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When Marx was a reformist

David Douglass reviews: René Berthier

***Social democracy and anarchism in the
International Workers Association 1864-1877***

Merlin Press, 2015, pp256, £16.95

Just what was the issue around which the First International ‘split’? What were the differences between Karl Marx and Mikhail Bakunin which characterised that split? What was the actual point of issue between anarchism and social democracy, among whom the Marxists counted themselves? Those are the subjects which this book addresses - an often talked about, but little researched, area of labour movement history.

With the International Workers Association (First International) - the first real coming together of different national workers’ federations, international bodies and political societies of the class - diversity demanded a broad platform. National bodies had already developed, and some international alliances were already in existence, many with distinct political leanings and perspectives. The idea that all these bodies, based upon national experiences and particular industrial conflicts and strategies, would lay aside all their previous perspectives and accept a ready-made, fully formed stratagem was always going to be a major obstacle. I suspect, had CPGB (Provisional Central Committee) members been projected back through time holding the positions they so often advance in broad front organisations today, they would find themselves somewhat at odds with Marx, at least in terms of the evidence advanced in this book.

Will it be possible for those for whom Marx’s word reads like a gospel to be able to accept that, perceptive genius aside, Marx was a bureaucratic, manipulative, tendency bully and not at all a team player? Any one of us with lifetimes in the revolutionary workers’ movement will surely find such a discovery not so surprising at all; maybe they actually did not do it any better than we do now.

For Bakunin and the forces he brought to the table, a basic class-struggle programme and organisation based upon international solidarity in a federation of national centres and other bodies seemed the most practical, democratic and functional. For Marx, however, the International would follow the structure of a political party, with a single programme and strategy. These broad organisational differences were in reality reflections of the way in which the two contending strategies saw the class war and

where its locus of power was. Undoubtedly for the Marxists of this period the struggle was for the construction of social democratic parties, to campaign to deepen the franchise further into the working class and attain 'political' - that is, parliamentary - power. For the people around Bakunin, the sometimes self-declared 'anarchists', the centre of struggle was directly around the industrial struggles of the masses in confederations of workers, transcending skills and trades.

Marxists today may find that the cap worn by Marx at the time of the formation of the First International was not the one he wore near the end of his life and the slogans which came to characterise his outlook at the time of this great ideological clash would better have been attributed to the Bakuninists rather than Marx. Marx in this work is shown to be not a man for all seasons - the Marx we have at the end, is not the Marx we have at the beginning. The truth is that the way Marx saw and understood 'power' changed, as did the 'Marxist' understanding of the state - certainly by the time of Lenin's *State and revolution* Marxism is occupying positions, at least in terms of analysis, in regard to the state, which had provoked such conflict between the Bakuninists and their federations and Marx/Engels. The apparent rejection of 'political struggle' by the Bakuninists was in reality a rejection of preoccupation with *parliamentary* struggles.

Taking power

For Marx, at the time of the First International, 'taking power' meant achieving a social democratic government - they thought most probably in Germany or Britain. For the Bakuninists this had nothing to do with the class taking actual power, which, of course, they wanted - they rejected the concept that a social democratic government in a bourgeois parliament was class power. For those of us raised in our tender years in the Young Communist League, Marxist missives holding that 'the working class cannot take hold of the ready-made state machine and wield it for their own purposes', or words to that effect, would seem to confront directly the word of 'the man' himself. Truth is, Marx's view of the centre of class struggle and the nature of alternative class society was informed by living experience - he witnessed its most forceful examples and his vision changed, as power moved from parliaments and parties to industrial conflict and battles on the streets like the Paris Commune.

I think it is also true that conflictual visions of what a socialist, non-capitalist society would look like were also framed by the different methods of 'taking power' and what this 'power' looked like. The author comments that, rather than *The British road to socialism* being a revision of Marxist thinking, it is something of a return to the original image. Although Marx said very little on how a future socialist society would operate, it is clear from the evidence in this book he foresaw something like mass social democratic parties occupying seats of office in national parliaments, at least during the period of the First International.

Bakunin, on the other hand, like the subsequent Industrial Workers of the World, saw the need for mass industrial struggles at the heart of the productive process and centre of wage-slavery, as the workers' industrial unions and trades societies were constructed to fight it. He thought that the struggles at work, the tasks of solidarity, the growth of class-consciousness and construction of workers' industrial combat organisations were the way to fight capitalism in the here and now and the framework of an alternative social system of administration of wealth and power at the other end.

Ironically as the soviets later mirrored the ideology of the IWW, Lenin seemed to come to this conclusion too, declaring 'All power to the soviets'.

The implication, and the understanding of most of the Russian workers, was that it was their own direct industrial organisations which would embody the power and authority of the working class and administer society after the defeat of capitalism. Here is not the place to debate whether he actually *meant* that, rather than the party, not the masses themselves, taking over the role of 'power'.

Like within many left alliances today, the conflict was not simply around ideology, but of organisational, structural principles, which would allow or suppress different views and the alternative visions being advanced. The so-called split, when it came, was not formed around choices or visions, still less whether Marx or Bakunin was the favourite of the International. The division was never that of choosing Marxism or anarchism. The 'federalist' concepts around Bakunin and the international forces he represented were anathema to Marx and his team, who responded by expelling practically the entire affiliated international membership. The expulsions took place after what can only be described (and is described in much detail in the book) as a bureaucratic coup within the British section worthy of Arthur Scargill's tactics (this is probably the only time I shall ever compare Marx to Arthur).

The political divisions between social democracy and anarchism began to take shape by 1878. In 1905 the birth of the IWW in Chicago brought the two strands back together, at least until, in a case of *déjà vu*, they split again in 1909 over this vexed question of 'political' (that is, parliamentary) or non-political, purely industrial strategies.

This book is a credit to its author, who has thoroughly researched the available evidence on this subject. He warns though at its inception that he does not come to this as neutral and writes from the point of view of anarchism. Marxologists will doubtless see this as a huge jigsaw of a challenge and joyfully take time to pick it apart. As a Marxist-anarchist (oh, yes, I can be!), I have found this book profoundly illuminating and in a matter of fact and non-fussy way it presents the trajectory of the different forces and their ultimate clash and division. It reads so true because many of us will have seen numerous conflicts within the movement played out in exactly the same way.

What was that about 'those who do not learn from history'?