of the day, anarchists and marxists worked sincerely for the proletarian cause, and despite their disagreements found themselves on the same side. There were even efforts to develop an organised and wide scale cooperation between the revolutionary marxists (Bolsheviks in Russia, Spartacists in Germany, Dutch Tribunists, Italian abstentionists etc) who had separated from the degenerating 2nd International, and a number of internationalist anarchist groups. An example of this process is the fact that an organisation like the CNT envisaged the possibility of joining the Third International, although it rejected this in the end[8].

To cite a more recent example, in many parts of the world today there are anarchist groups and sections of the IWA who not only maintain an internationalist position but who also fight for the autonomy of the proletariat against all the ideologies and currents of the bourgeoisie:

- these anarchists call for direct and massive class struggle and self-organisation in general assemblies and workers' councils;
- they reject any participation in the electoral masquerade and any support for political parties who take part in this masquerade, however radical they claim to be.

In other words, they stick to one of the main principles of the First International: "the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves". Those comrades are part of the struggle for the revolution and a world human community.

The ICC belongs to the same camp as these internationalist anarchists who really defend working class autonomy. Yes, we consider them as comrades with whom we want to debate and cooperate. Yes, we also think that these anarchist militants have more in common with the communist left than with those who, under the label of anarchism, actually defend nationalist and reformist positions and are thus really defenders of capitalism.

In the debate which is slowly developing between all the revolutionary groups and elements on the planet, there will inevitably be mistakes, animated debates, clumsy formulations, misunderstandings and real disagreements. But the needs of the proletarian struggle against a capitalism which is becoming increasingly unbearable and barbaric, the indispensable perspective of the world proletarian revolution, a precondition for the survival of humanity, make this a vital and necessary effort, a duty in fact. And today, when we are seeing the emergence of revolutionary proletarian minorities in many countries, who refer either to marxism or anarchism (or who are open to both), this duty to discuss and cooperate should meet with a determined and enthusiastic response.

Future articles in this series will deal with our difficulties in debating and the way to overcome them. We will also look in more detail at the Anarchist Federation in Britain, which we have mistakenly labelled as a leftist group in the past.

ICC 30/6/10

[1] GSL: Grupo Socialista Libertario (<http://webgsl.wordpress.com> <sup>[1]</sup>); PAM: Proyecto Anarquista Metropolitano (<http://proyectoanarquistametropolitano.blogspot.com> <sup>[2]</sup>)

[2] There was a very warm atmosphere throughout this meeting. Read the report on it written on website: '[Réunion CNT-AIT de Toulouse du 15 avril 2010: vers la constitution d'un creuset de réflexion dans le milieu internationaliste](#)' <sup>[3]</sup>

[3] See 'Anarchism and imperialist war', *World Revolution* numbers 325-328. All available online, beginning here: <https://en.internationalism.org/2009/wr/325/anarchism-war1> <sup>[4]</sup>

[4] In particular, some comrades were initially uneasy about the joint GSI/PAM/ICC leaflet. We tried to explain our approach in a Spanish article entitled 'What is our attitude towards comrades who are part of the anarchist tradition?' (<https://es.internationalism.org/node/2715>) <sup>[5]</sup>

[5] Some anarchist comrades rightly pointed out certain imprecise formulations and even historical errors in these articles. We will return to this. However, we do want to rectify the most glaring errors here:

- On various occasions, the series 'Anarchism and imperialist war' asserts that the majority of the anarchist movement fell into nationalism during the First World War while only a handful of individuals risked their lives to defend internationalist positions. The historical elements brought to the discussion by members of the IWA, and confirmed by our own researches, show that in reality a large number of the anarchists opposed the war from 1914 onwards (sometimes in the name of internationalism or anationalism, or under the banner of pacifism)

- The most embarrassing mistake (which up till now no-one has pointed out) concerns the Barcelona uprising in May 1937. We wrote in *WR* 326 that "*When the workers of Barcelona rose up in May 1937, the CNT were complicit in the repression by the Popular Front and the government of Catalonia*" - the French version used "anarchists" instead of the CNT, but the ambiguity remains in

the English version, since in reality, it was the militants of the CNT or the FAI who made up the majority of the insurgent workers in Barcelona and were the principal victim of the repression organised by the Stalinist hordes. It would have been much more accurate to denounce the collaboration in this massacre of the CNT leadership rather than the "the anarchists". This in any case is the real content of our position on the war in Spain, as defended in particular in the article 'Lessons of the events in Spain' in no. 36 of the review Bilan (November 1936)

[6] Vignoles is the name of the street where their main HQ is located. 'AIT' stands for Association Internationale des Travailleurs - in English the International Workers' Association

[7] However, there were groups and elements who were able to break away from organisations which had gone over to the bourgeoisie, for example the Munis group or the group which gave rise to Socialisme ou Barbarie in the Trotskyist Fourth International

[8] See 'History of the CNT (1914-19): The CNT faced with war and revolution', *International Review* 129, <https://en.internationalism.org/ir/129/CNT-1914-1919> [6]

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### Links

- [1] <http://webgsl.wordpress.com/>
- [2] <http://proyectoanarquistametropolitano.blogspot.com>
- [3] <https://fr.internationalism.org/node/4256>
- [4] <https://en.internationalism.org/2009/wr/325/anarchism-war1>
- [5] <https://es.internationalism.org/node/2715>
- [6] <https://en.internationalism.org/ir/129/CNT-1914-1919>
- [7] <https://en.internationalism.org/tag/life-icc/intervention>
- [8] <https://en.internationalism.org/tag/28/1292/left-communism-and-internationalist-anarchism>
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- [10] <https://en.internationalism.org/tag/recent-and-ongoing/internationalist-anarchism>