

Anti-Electoralism and William Morris

Some Revolutionary History

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It is generally a waste of time to argue with individuals about their voting or not voting. Among tens of thousands, one vote either way makes no difference (even when it gets counted).

The question is what large social forces should do in elections. Such forces include the labor unions, the African-American communities, Latino communities, the organized feminist movement, Gay and Lesbian organizations, organized environmentalists, and the network of anti-globalization/anti-corporate activists.

Such groups involve very large numbers. They include the “core constituencies” of the Democratic Party, which would collapse without their support. Conservatives sneer at them as “special interests,” but potentially they represent the vast majority (working people, women, people who want to breathe clean air).

The historical position of anarchists and other anti-authoritarian socialists has been that such forces should not participate in elections. In Kropotkin’s words, “Anarchists ... do not seek to constitute, and invite the workingmen [sic] not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments ... They have endeavored to ... induce [labor] unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.”

The opposite approach was raised by Karl Marx and his followers. Marx proposed a resolution to the First International, “The working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes.”

With such parties, “Universal suffrage ...will ...be transformed from the instrument of fraud that it has been up till now into an instrument of emancipation.” This (unlikely) strategy was the main political issue in the conflict between the Marxists and anarchists which split the First International. When the Second (or Socialist) International was formed, its leaders physically threw out the anarchists and insisted that only pro-electoralists could be members.

Marx’s pro-electoral arguments did not immediately sweep all before them; it took a while before they became dominant even among non-anarchist socialists. There was an anti-electoral minority which correctly predicted the evolution of the electoral parties.

A special example was the British poet and artist, William Morris. He became a socialist (or, as he liked to call himself, a communist) at the age of 50 in the late 1880s. He knew both Kropotkin and Engels. What he meant by “socialism” or “communism” had an anti-authoritarian and anti-statist content.

Hal Draper, the Marxist, calls Morris, “the leading personality of revolutionary socialism of that period ... Morris’s writings on socialism breathe from every pore the spirit of Socialism-from-Below.” For various reasons, Morris did not regard himself as an anarchist, but he allied himself with the anarchists in his organization to fight the Marxists (associates of Engels) over the issue of participating in elections and parliament. His writings on the subject are unusually prescient.

His views on elections began with what he learned from Marx: that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the capitalist class and the working class. This is not to deny other conflicts involving race, gender, or ecology. But a multidimensional analysis of authoritarianism does not require abandoning an analysis of class conflict.

As Morris learned from Marx, the state serves the ruling boss class; it is on their side of the class line. We can add that the state is also essential to maintaining patriarchy, white supremacy, and other forms of oppression. While the state may grant reforms when under pressure, it cannot be used to create a new and better society.

In his 1871 *The Civil War in France*, Marx famously concluded, "The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready made state machinery and wield it for its own purposes." The centralized, bureaucratic-military structure of the state is not capable of organizing a free society. That requires a wholly different sort of structure, a federation of workplace and neighborhood councils, with directly recallable representatives, a commune-like (or "soviet") non-state. Given the nature of the patriarchal-capitalist state, there is no "parliamentary road to socialism" (as it used to be called). If anti-authoritarian socialism is the necessary goal, and if elections to the U.S. government are the means, then you can't get there from here.

Morris thought that to say, "Elect our socialist party and we will create a new, socialist society" could only be a lie. Of course it is possible to disagree with Morris and other anti-electoralists. Most people do.

But I do not see how it is possible to believe both (1) that the existing state cannot be used to create a freer, cooperative, society, and (2) that the use of elections by workers' parties would lead to "emancipation." I have looked through the works of Marx and Engels to find out just how they squared these conceptions. I have been unable to find any explanation or any explicit electoral strategy.

Policy of Abstention

As he explains in his 1887 *The Policy of Abstention*, William Morris felt that "It is necessary to keep the two camps of labor and monopoly [capitalism] as distinct as possible... Everything that tends to weaken that opposition, to confuse it, weakens the popular force, and gives a new lease of life to the reaction...If our own people are forming part of parliament, the instruments of the enemy, they are helping to make the very laws we will not obey. Where is the enemy then?" Morris argued that a socialist party, if it seriously wants to get elected, would have to advocate something besides "socialism;" it would have to advocate some sort of lesser, inter mediate, demands. Except in revolutionary periods, most people are not yet in favor of socialism. So if the party wants to elect members, then it must modify its socialist program.

"They will then have to put forward a program of reforms deduced from the principles of socialism...They will necessarily have to appeal for support (i.e., votes) to a great number of people who are not convinced socialists, and their program of reforms will be the bait to catch these votes; and to the ordinary voter it will be this bait which will be the matter of interest, and not the principle..."

It will be impossible to honestly tell the voters and recruits that these reforms are only bait and not the real program. Therefore, "the socialist members when they get into parliament will represent a heterogeneous body of opinion, ultra-radical, democratic, discontented non-politicals, rather than a body of socialists, and it will be their opinions and prejudices that will sway the actions of the members in parliament."

In practice, as the socialists have success with their reform demands, these will be adopted by the liberals, leaving the socialists without anything special to say. Or the socialists will themselves dissolve into the liberals (the "progressive democratic party"). Even in the unlikely event that the reform socialists did by "cumulative reforms manage to bring us to the crisis of revolution...they would then have to govern a people who had rather been ignorantly betrayed into socialism then have learned to accept it as an understood necessity..."

"Instead, he proposed to expand the scope of the existing labor unions to form widely organized labor combinations which would stand opposite parliament as an alternate power (note that Morris was not against working in unions or in other limited struggles). By strikes, boycotts, and other mass actions, the power of the workers would oppose that of the capitalists organized in parliament. His proposals sound remarkably like a prediction of the popular committees which have burst out in every mass revolution from the 1917 Russian revolution on.

It has been argued that the ill effects Morris predicted from socialist electoralism could be avoided by a revolutionary party which would openly argue for socialist revolution and maintain an internal discipline so that their electoral agents can be controlled by the party leadership to keep advocating socialism. In fact, this was the argument of Lenin against the anti-electoralists of his day.

Perhaps this is possible for a very brief period in a revolutionary situation-and Morris was open to this. But realistically, a party cannot maintain a revolutionary electoral posture for election after election, year after year, and decade after decade. The pressure to adapt to the low level of the voters' consciousness on the one hand, and to the nature of the electoral (parliamentary) system on the other, must corrupt the socialist party.

An electoral strategy means persuading the working people to elect leaders who will be political for them, people who will act in congress (parliament, whatever) in their place, as their representatives. Of his plan for labor councils, Morris said, "The organization I am thinking of would have a serious point of difference from any that could be formed as a part of a parliamentary plan of action: its aim would be to act directly, whatever was done in it would be done by the people themselves..."

His prediction is our history

What was a prediction in Morris' day has become history in ours. From the beginning, electoralists united both revolutionists and reformists behind their approach-both those who wanted electoral parties in order to get to a revolution and those who wanted electoral parties in order to prevent a revolution.

The European Social Democratic parties became mere electoral machines. By now, they have so degenerated that they no longer claim to be for a new kind of society at all; they merely claim to be liberal pro-capitalist parties. They are presently in the governments of most of the Western European countries.

They all supported the bombing of Serbia and of Afghanistan, the U.S. support for Israel, and U.S. preparation for other wars (with various quibbles here and there). The Communist parties in Western Europe also became no more than electoral machines. If, as Engels often quoted, "The proof of the pudding is in the eating," then electoralism should be decidedly discredited.

The most recent awful example of electoralism is that of the German Green party. It was founded as the unparty, the anti-party party, a virtually anarchist party, with rotating representatives and a program which could not be granted by industrial capitalism. In a couple of decades, the Greens' elected representatives "realistically" adapted to the German parliament. Now, in coalition with the Social Democratic party, their leader, Fischer, is the German foreign minister. They support NATO and its current wars. This should not give us confidence in those U.S. activists who are trying to follow the same model by building a U.S. Green party.

This history has a message. The problems of our society will not be solved by making the Democratic party more liberal nor by replacing the Democrats with a new party. They will not be helped by a new, pro-capitalist party (such as the Nader/Greens effort) nor by a union-based party with a pro-capitalist program (as advocated by the leaders of the Labor Party movement). Not even by a party with an openly anarchist or socialist program. The whole electoral approach is unworkable.

Morris was perfectly aware that there was a real difference between liberal politicians and conservatives. Yet he also knew that the lesser evil was still an evil. It is not that the liberals are the same as the reactionaries; it is that the lesser evils cannot be effective in fighting the reactionary right. This can be demonstrated by the steady move of U.S. politics to the right, as the lesser-evil Democrats keep on following the lead of the Republicans. What oppressed people need the most is not lesser-evil presidents or judges but militant and independent movements of workers, women, African-Americans, and everyone with grievances against this system.

This is the rulers' state, the organization of oppression in all its aspects. The oppressed do not gain by participating in it. Elections run on rivers of cash (legal and illegal, soft and hard)-and no "campaign finance reform" will change that.

Working people, oppressed "minorities," and the poor do not have such funds. What we have is numbers and the possibility of organizing ourselves. Instead of organizing to support our enemies, the oppressed should be organizing people into anti-hierarchical unions and other popular collectives, building demonstrations, engaging in civil disobedience/strikes/boycotts/direct actions, and in general, raising hell.

The popular forces have won their biggest gains by non-electoral direct struggle. This includes the mass strikes of the 1930s, with their factory sit-ins and clashes with the National Guard, which won the unions the right to exist. Also, the mass civil disobedience of the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movements, including breaking legal

segregation in the South and winning federal anti-discrimination laws. From the anti-war movement of the 1960s to the global justice demonstrations of today, the struggle against military and economic imperialism has taken place in the streets, not in Congress.

This does not mean that anarchists should be neutral when oppressed people demand the right to vote. Likewise, if some radicals vote defensively, we need not lecture them about this decision as long as it is not seen as a substitute for direct action. On the contrary, we should support this both because 1) it is what people want and have a right to, and 2) the more “democratic” the country is-although still really run by a ruling class minority-the easier it is for people to organize and use free speech to fight the system.

Voting rights for the oppressed became an issue again at the end of the last presidential election. The way in which African Americans in particular were denied the right to vote and be counted in Florida exposed the reality of capitalist “democracy.” Black people were furious. But no one organized this fury into mass marches and protests-not even the Democrats who were being cheated out of a political plum. They preferred to lose rather than to mobilize the Southern Black population! The Green party too did nothing, chained to their electoral strategy. Hopefully, if there had been an uprising in Florida, anarchists would have participated in mass demonstrations and direct actions around the election fraud.

We live in a society of oppression and of a galloping destruction of the balance of nature. It is past time for people to say that we will no longer participate in our rulers’ shell games.

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