

# Anarchists & Guns

Paul Walker

“Workingmen: Arm yourselves and appear in full force!”

—1886 Haymarket leaflet

The initial clamor about controlling gun violence following the horrible mass shooting at Parkland, Fla. high school this February mostly subsided following huge demonstrations of students across the country in March and April. Young students appeared everywhere in the media advocating reforms, but no legislation has passed that will staunch the blood flow, and probably none will be forthcoming.

(As this was written, another high school massacre occurred in Santa Fe, Tex., followed by several other smaller ones that quickly disappeared from public attention.)

Liberal policies will do little to stem gun violence, and right wing proposals to arm everybody, led by the increasingly shrill National Rifle Association (NRA), only assures more killing.

Neither approach will successfully combat gun violence in a country steeped in a history of violence, where a third of the population owns 300 million firearms, and political limits constrain lawmakers to, at best, make tepid reforms.

While that mainstream debate continues, those who see the need for defense against a rising right wing current and perhaps for a revolution in a future period are involved in a parallel discussion about arms possession. If you oppose the political state what should be the stance toward legislation that would limit gun ownership and type of weaponry? Formal laws take the place of autonomous action in all spheres of life, providing both a protective and a repressive function. Armed might is the core of the political state. Without it protecting the ruling class and its economic and social arrangements, hierarchal systems from the first slave states to the current capitalist ones wouldn't have lasted long in the face of popular resistance.

However, the modern state mediates some of the worst abuses and natural consequences of an exploitative system. One can assume most anarchists, while opposing the state as an institution, are supportive of laws within the current system such as those governing the environment, product and workplace safety, discrimination, speed limits, and crimes against persons, all of which are enforced by the same tyrannical system of cops, judges, and courts which victimize the poor and people of color, and repress expressions of resistance.

It is certain that anarchists and other revolutionaries share a concern about the daily death toll the proliferation of firearms exacts, but the question to consider is, are arms a special and unique category different from air quality regulation or no left turn prohibitions?

Other than the United States, most Western countries have strict requirements regarding weaponry, including ownership, type, usage, etc., resulting in gun death rates up to 90 percent less than that of this country.

All of the liberal proposals for background checks, mandatory gun locks and safes, prohibiting ownership by abusers, and banning semi-automatic assault rifles, if enacted, would probably reduce gun violence somewhat. However, even under that politically fanciful scenario, that would still leave a heavily armed population with a capacity to act out shootings against themselves and others.

When we move to a discussion on our end of things as to what position should be taken regarding gun ownership, a whole different set of concerns come into the equation. It takes place in a context far from the understandable liberal dismay at the repeated mass shootings, one that considers the consequences of a disarmed population unable to protect workers and minorities against a tyrannical government, racist or right-wing mobs, or the ability to defend a revolution.

Historically, anarchists have admired armed revolutionaries, on the European barricades of 1848, at the 1871 Paris Commune, the revolutionary resistance to the Bolsheviks by the Makhnovist movement and Kronstadt garrison, and the most frequently cited example, our comrades of the anarchist militias in Spain who fought both fascists and Stalinists in the defense of the revolution they created in the 1930s.

In the U.S., African Americans frequently employed armed resistance to white racist terror following the Civil War and into the 1960s. Workers in the coal fields of West Virginia and Kentucky fought cops, National Guard, and company goons to defend their unions or the right to organize in the 1920s. In 1886, anarchist labor leaders called upon their members to “Arm yourselves and appear in full force,” at a rally in Chicago’s Haymarket Square. Many did, but following a bomb blast and ensuing gunfire that left scores dead and wounded, four anarchists were hanged by the state of Illinois.

Huey Newton, chairman of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s, famously urged oppressed black people to, “Pick up the gun!” The specter of armed African Americans confronting brutal urban police forces led to a murderous campaign of repression against the party resulting in the deaths of dozens of Panthers in spectacular shoot-outs across the country, and an eclipse of their non-violent community based programs.

The 1921 so-called Tulsa Race Riot was actually a white mob and police attack against a prosperous African American district. Black World War I veterans and members of the African Blood Brotherhood bravely built barricades to defend their neighborhoods against the marauders.

The resistance against the mobs was so intense that white city officials aerial bombed the defenders, burning the black section to the ground, killing hundreds.

The third aerial bombing of the U.S. (the second being Pearl Harbor) came in 1985 when a Philadelphia police helicopter dropped an incendiary device on the communal living space of the MOVE organization following a pitched gun battle with authorities trying to serve arrest warrants including ones for arms possession. The resulting fire killed eleven MOVE members including five children and destroyed 65 houses. Many of the black liberation group’s members remain in prison serving long sentences. (See “On a MOVE in Maine” in this issue.)

All of these examples (hundreds more exist) were heroic struggles against oppression and exploitation, yet almost all of them were scenes of great bloodshed and usually defeat of the radical forces pitted against the ruling powers.

The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was originally proposed by its Framers to guarantee states the right to raise militias to suppress slave uprisings and armed white revolts such as Bacon’s and Shay’s Rebellions. In recent years, its alleged ambiguity has morphed explicitly into a right of personal gun ownership, and increasingly advocated by the NRA to expand an armed population. However, the Framers also saw the necessity for having every white male armed in an era when they had a palpable fear of slave rebellions and Indian attacks. That siege mentality still exists among many whites, particularly ones who are armed.

The question here is what works for organizing defense of one’s self and community and a revolution if that comes to pass. Just as in day-to-day organizing, we evaluate what works partly by examining the strategies and tactics of past campaigns so we don’t repeat the same mistakes. What does this say about the efficacy of arming for revolution or for even community self-defense?

The first line of defense for capitalism and the political state once threatened is the police who are increasingly militarized. The cops of yore did damage enough when armed only a little better than their challengers, but now they possess military grade armaments including tanks and a variety of sophisticated weapons, surveillance, and command capacity.

Were the cops to fail in efforts to halt a mass based movement demanding revolutionary change, the final level of protection of the state is its regular armed forces who could easily overcome any popular-based revolution or resistance. A modern revolution could only occur if sections of the military joined the revolution.

Regarding defense against fascist threats to our movements on a daily basis, let alone for revolution or even radical reform: We are currently way outgunned. There are ten million AR-15 assault rifles owned by Americans. How many can we estimate are in the hands of, in general, Trump supporters, or narrowing it to extreme rightists and open fascists compared to how many are possessed by anarchists or leftists? The math is not encouraging.

Employing increasingly strident, far right-wing rhetoric, the NRA with its five million armed members, could easily be transformed into fascist militias as happened after World War I when the German Freikorps, a right-wing para-military, was used by the government to suppress revolutionary upsurges.

Currently, on the left, there are small gun groups like Guerrilla Mainframe and the Huey P. Newton Gun Club, which oppose police brutality and advocate for the rights of black gun owners.

Also, there is Redneck Revolt, an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-fascist group which organizes white working-class people and has more than 33 local chapters, an offshoot of the John Brown Gun Clubs. They've appeared armed at Trump rallies in the manner rightists have elsewhere. Left groups are all under heavy police surveillance. The co-founder of the two black organizations, Rakem Balogun, was recently locked up for five months without bail on suspicion of "domestic terrorism."

It's hard to say what this suggests doing. We are clearly outgunned both by the state and the right. Should historic defeats encourage us to submit without a struggle? Should we depend upon the state to protect us from rightist assault? The answers to these questions are obvious.

Harder questions are, should anarchists oppose any restrictions on gun ownership other than background checks, or even that? Should we see the Red Neck/John Brown Gun Clubs as a model of armed resistance against an increasingly crazed right wing which has no debate about the issue of guns?

In answering this, we should be aware that there will be 35,000 U.S. gun deaths in a given year with 100,000 people wounded. If anarchists were as armed as are current gun owners, would we be any safer from murdering one another, taking our own lives, and shooting others accidentally? Probably not. (Full disclosure: I own three weapons, and do not want to surrender them.)

However, revolution has always been an undertaking filled with risks and the future is uncertain as to what will occur as this country's politics get crazier. It's been said that we should have a big tool box, one which includes a multitude of resources of which guns at a particular time could be useful ones.

Most revolutions are thought of as extremely violent events, but the act of revolution by itself, the wheel turning over the old society and bringing the new one to the top, is usually fairly non-violent. In Russia and Spain, for instance, revolutionary ideals supplanted the conventional norms of capitalism and the state as workers and peasants simply began life without bosses and cops. It was the defense of those new forms in which so many lives were lost.

No one from the *Fifth Estate* offers advice as to whether gun possession is appropriate or not, and certainly not this writer. The most appropriate tools are those which have always led towards revolution—organizing around greater freedom, protecting those most at risk from racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia, supporting struggles in the workplace and the community, and subverting loyalty to the empire, its military, and its wars.

Once we see where this has brought us, it will be an organic process of deciding the best means of defense.

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