

An Anarchist FAQ

Reply to errors and distortions in Phil Mitchinson's *Marxism and direct action*

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Reply to errors and distortions in Phil Mitchinson's *Marxism and direct action*

Phil Mitchinson's essay [Marxism and direct action](#) attempts to provide a "Marxist" (i.e. Leninist/Trotskyist) critique of the "Direct Action" based groups which came to notice at various demonstrations across the world in the late 1990s and early 2000s -- most famously in Seattle, November 1999. He, correctly, links these groups and currents with anarchism. However, his "critique" is nothing but a self-contradictory collection of false assertions, lies and nonsense, as we shall prove (indeed, his "critique" seems more the product of envy at anarchist influence in these movements than the product of scholarship or objectivity). That is why we have decided to reply to his article -- it gives us an ideal possibility to indicate the depths to which some Marxists will swoop to distort anarchist politics and movements.

The organisation which Mitchinson seeks to critique is *Reclaim the Streets* (RTS) which often staged non-violent direct action street reclaiming events such as the "invasion" of a major road, highway or motorway to stage a party. In addition, it produced various spoof newspapers (such as [Maybe](#) to advertise the May Day 2000 "guerrilla gardening" demonstrations). While RTS actions and the wider "anti-globalisation" protests eventually petered out for a variety of reasons such as an inability to apply themselves in everyday struggles and life, another factor would be the various attempts by vanguard parties to "educate" these movements and recruit from them. This will, of course, be inflicted upon any future movement which develops and, we are sure, the same arguments will be raised again. As such, this appendix is of use in spite of its apparently narrow focus.

1. How does Mitchinson impoverish the politics of the direct action groups?

Mitchinson begins by noting that the *"recent anti-capitalist demonstrations have brought together many different groups protesting against the destruction of the environment, racism, the exploitation of the third world, and also many ordinary young people protesting at the state of things in general. They have certainly shattered the myth that everyone is happy and that the capitalist system is accepted as the only possible form of society."* Of course, this is correct. What he fails to mention is that these demonstrations and groups managed to do this **without** the "guidance" of any Leninist party -- indeed, the vanguard parties are noticeable by their absence and their frantic efforts to catch up with these movements. This, of course, is not the first time this has happened. Looking at every revolution we discover the "revolutionary" parties either playing no role in their early stages or a distinctly counter-productive role.

He states that *"[a]ll around us we see the misery this system causes. Famine, war, unemployment, homelessness and despair, these are the violent acts that the system perpetrates against millions every day."* However, as much as these aspects of capitalism are terrible, the anti-capitalist revolt expressed by many within the direct action groups is much wider than this (standard) leftist list. The movements, or at least parts of them, have a much more radical critique of the evils of capitalism -- one that bases it self on abolishing alienation, domination, wage slavery, oppression, exploitation, the spiritual as well as material poverty of everyday life, by means of self-management, autonomy, self-organisation and direct action. They raise the possibility of playful, meaningful, empowering and

productive self-activity to replace *"tedious, over-tiring jobs"* as well as the vision of a libertarian communist (i.e. moneyless, stateless) society.

Given this, Mitchinson's account of the movements he is trying to critique is as poverty stricken intellectually as the capitalist system these movements are challenging. Leninists like Mitchinson, instead of swallowing a dose of humility and learning from the very different ways this new wave of protest is being framed, are trying to squeeze the protest into their own particular one-dimensional model of revolution. Being unable to understand the movements he is referring to, he pushes their vision into the narrow confines of his ideology and distorts it.

He goes on to state that *"[w]itnessing and experiencing this destruction and chaos, young people everywhere are driven to protest."* Of course, anyone who is part of these movements will tell you that a wide cross-section of age groups are involved, not just *"young people."* However, Mitchinson's comments on age are not surprising -- ever since Lenin's *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Bolshevik inspired Marxists have attributed other, more radical, political theories, analyses and visions to the alleged youth of those who hold these opinions (in spite of the facts). In other words, these ideas, they claim, are the produce of immaturity, inexperience and youth and will, hopefully, be grown out of. Just as many parents mutter to themselves that their anarchist (or Marxist, homosexual, whatever) children will "grow out of it", Lenin and his followers like Mitchinson consider themselves as the wiser, older relations (perhaps a friendly Uncle or a Big Brother?) of these "young" rebels and hope they will "grow out of" their infantile politics.

The word patronising does not do Mitchinson justice.

2. Does anarchism *"juxtapose"* theory and action?

Mitchinson launches into his first strawman by asserting:

"However, the idea of getting involved in a political organisation is a turn off for many, who understandably want to do something, and do something now. In reality, the attempt to juxtapose organisation, discussion, and debate with 'direct action' is pure sophistry."

We are not aware of any anarchist or direct action group which does not discuss and debate their actions, the rationale of their actions and the aims of their actions. These demonstrations that *"young people"* apparently turn up at are, in fact, organised by groups who have meetings, discuss their ideas, their objectives, their politics, and so on. That much should be obvious. In reality, it is Mitchinson who expresses *"pure sophistry,"* not the *"many"* who he claims act without thinking. And, of course, he fails to mention the two days of meetings, discussion and debate which took place the Saturday/Sunday before the May Day actions in London -- to mention the May Day 2000 conference would confuse the reader with facts and so goes unmentioned.

He then asserts that the *"ideas of Marxism are not the subject of academic study, they are precisely a guide to action."* We have to point out here that the Marxist Parties Mitchinson urges us to build did not take part in organising the actions he praises (a few members of these parties did come along, on some of them, to sell papers, of course, but this is hardly a

"vanguard" role). In general, the vanguard parties were noticeable by their absence or, **at best**, their lack of numbers and involvement. If we judge people by what they do, rather than what they say (as Marx urged), then we must draw the conclusion that the Marxism of Mitchinson is a guide to inaction rather than action.

Mitchinson continues by stating Marxists *"are all in favour of action, but it must be clearly thought out, with definite aims and objectives if it is to succeed. Otherwise we end up with directionless action."* It would be impolite to point out that no anarchist or member of a direct action organisation would disagree with this statement. Every anti-capitalist demonstration has had a definite aim and objective, was clearly thought out and organised. It did not "just happen." Mitchinson presents us with a strawman so fragile that even a breeze of reality would make it disintegrate.

The question is, of course, what kind of organisation do we create, how do we determine our aims and objectives. That is the key question, one that Mitchinson hides behind the strawman of organisation versus non-organisation, planned action versus *"directionless action."* To state it bluntly, the question is actually one of whether we organise in an authoritarian manner or a libertarian manner, not whether or not we organise. Mitchinson may not see the difference (in which case he thinks all organisation is "authoritarian" and so, as we discuss in [section H.4](#), echoes Engels) but for anarchists and members of direct action groups the difference is vital.

He goes on to state:

"Furthermore without political organisation who decides what action is to be taken, when and where? There can be no greater direct action than the seizing of control over our own lives by the vast majority of society. In that act lies the essence of revolution. Not just an aimless 'direct action' but mass, democratic and conscious action, the struggle not just against capitalism, but for a new form of society, socialism."

It may come as a surprise to Mitchinson but people and groups decide *"what action is to be taken, when and where"* without a *"political organisation"* (party) all the time. Trade unions, for example, vote to take strike action on specific days all the time without a party deciding on behalf of their members. Indeed, his article was written precisely **because** a group decided these without the benefit of a party telling them what to do, when to do it and where to do it. It does, of course, raise the question of how much *"control over our lives"* can exist if a *"political organisation . . . decides what action is to be taken, when and where"*? Simply put, libertarian organisation rests on the notion that *"mass, democratic and conscious action"* **is** possible and that we do not need others telling us what to do, which is why we reject the hierarchical structures and perspectives of class society -- and vanguardism (see [section H.5](#)).

Perhaps it may be objected that Mitchinson does not mean a party is needed for action but simply that we need organisation. If so, then (again) he presents us with the strawman of *"conscious"* action versus *"aimless"* action. After all, the anti-capitalist demonstrations **were** organised -- non-hierarchical groups decided collectively what action was to be organised, when and where. The real question is not organisation versus non-organisation but rather authoritarian versus libertarian organisation. Either decision making from the bottom up or decision making from the top-down. As for there bring *"no greater direct action"* than

revolution, well, anarchists have been saying that for over one hundred years -- we do not need a Leninist to tell us our own ideas!

3. How does Mitchinson distort the London May Day demo?

Mitchinson then gets to the crux of the issue -- "*So, what comes next?*" -- and asserts:

"The organisers of the demo tell us this was not a protest in order to secure changes, reforms apparently are a waste of time. No, simply by participating in what they call the 'carnival' we become better people, and eventually more and more people will participate, until a critical mass is reached and we all ignore capitalism, don't pay our bills, until they go away. What an infantile flight of fancy!"

Yes, indeed, what an infantile flight of fancy! However, the flight is purely Mitchinson's. No one in RTS (or any anarchist) makes such a claim. Yes, RTS urged people to take part in a carnival -- as they argue "*[m]any of the great moments of revolutionary history were carnivalesque . . . But we are not waiting for these moments of carnivalesque revolution, we are trying to merge them into every moment of everyday life. We cannot live on one-off days, a letting of steam, safety valves for society enabling life to return to normal the next day or for hierarchical domination to return, as did in so many historical revolutions. Revolution is not an act but a process and carnival can prepare us for this process.*" [Maybe, p. 9] Thus "carnival" is **not** seen as an end to itself (as Mitchinson asserts) but rather an aid to the creation of a revolutionary movement. Mitchinson confuses a celebration of May Day with an insurrection. In the words of Maybe:

"And although Mayday is just one day, it seeks to incite continuous creativity and action towards a radical remaking of everyday life. Steeped in a history of daily struggle, of 'day in day out' organising for social change, but pulsating with the celebration of renewal and fresh hope that returns with the coming of summer. Mayday will always be a pivotal moment." [Maybe, p. 5]

Maybe is clear -- we need to organise the daily struggle and enjoy ourselves while we are at it. Mitchinson's distortion of that message is pitiful.

4. Do anarchists really think "*the bosses will do nothing to defend their system*"?

Mitchinson continues by raising a commonplace Marxist fallacy on anarchism:

"The genuine intentions of those protesting is not open to question. However, the way to hell is paved with many such good intentions. Are we really to believe that whilst we all 'place ourselves outside of capitalism', the bosses will do nothing to defend their system? This ostrich like tactic of burying our heads in the sand until they go away is not serious. Nor is it action. In reality, it is irresponsible, indirect inaction."

The comment about "*indirect inaction*" is somewhat funny coming from a political tendency which did not produce a movement of the importance of Seattle 1999 and is now trying to

recruit from it. Still, it would be interesting to discover in which anarchist work comes the notion that we anarchists think the bosses will not defend their system. Yes, Lenin did claim that anarchists would *"lay down their arms"* after a revolution, but as Murray Bookchin notes, anarchists are *"not so naive as to believe anarchism could be established overnight. In imputing this notion to Bakunin, Marx and Engels wilfully distorted the Russian anarchist's views. Nor did the anarchists . . . believe that the abolition of the state involved 'laying down arms' immediately after the revolution. . ."* [**Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 137] Bakunin, for example, thought the *"Commune would be organised by the standing federation of the Barricades"* and that *"the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces"* would *"organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction . . . it is the very fact of the expansion and organisation of the revolution for the purpose of self-defence among the insurgent areas that will bring about the triumph of the revolution."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 170 and p. 171] This is discussed further in [section H.2.1](#) and so we will leave this at that.

Moreover, RTS actions have continually come into conflict with the state and its forces of defence. Mitchinson seems to think that the participants of RTS and its demonstrations are incapable of actually understanding and learning from their experiences -- they have seen and felt the capitalist system defending itself. Anyone on the J18, N30, A16 or M1 demonstrations or just watching them on TV would have seen the capitalist system defending itself with vigour -- and the protestors **fighting back**. Rather than acknowledge the obvious, Mitchinson asserts nonsense. The only person burying their head in the sand is Mitchinson if he ignores the experiences of his own senses (and the basic principles of materialism) in favour of an ideological diatribe with no basis in reality.

What is *"irresponsible"* is misrepresenting the viewpoints of your enemies and expecting them not to point out your errors.

5. How does Mitchinson misrepresent anarchist organisation?

Mitchinson now moves onto the real enemy, anarchism. He asserts that:

"Anarchist organisations have always hidden behind a facade of 'self-organisation'. They claim to have no leaders, no policy etc. Yet who decides?"

Yes, anarchist groups claim to have no leaders but they do not claim to be without policies. Anyone with any comprehension of anarchist theory and history would know this (just one example, Bakunin argued -- in an article entitled *"The Policy of the International"* -- that we needed to establish *"a genuine workers' program -- the policy of the International [Workers Association]"* [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 100]).

Mitchinson asks the question, if we do not have leaders, *"who decides?"* That in itself exposes the authoritarian nature of his politics and the Bolshevik-style party. He obviously cannot comprehend that, without leaders deciding things for us, we manage our own affairs -- we decide the policy of our organisations collectively, by the direct democracy of the membership. Forgetting his early comment of that there is *"no greater direct action than the seizing of control over our own lives by the vast majority of society,"* he now asks how the

vast majority of society can seize control over our own lives without leaders to tell us what to do!

Anarchists reject the idea of leaders -- instead we argue for the *"leadership of ideas."* As we discuss this concept in [section J.3.6](#), we will not do so here. However, the key concept is that anarchists seek to spread their ideas by discussing their politics **as equals** in popular organisations and convincing the mass assemblies of these bodies by argument. Rather than using these bodies to be elected to positions of power (i.e. leadership as it is traditionally understood) anarchists consider it essential that power remains in the hands of the base of an organisation and argue that the policies of the organisation be decided by the member directly in assemblies and co-ordinated by conferences of mandated, recallable delegates (see [section A.2.9](#) for more discussion).

This is to be expected, of course, as anarchists believe that a free society can only be created by organisations which reflect the principles of that society (see [section H.1.6](#)). Hence we see policies being made by those affected by them and oppose attempts to turn self-managed organisations into little more than vehicles to elect "leaders." A free society is a self-managed one and can only be created by self-management in the class struggle or revolutionary process. All that revolutionaries should do is try and influence the decisions these organisations make by discussing our ideas with their membership -- just as any other member could in the mass assemblies the organisation is built upon. Any attempt by revolutionaries to seize power upon behalf of these organisations means destroying their revolutionary potential and the revolution itself by replacing the participation of all with the power of a few (the party leadership).

Thus anarchist theory and practice is very clear on the question *"who decides"* -- it is those who are affected by the question via group assemblies and conferences of mandated, recallable delegates. Rather than have *"no policy,"* policy in an anarchist organisation is decided directly by the membership. Without *"leaders"* -- without power delegated into the hands of a few -- who else **could** make the decisions and policy? That Mitchinson cannot comprehend this implies that he cannot envision a society without a few telling the many what to do.

Mitchinson continues to show his incomprehension:

"If there was no leadership and no policy then there could be no action of any kind. The recent demonstrations have been highly organised and co-ordinated on an international scale. Good, so it should be. However, without organisation and democracy no-one, except a clique at the top, has any say in why, where and when. Such a movement will never bring international capital trembling to its knees."

First, we must point out that these demonstrations which spread like wild-fire across the world at this time had, most definitely, made international capital nervous. Second, we must point out that no Leninist vanguards were involved in organising them (a few members turned up to sell papers later, once their significance had registered with the party leadership). Third, we must point out that no Leninist vanguard has made *"international capital"* tremble in the knees for quite a few decades -- since 1917, only Stalinist vanguards have had any effect (and, of course, *"international capital"* soon realised they could work with the Bolsheviks and other "Communist" leaders as one ruling elite with another). It seems

somewhat ironic that a Leninist, whose movement was noticeable in its absence, mocks the first movement to scare the ruling class since the 1960s.

We must also note that the policy decided upon by the multitude of groups across the world was decided upon by the members of those groups. They organised and used **direct** democracy to make their policy decisions and implement them. Given that Mitchinson wonders how people can make decisions without leaders, his comments about rule by "*a clique at the top*" are somewhat ironic. As the history of the Russian Revolution indicates, a highly centralised state system (which mimics the highly centralised party) soon results in rule by the top party officials, not by the mass of people.

Mitchinson again decides to flog his fallacy of organisation versus non-organisation:

"One of the best known anarchist groups in Britain, Reclaim the Streets, gave the game away in their spoof Mayday publication, 'Maybe'. Incidentally, who wrote these articles, who decided what went in and what didn't, who edited it, where did the money come from? Our intention here is not to accuse them of dodgy financing - simply to point out that this 'no leaders' stuff is a self-organised myth."

It states who put together **MayDay** on page 5 of the paper. It was "*an organic group of 'guerrilla gardeners'*" -- in other words, members of **Reclaim the Streets** (RTS) who desired to produce the paper for that event. These people would have joined the group producing it via the weekly RTS open meetings and would have been held accountable to that same open meeting. No great mystery there -- if you have even the slightest vision of how a non-hierarchical organisation works. Rather than being a "*myth*", RTS shows that we do not need to follow leaders -- instead we can manage our own organisations directly and freely participate in projects organised via the main open meeting. Writing articles, editing, and so on are not the work of "*leaders*" -- rather they are simply tasks that need doing. They do not imply a leadership role -- if they did then every hack journalist is a "*leader*."

He continues to attack what he cannot understand:

"On page 20 they announce 'Reclaim the streets is non-hierarchical, spontaneous and self-organised. We have no leaders, no committee, no board of directors, no spokes people. There is no centralised unit for decision making, strategic planning and production of ideology. There is no membership and no formalised commitment. There is no master plan and no pre-defined agenda.'

"There are two problems here. Firstly who is 'we', who made the above statement, and who decided it. Secondly, if it were true, it would not be something of which to be proud. Whether you like it or not, there is no way the capitalist system will ever be overthrown by such a haphazard and slipshod method."

Taking the first issue, "*who is 'we,' who made the above statement, and who decided it.*" Why, it is the membership of RTS -- decided via their weekly open meeting (as mentioned on that page). That Mitchinson cannot comprehend this says a lot about his politics and vision. He cannot comprehend self-management, direct democracy. He seems not to be able to understand that groups can make decisions collectively, without having to elect leaders to make any decisions for them.

Taking the second issue, it is clear that Mitchinson fails to understand the role of RTS (and other anarchist groups). Anarchists do not try to overthrow capitalism **on behalf of others** -- they urge them to overthrow it themselves, by their own direct action. The aim of groups like RTS is to encourage people to take direct action, to fight the powers that be and, in the process, create their own organs of self-management and resistance. Such a process of working class self-activity and self-organisation in struggle is the starting process of every revolution. People in struggle create their own organisations -- such as soviets (workers' councils), factory committees, community assemblies -- through which they start to manage their own affairs and, hopefully, overthrow the state and abolish capitalism. It is not the task of RTS to overthrow capitalism, it is the task of the whole population.

Moreover, many anarchists do see the need for a specific anarchist organisation (see [section J.3](#)). RTS does not need to organise in this fashion simply because such groups **already** existed in the UK at that time. It is not its role -- its role is a means to encourage self-activity and direct action as well as raising libertarian ideas in a popular manner. For more "serious" political organisation, people can and do turn to other anarchist groups and federations.

The street carnival principle of RTS is precisely the type of organising anarchists excel at -- namely organising that catches the fun and excitement of popular direct action and, most importantly, **gets people out on the streets** -- something Marxists have failed to do very well (if at all). It is a small step from organising a street carnival to further, "more serious" organising. Anarchist revolution is about bringing joy back into human lives, not endless (and often dishonest) polemics on the ideas of long dead philosophers. Rather, it is about creating a philosophy which, while inspired by past thinkers, is not subservient to them and aims to base itself on **current** struggles and needs rather than past ones. It is also about building a new political culture, one that is popular, active, street-based (versus ivory-tower elitist), and above all, fun. Only this way can we catch the imagination of everyday people and move them from resigned apathy to active resistance. The Marxists have tried their approach, and it has been a resounding failure -- everyday people consider Marxism at best irrelevant, and at worst, inhuman and lifeless. Fortunately, anarchists are not following the Marxist model of organising, having learned from history

Thus Mitchinson fails to understand the role of RTS or its position in the UK anarchist movement. He then asserts:

"There is no theory, no coherent analysis of society, no alternative programme. To brag of a lack of direction, a lack of purpose and a lack of coherence, in the face of such a highly organised and brutal enemy as international capital, is surely the height of irresponsibility."

First, anyone reading **Maybe** or other RTS publications will quickly see there is theory, coherent analysis and an alternative vision. As Mitchinson has obviously read **Maybe** we can only assume his claim is a conscious lie. Second, RTS in the quoted passage clearly do **not** "brag of a lack of direction, a lack of purpose and a lack of coherence." They do state there is no "centralised unit for decision-making" -- which is true, they have a **decentralised** unit for decision-making (direct democracy in open meetings). There is "no master-plan," etc. as any plans are decided upon by these open meetings. There is no pre-defined agenda because, as a democratic organisation, it is up to the open meeting to define their own agenda.

It is just Mitchinson's **assumption** that only centralised parties, with leaders making the decisions, can have "*direction*," "*purpose*" and "*coherence*." As can be seen **by their actions** that RTS **does** have direction, purpose and coherence. Needless to say, while other anarchists may be critical about RTS and its actions, we do not deny that it has been an effective organisation, involving a great many people in its actions who would probably not be involved in political activities. Rather than being "*irresponsible*," RTS shows the validity of libertarian organisation and its effectiveness. No Marxist Party has remotely approached RTS's successes in terms of involving people in political actions. This is hardly a surprise.

6. How does Mitchinson define anarchism wrongly?

Mitchinson states:

"In reality the leaders of these movements are not devoid of ideology, they are anarchists. Anarchism is not simply a term of abuse, it comes from the Greek word 'anarchos' meaning 'without government'. To anarchists the state - the institutions of government, the army, police, courts etc. - is the root cause of all that is wrong in the world. It must be destroyed and replaced not with any new form of government, but the immediate introduction of a stateless society."

This is wrong, for "*anarchos*" actually means "*without authority*," or "*contrary to authority*". It does **not** mean "without government" as such (although it commonly is used that way). This means that anarchism does **not** consider the state as "*the root of all that is wrong with the world*" -- we consider it, like capitalism (wage slavery), patriarchy, hierarchy in general, etc., as a symptom of a deeper problem, namely authority (or, more precisely, authoritarian social relations, hierarchical power -- of which class power is a subset). Therefore anarchist theory is concerned with more than just the state -- it is against capitalism just as much as it is against the state, for example.

Thus, as anyone familiar with anarchist theory could tell you, anarchists do not think that "*the state*" is the root of all that is wrong in the world. As shown in [section H.2.4](#), Marxists have asserted this for years -- unfortunately for them, repetition does not make something true. Rather, anarchists see the state as **one** of the causes of evil in the world and the main protector of all the rest. We also stress that in order to combat all the evils, we need to destroy the state so that we are in a position to abolish the other evils by being in control of our own lives. For example, in order to abolish capitalism -- i.e. for workers' to seize the means of life -- the state, which protects property rights, must be destroyed. Without doing so, the police and army will come and take back that which the workers' have taken. However, we do not claim that the state causes all of our problems -- we do claim that getting rid of the state is an essential act, on which many others are dependent.

In the words of Brian Morris:

"Another criticism of anarchism is that it has a narrow view of politics: that it sees the state as the fount of all evil, ignoring other aspects of social and economic life. This is a misrepresentation of anarchism. It partly derives from the way anarchism has been defined, and partly because Marxist historians have tried to exclude anarchism from the broader socialist movement. But when one examines the writings of classical anarchists . . . as well as the character of anarchist movements. . . it is

clearly evident that it has never had this limited vision. It has always challenged all forms of authority and exploitation, and has been equally critical of capitalism and religion as it has been of the state." ["Anthropology and Anarchism," **Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed**, no. 45, p. 40]

As can be seen, Mitchinson repeats the usual Marxist straw man -- and it is significant that he felt no urge to determine whether this assertion is correct or not before repeating it.

7. Does anarchism reject fighting for reforms?

After asserting the usual Marxist falsehoods about anarchism being just against the state, he moves on:

"This opposition to the state and authority leads to a rejection of participation in any form of parliamentary activity, belonging to a political party or fighting for any reforms, that is political change through the state."

Again Mitchinson smuggles a falsehood into his "analysis." Anarchists do not reject *"fighting for any reforms"* -- far from it. We do reject parliamentary activity, that is true, but we think that reforms can and must be won (see [section J.1](#)). We see such reforms coming via the direct action of those who desire them -- for example, by workers striking for better working conditions, more wages and so. Anyone with even a passing awareness of anarchist thought would know this. Indeed, that is what direct action means -- it was coined by French anarcho-syndicalists to describe the struggle for reforms within capitalism!

As for rejecting parliamentary activity, yes, anarchists do reject this form of "action." However, we do so for reasons Mitchinson fails to mention -- see [Section J.2](#) for the reasons why anarchists support direct action and oppose electioneering as a means of both reform and revolution. Suffice to say here, the history of Marxist (and other) use of *"parliamentary activity"* has confirmed the anarchist position, namely that it would turn the parties using it reformist and part of the system they originally aimed to end.

Similarly, anarchists reject political parties but we do not reject political organisations -- i.e. specific anarchist groups (see [section J.3](#)). The difference is that political parties are generally organised in a hierarchical fashion and anarchist federations are not -- we try and create the new world when we organise rather than reproducing the traits of the current, bourgeois, one.

Needless to say, Mitchinson seeks to recruit the people he is slandering and so holds out an olive-branch by stating that *"[o]f course, Marxism is opposed to the brutal domination of the capitalist state too. Marx saw a future society without a state but instead 'an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.' That is a self-governing people. The question however is how can this be achieved?"*

Yes, as Bakunin argued, Marxists do not reject our programme out of hand. They claim to also seek a free society and so Mitchinson is correct -- the question is how can this be achieved. Anarchists argue that a self-governing people can only be achieved by self-governing means: *"Bakunin . . . advocated socialist (i.e., libertarian) means in order to achieve a socialist (i.e., libertarian) society."* [Arthur Lehning, "Introduction", **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 27] Thus means and ends must be consistent --

revolutionary movements must be organised in a way that reflects the society we want to create. Thus a self-governing society can only be created by self-governing organisations and a self-governing movement. If the revolutionary movement reflects bourgeois society -- for example, is hierarchical -- then it cannot create a free society. That is the rationale for the way anarchist groups organise, including RTS. Marxists disagree and consider how a revolutionary movement organises itself as irrelevant.

Also, we must note that earlier Mitchinson denied that a self-governing organisation could exist when he was discussing RTS. He asserted that "[i]f there was no leadership and no policy then there could be no action of any kind." Now he claims that it is possible, but only **after** the revolution. We will note the obvious contradiction -- how do people become capable of self-government post-revolution if they do not practice it pre-revolution and, obviously, during the revolution?

8. Does anarchism see the state as the root of all problems?

Mitchinson moves on to assert that:

"Since anarchism sees in the state the root of all problems, it therefore believes these problems will be resolved by the destruction of the state."

As noted in [section 6](#), anarchists do **not** see in the state the root of all problems. We do urge the destruction of the state but that is because the state is the protector of existing society and in order to transform that society we need get rid of it. Kropotkin, for example, was well aware of *"the evil done by Capitalism and the State that supports it."* [**Evolution and Environment**, p. 83] Rather than seeing the State as the root of all evil, anarchists are well aware that evil is caused by many things -- particularly capitalism -- and that the state, as well as causing its own evils, supports and protects others. Thus anarchists are aware that the state is a tool for minority rule and only one source of evil.

Mitchinson, after misrepresenting anarchist thought, states:

"Marxism, meanwhile, sees the division of society into classes, a minority who own the means of producing wealth, and the majority of us whose labour is the source of that wealth, as the crux of the matter. It is this class division of society which gives rise to the state - because the minority need a special force to maintain their rule over the majority - which has evolved over thousands of years into the complicated structures we see today."

Anarchists would agree, as far as this goes. Bakunin argued that the State *"is authority, domination, and forced, organised by the property-owning and so-called enlightened classes against the masses."* He saw the social revolution as destroying capitalism and the state at the same time, that is *"to overturn the State's domination, and that of the privileged classes whom it solely represents."* [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 140] The idea that the state is a means to ensure class rule is one anarchists, as can be seen, would agree with (see [section B.2](#)).

However, anarchists do not reduce their understanding of the state to this simplistic Marxist analysis. While being well aware that the state is the means of ensuring the domination of an economic elite, anarchists recognise that the state machine also has interests of its own (see

[section H.3.9](#)). The state, for anarchists, is the delegation of power into the hands of a few. This creates, by its very nature, a privileged position for those at the top of the hierarchy:

"A government, that is a group of people entrusted with making the laws and empowered to use the collective force to oblige each individual to obey them, is already a privileged class and cut off from the people. As any constituted body would do, it will instinctively seek to extend its powers, to be beyond public control, to impose its own policies and to give priority to its special interests. Having been put in a privileged position, the government is already at odds with the people whose strength it disposes of." [Malatesta, **Anarchy**, p. 36]

While it is true that the state (particularly under capitalism) acts as the agent of the capitalist class, it does not mean that it does not have interests of its own. The State has developed as a means of imposing minority rule -- that much anarchists and Marxists can agree upon. To do so it has developed certain features, notably delegation of power into the hands of a few. This feature of the state is a product of its function. However, function and feature are inseparable -- retain the feature and the function will be re-established. In other words, maintain the state and minority rule will be re-established.

The simplistic class analysis of the state has always caused Marxists problems, particularly Trotskyists who used it to deny the obvious class nature of Stalinist Russia. Rather than see the USSR as a class society in which the State bureaucracy exploited and oppressed the working class for its own benefit, Trotskyists argued it was an autocratic, privileged bureaucracy in a classless society. As anarchist Camillo Berneri argued:

"In history there is no absurdity. An autocratic bureaucracy is a class, therefore it is not absurd that it should exist in a society where classes remain: bureaucratic and proletarian. If the USSR were a 'classless' society, it would also be a society without a bureaucratic autocracy, which is the natural fruit of the permanent existence of the State." ["The State and Classes", **The State - Or Revolution**, p. 87]

The weakness (or, at best, incompleteness) of the Marxist understanding of the state can best be seen by Trotsky's and his followers lack of understanding of Stalinism. As the state owned all the land and means of production, there could be no classes and so the Soviet Union must be a classless society. However, the obvious privileges of the bureaucracy could not be denied (as Trotsky was once a leading bureaucrat, he saw and experienced them at first hand) but as the state bureaucracy could not be a class and have class interests (by definition in his ideology), Trotsky would not draw the obvious conclusion. The actual practice of Leninism in power is enough to expose its own theoretical weaknesses.

9. Why is Mitchinson wrong about the "*Abolishion [i.e. Abolition] of the state*"?

Mitchinson moves on to argue that the "*modern capitalist state can wear many guises, monarchy, republic, dictatorship, but in the end its purpose remains the same, to maintain the minority rule of the capitalist class. Marxism's goal therefore is not simply to abolish the state, but to put an end to class society.*" Needless to say, that is also anarchism's goal. As Bakunin argued, "*political transformation*" and "*economic transformation . . . must be accomplished together and simultaneously.*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 106] So, as can be seen,

anarchism's goal is not simply abolishing the state, but to put an end to class society. That anarchists have always argued the state and capitalism must be destroyed at the same time is easily discovered from reading our works.

Continuing this theme Mitchinson argues that the state *"was born with the split of society into classes to defend private property. So long as there are classes there will be a state. So, how can class society be ended? Not by its denial, but only by the victory of one of the contending classes. Triumph for capitalism spells ruin for millions."*

Of course, we could point out here that many anthropologists disagree with the claim that the state is a product of class society. As Michael Taylor summarises, the *"evidence does not give this proposition a great deal of support. Much of the evidence which has been offered in support of it shows only that the primary states, not long after their emergence, were economically stratified. But this is of course consistent also with the simultaneous rise . . . of political and economic stratification, or with the **prior** development of the state -- i.e. of **political** stratification -- and the creation of economic stratification by the ruling class."* [Community, Anarchy and Liberty, p. 132]

Also, of course, as should be obvious from what we have said previously, anarchists do not think class society can be ended by "denial." As is clear from even a cursory reading of any anarchist thinker, anarchists seek to end class society as well as the state. However, we reject as simplistic the Marxist notion that the state exists purely to defend classes. The state has certain properties **because it is a state** and one of these is that it creates a bureaucratic class around it due to its centralised, hierarchical nature. Within capitalism, the state bureaucracy is part of the ruling class and (generally) under the control of the capitalist class. However, to generalise from this specific case is wrong as the state bureaucracy is a class in itself -- and so trying to abolish classes without abolishing the state is doomed to failure.

As such, the Marxist notion that we can use the state to abolish classes is just an assumption, an assumption that the experience of Marxism itself in power refuted -- as discussed in [section H.6.2](#), the Bolshevik regime soon spawned a bureaucracy which gathered power and privileges to itself, so creating a new class system.

10. Why is Mitchinson's comment that we face either *"socialism or barbarism"* actually undermine his case?

Mitchinson continues:

"As Marx once explained the choice before us is not socialism or the status quo, but socialism or barbarism."

We should point out that it Rosa Luxemburg who is usually associated with this quote. She made her famous comment during the First World War. The start of this war saw the Marxist German Social Democratic Party (and most of the others) vote for war credits in Parliament. This party was a mass workers' party which aimed to use every means, including elections, to gain reforms for the working class. The net end result of this strategy was the voting for war credits and the support of their state and ruling class in the war -- that is, the betrayal of the fundamental principles of socialism.

This event did not happen out of the blue. It was the end result of years of working within the bourgeois political system, of using elections ("*political activity*") as a means of struggle. The Social Democratic Parties had already been plagued with reformist elements for years before 1914. These elements, again, did not come from nowhere but were rather the response to what the party was actually doing. They desired to reform the party to bring its rhetoric in-line with its practice. As one of the most distinguished historians of this period put it, the "*distinction between the contenders remained largely a subjective one, a difference of ideas in the evaluation of reality rather than a difference in the realm of action.*" [C. Schorske, **German Social Democracy**, p. 38] The debacle of 1914 was a logical result of the means chosen, the evidence was already there for all to see (except, apparently, Lenin who praised the "*fundamentals of parliamentary tactics*" of the German and International Social Democracy and how they were "*at the same time implacable on questions of principle and always directed to the accomplishment of the final aim*" in his obituary of August Bebel in 1913! [**Collected Works**, vol. 19, p. 298])

Needless to say, this result had been predicted by Bakunin over 40 years previously. And Mitchinson wants us to repeat this strategy? As Marx said, history repeats itself -- first time as tragedy, second time as farce.

11. Why is Mitchinson wrong to assert anarchists do not believe in defending a revolution?

Mitchinson argues that the "*victory of the working class can only mean the destruction of the capitalist state. Will the capitalists take defeat like sporting ladies and gentlemen, retiring quietly to the pavilion? No, all history suggests that they would not. The workers would need to create a new state, for the first time to defend the rule of the majority over the minority.*"

Yes, indeed, all history **does** show that a ruling class will not retire quietly and a revolution will need to defend itself. If anarchists **did** believe that they would retire peacefully then Marxists would be correct to attack us. However, Marxist assertions are false. Indeed, they must think anarchists are morons if they genuinely do think we do not believe in defending a revolution. A few quotes by Bakunin should suffice to expose these Marxist claims as lies:

"Commune will be organised by the standing federation of the Barricades. . . [T]he federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces . . . [would] organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction . . . it is the very fact of the expansion and organisation of the revolution for the purpose of self-defence among the insurgent areas that will bring about the triumph of the revolution." [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, pp. 170-1]

And:

*"[L]et us suppose . . . it is Paris that starts [the revolution] . . . Paris will naturally make haste to organise itself as best it can, in revolutionary style, after the workers have joined into associations and made a clean sweep of all the instruments of labour, every kind of capital and building; armed and organised by streets and **quartiers**, they will form the revolutionary federation of all the **quartiers**, the federative commune . . . All the French and foreign revolutionary communes will then send representatives to*

organise the necessary common services . . . and to organise common defence against the enemies of the Revolution." [Op. Cit., p. 178-9]

As can be seen, Bakunin was well aware of the needs to defend a revolution after destroying the state and abolishing capitalism. As shown in [section H.2.1](#), other revolutionary anarchists held the same position on both the necessity of defending a revolution and the nature of that defence. Thus we discover Malatesta arguing that we should "[a]rm all the population," and the "creation of a voluntary militia, without powers to interfere as militia in the life of the community, but only to deal with any armed attacks by the forces of reaction to re-establish themselves, or to resist outside intervention by countries as yet not in a state of revolution." [Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas, p. 170 and p. 166] Malatesta stated the obvious for all anarchists:

*"But, by all means, let us admit that the governments of the still unemancipated countries were to want to, and could, attempt to reduce free people to a state of slavery once again. Would this people require a government to defend itself? To wage war men are needed who have all the necessary geographical and mechanical knowledge, and above all large masses of the population willing to go and fight. A government can neither increase the abilities of the former nor the will and courage of the latter. And the experience of history teaches us that a people who really want to defend their own country are invincible: and in Italy everyone knows that before the corps of volunteers (anarchist formations) thrones topple, and regular armies composed of conscripts or mercenaries disappear. . . [Some people] seem almost to believe that after having brought down government and private property we would allow both to be quietly built up again, because of a respect for the **freedom** of those who might feel the need to be rulers and property owners. A truly curious way of interpreting our ideas!"* [Anarchy, pp. 42-3]

Not only do we have this theoretical position, we can also point to concrete historical examples -- the Makhnovist movement in the Russian Revolution and the CNT militias during the Spanish Revolution, amongst others -- that prove that anarchists do recognise the need and importance of defending a successful revolution.

Therefore, statements asserting that anarchists are against defending a revolution are either spreading a conscious lie or a product of deep ignorance.

The question, then, is **not** one of defending or not defending a revolution. The question is **how** do we defend it (and, another key question, what **kind** of revolution do we aim for). Marxists urge us to "create a new state, for the first time to defend the rule of the majority over the minority." Anarchists reply that every state is based on the delegation of power into the hands of a minority and so cannot be used "to defend the rule of the majority over the minority." Rather, it would be the rule of those who claim to represent the majority. The confusion between people power and party power is at the root of why Leninism is not revolutionary.

Mitchinson then quotes Lenin and Trotsky to defend his assertion:

"The proletariat needs the state only temporarily. We do not at all disagree with the anarchists on the question of the abolition of the state as the aim. We maintain that, to

achieve this aim, we must temporarily make use of the instruments resources and methods of state power against the exploiters." [Lenin]

"Marxists are wholly in agreement with the anarchists in regard to the final goal: the liquidation of the state. Marxists are statist only to the extent that one cannot achieve the liquidation of the state simply by ignoring it." [Trotsky]

Of course, quoting Lenin or Trotsky when they make a false assertion does not turn lies into truth. As proven above, anarchists are well aware of the necessity of overthrowing the state by revolution **and** defending that revolution against attempts to defeat it. To state otherwise is to misrepresent anarchist theory on this subject. Moreover, despite Trotsky's claims, anarchists are aware that you do not destroy something by ignoring it. The real question is thus **not** whether to defend a revolution or whether to shatter the state machine. The questions are, **how** do you shatter the state, what do you replace existing society with and how do you defend a revolution. To state otherwise is to build a strawman -- unfortunately much of Lenin's "masterpiece" **The State and Revolution** is based on destroying this self-created strawman. Worse for Mitchinson, as shown in [section H.1.7](#), anarchists -- unlike Marxists -- do not simply quote Lenin's work, we compare his promises to the reality of his regime and it is this reality which proves the validity of anarchism.

12. Would the "workers' state" really be different, as Mitchinson claims?

Mitchinson argues that from *"the very beginning this would be like no previous state machine. From day one it would be in effect a semi-state."* The question is, for anarchists, whether this "semi-state" is marked by the delegation of power into the hands of a few. If so, then the "semi-state" is no such thing -- it is a state like any other and so an instrument of minority rule. Yes, this minority may state it represents the majority but in practice it can only represent itself and claim that is what the majority desires.

Hence, for anarchists, *"the essence of the state"* is *"centralised power 'OR TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY THE COERCIVE AUTHORITY' of which the state enjoys the monopoly, in that organisation of violence know as 'government'; in the hierarchical despotism, juridical, police and military despotism that imposes laws on everyone."* [Luigi Fabbri, *"Anarchy and 'Scientific' Communism"*, pp. 13-45, **Bloodstained**, Friends of Aron Baron (ed.), p. 24] The so-called "semi-state" is nothing of the kind -- it is a centralised power in which a few govern the many. Therefore, the "workers' state" would be "workers" in name only.

Mitchinson continues:

"The task of all previous revolutions was to seize state power. From the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 Marx and Engels concluded that it would not be possible for the workers to simply use the old state apparatus, they would instead have to replace it with an entirely new one, to serve the interests of the majority and lay the basis for a socialist society."

Needless to say, he forgets the **key** question -- **who** is to seize power. Is it the majority, directly, or a minority (the leaders of a party) who claim to represent the majority. Leninists

are clear, it is to be the party, not the working class as a whole. They confuse party power with class power. In the words of Lenin:

*"The mere presentation of the question - 'dictatorship of the party **or** dictatorship of the class: dictatorship (party) of the leaders **or** dictatorship (party) of the masses?' - testifies to most incredible and hopelessly muddled thinking . . . [because] classes are led by political parties" ["'Left-wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder", **The Lenin Anthology**, p. 567]*

And:

*"To go so far, in this connection, as to contrast **in general**, the dictatorship of the masses with the dictatorship of the leaders, is ridiculously absurd, and stupid." [Op. Cit., p. 568]*

However, what is **truly** stupid is confusing the rule by a minority with that of the majority managing their own affairs. The two things are different, they generate different social relationships and to confuse the two is to lay the ground work for the rule by a bureaucratic elite, a dictatorship of state officials **over** the working class.

Now we come to the usual Leninist claims about Bolshevik theory:

"To ensure that the workers maintain control over this state, Lenin argued for the election of all officials who should be held accountable and subject to recall, and paid no more than the wage of a skilled worker. All bureaucratic tasks should be rotated. There should be no special armed force standing apart from the people, and we would add, all political parties except fascists should be allowed to organise."

This is what Lenin, essentially, said he desired in **The State and Revolution** (Mitchinson misses out one key aspect, to which we will return later). Anarchists reply in three ways.

First, we note that *"much that passes for 'Marxism' in **State and Revolution** is pure anarchism -- for example, the substitution of revolutionary militias for professional armed bodies and the substitution of organs of self-management for parliamentary bodies. What is authentically Marxist in Lenin's pamphlet is the demand for 'strict centralism,' the acceptance of a 'new' bureaucracy, and the identification of soviets with a state."* [Murray Bookchin, **Post-Scarcity Anarchism**, p. 137] As an example, let us look at the recall of "officials" (inspired by the Paris Commune). We find this in Bakunin's and Proudhon's work **before** it was applied by the Communards and praised by Marx. Bakunin in 1868 argued for a *"Revolutionary Communal Council" composed of "delegates . . . vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, pp. 170-1] Proudhon's election manifesto of 1848 argued for *"universal suffrage and as a consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the binding mandate. Politicians balk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, do not appoint mandatories but rather abjure their sovereignty! That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy."* [**Property is Theft!**, p. 379] As can be seen, Lenin's recommendations were first proposed by anarchists.

Second, Lenin does not mention, never mind discuss, the role of the Bolshevik Party would have in the new "semi-state." Indeed, the party is mentioned only in passing. That in itself

indicates the weakness of using **The State and Revolution** as a guide book to Leninist theory or practice. Given the importance of the role of the party in Lenin's previous and latter works, it suggests that to quote **The State and Revolution** as proof of Leninism's democratic heart leaves much to be desired. And even **The State and Revolution**, in its one serious reference to the Party, is ambiguous in the extreme:

"By educating the workers' party, Marxism educates the vanguard of the proletariat which is capable of assuming power and of leading the whole people to Socialism, of directing and organising the new order, of being the teacher, the guide, the leader of all the toiling and exploited in the task of building up their social life without the bourgeoisie and against the bourgeoisie." [**The Essential Lenin**, p. 288]

Is it the vanguard **or** the proletariat which is "*capable of assuming power*"? The answer is important as a **social** revolution requires the fullest participation of the formerly oppressed masses in the management of their own affairs. In the context of the rest of **The State and Revolution** it could be argued it is the proletariat. However, this cannot be squared with Lenin's (or Trotsky's) post-October arguments and practices or the resolution of the Second World Congress of the Communist International which stated that "*[e]very class struggle is a political struggle. The goal of this struggle . . . is the conquest of political power. Political power cannot be seized, organised and operated except through a political party.*" [quoted by Duncan Hallas, **The Comintern**, p. 35] It is obvious that if the party rules, the working class does not. A socialist society cannot be built without the participation, self-activity and self-management of the working class. Thus the question of **who** makes decisions and **how** they do so is essential -- if it is not the masses then the slide into bureaucracy is inevitable.

Thus to quote **The State and Revolution** proves nothing for anarchists -- it does not discuss the key question of the party and so fails to present a clear picture of Leninist politics and their immediate aims. As soon becomes clear if you look at Leninism in power.

Third, we point to what he actually **did** in power. In this we follow Marx, who argued that we should judge people by what they do rather than what they say. We will concentrate on the pre-Civil War (October 1917 to May 1918) period to indicate that this breaking of promises started **before** the horrors of Civil War can be claimed to have forced these decisions onto the Bolsheviks (for more discussion, see [section H.6](#)).

Before the out-break of Civil War, the Bolsheviks had replaced election of "*all officials*" by appointment from above in many areas of life -- for example, they abolished the election of officers in the Red Army and replaced workers' self-management in production with one-man management, both forms of democracy being substituted by appointed from above. In addition, by the end of April, 1918, Lenin **himself** was arguing "*[o]bedience, and unquestioning obedience at that, during work to the one-man decisions of Soviet directors, of the dictators elected or appointed by Soviet institutions, vested with dictatorial powers.*" [our emphasis, "*Six Theses on the Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government*", **Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 316] Moreover, the Soviet Constitution adopted in July 1918 stated that "*[e]very commissar [of the Council of People's Commissars -- i.e. the Soviet government] has a collegium (committee) of which he is the president, and the members of which are appointed by the Council of People's Commissars.*" Appointment was the rule at the very heights of the state. By the sixth month of the Revolution the promise that "*[a]ll officials, without exception, to be elected*" no longer existed even in Lenin's own writings -- and **before** the

start of the Civil War. [Lenin, *"The State and Revolution"*, **Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 302]

Lenin also argued in mid-April 1918 that the *"socialist character of Soviet, i.e. **proletarian**, democracy"* lies, in part, in *"the people themselves determin[ing] the order and time of elections."* [*"The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government"*, **The Lenin Anthology**, p. 457] Given that *"the government [had] continually postponed the new general elections to the Petrograd Soviet, the term of which had ended in March 1918"* because it *"feared that the opposition parties would show gains"* Lenin's comments seem hypocritical in the extreme. [Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 22]

Moreover, the Bolsheviks did not stay true to Lenin's claim in **The State and Revolution** that *"since the majority of the people **itself** suppresses its oppressors, a 'special force' is **no longer necessary**"* as so *"in place of a **special** repressive force, the whole population itself came on the scene."* In this way the *"state machine"* would be *"the armed masses of workers who become transformed into a universal people's militia."* [**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 301, p. 320 and p. 347] Instead they created a political police force (the Cheka) and a standing army (in which elections were set aside by decree). These were special, professional, armed forces standing apart from the people and unaccountable to them. Indeed, they were used to repress strikes and working class unrest. So much for Mitchinson's claim that *"there should be no special armed force standing apart from the people"* -- it did not last three months (the Cheka was founded two months into the revolution, the Red Army was created in early 1918 and elections set aside by March of that year).

Also, the Bolsheviks banned newspapers from the start -- including other socialist papers -- and they did not allow other political tendencies to organise freely. The repression started **before** the Civil War with the attack, by the Cheka, in April 1918 on the anarchist movements in Petrograd and Moscow. While repression obviously existed during the Civil War, it is significant that it, in fact, started **before** it began. During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks repressed all political parties, including the Mensheviks even though they *"consistently pursued a policy of peaceable opposition to the Bolshevik regime, a policy conducted by strictly legitimate means"* and *"[i]ndividual Mensheviks who joined organisations aiming at the overthrow of the Soviet Government were expelled from the Menshevik Party."* [George Leggett, **The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police**, pp. 318-9 and p. 332] In fact, repression **increased** after the end of the Civil War -- a strange fact if it was that war which necessitated repression in the first place.

Strangely, Mitchinson fails to mention Lenin's argument that, like the Paris Commune, the workers' state would be based on a fusion of executive and administrative functions in the hands of the workers' delegates. Yet this is hardly surprising, as Lenin created an executive body (the Council of People's Commissars) immediately after the October Revolution. This division of executive and administrative powers was written into the Soviet Constitution. So much for **The State and Revolution** -- its promises did not last a night.

More details of the contrast between the promises made by Lenin and the reality of his regime can be found in [section H.1.7](#).

Thus, Mitchinson's claims that the "semi-state" would not be like any other state are contradicted by the actual experience of Bolshevism in power. For anarchists, this comes as no surprise as they are well aware that the state machine does not (indeed, **cannot**) represent

the interests of the working classes due to its centralised, hierarchical and elitist nature -- all it can do is represent the interests of the party in power, its own bureaucratic needs and privileges and slowly, but surely, remove itself from popular control. Hence the movement away from popular control -- it is the nature of centralised power to remove itself from control from below, control by the masses, particularly when all other focal points of working class self-management have been abolished as being no longer required as we have a "semi-state."

Mitchinson seems to want us to look purely at Bolshevik theory and not its practice. It is exactly what supporters of capitalism desire us to do -- in theory, capitalism is based on free agreement and free exchange between autonomous individuals but in practice it is a system of inequality which violates the autonomy of individuals and makes a mockery of free agreement.

In a way, **The State and Revolution** laid out the foundations and sketched out the essential features of an alternative to Bolshevik power -- and that system would be essentially libertarian once the statist features are removed. Only the pro-Leninist tradition has used Lenin's work, almost to quiet their conscience, because Lenin, once in power, ignored it totally. Such is the nature of the state -- as Kropotkin and all other anarchists have argued, there can be no such thing as a "revolutionary government." Conflict will inevitably arise between the party which aims to control the revolution and the actions of the masses themselves. To resolve the conflict the state must eliminate the organs of workers self-activity which the revolution creates otherwise the party cannot impose its decisions -- and this is what the Bolshevik state did, aided of course by the horrors of the civil war.

To state the obvious, to quote theory and not relate it to the practice of those who claim to follow that theory is a joke. If you look at the actions of the Bolsheviks before and after the Russian Revolution you cannot help draw the conclusion that Lenin's **State and Revolution** has nothing to do with Bolshevik policy and presents a false image of what Trotskyists desire.

13. Is the Marxist "worker's state" really the rule of one class over another?

Mitchinson argues that the *"task of this state would be to develop the economy to eradicate want. Less need, means less need to govern society, less need for a state. Class society and the state will begin to wither away as the government of people, the rule of one class over another, is replaced by the administration of things, the planned use of resources to meet society's needs."* Yet, as Malatesta made clear, this is pure sophistry:

"Whoever has power over things has power over men; whoever governs production also governs the producers; who determines consumption is master over the consumer."

"This is the question; either things are administered on the basis of free agreement of the interested parties, and this is anarchy; or they are administered according to laws made by administrators and this is government, it is the State, and inevitably it turns out to be tyrannical."

"It is not a question of the good intentions or the good will of this or that man, but of the inevitability of the situation, and of the tendencies which man generally develops in given circumstances." [Errico Malatesta: **His Life and Ideas**, p. 145]

Moreover, it is debatable whether Trotskyists really desire the rule of one class over another in the sense of working class over capitalist class. To quote Trotsky:

"the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard. In itself the necessity for state power arises from an insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity. In the revolutionary vanguard, organised in a party, is crystallised the aspirations of the masses to obtain their freedom. Without the confidence of the class in the vanguard, without support of the vanguard by the class, there can be no talk of the conquest of power. In this sense the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard." [*Stalinism and Bolshevism*], **Writings 1936-37**, p. 490]

Thus, rather than the working class as a whole seizing power, it is the "vanguard" which takes power -- *"a revolutionary party, even after seizing power . . . is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society."* [Trotsky, **Op. Cit.**, p. 488] That is, of course, true -- they are still organs of working class self-management (such as factory committees, workers councils, trade unions, soldier committees) through which working people can still exercise their sovereignty. Little wonder Trotsky abolished independent unions, decreed the end of soldier committees and urged one-man management and the militarisation of labour when in power. Such working class organs do conflict with the sovereign rule of the party and so have to be abolished.

After being in power four years, Trotsky was arguing that the *"Party is obliged to maintain its dictatorship . . . regardless of temporary vacillations even in the working class . . . The dictatorship does not base itself at every moment on the formal principle of a workers' democracy."* [quoted by Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 78] In 1937 he repeated this:

"The revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is for me not a thing that one can freely accept or reject: It is an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities - the class struggle, the heterogeneity of the revolutionary class, the necessity for a selected vanguard in order to assure the victory. The dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory as does the state itself, but we can not jump over this chapter, which can open (not at one stroke) genuine human history. . . The revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution . . . Abstractly speaking, it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the 'dictatorship' of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions. The reason for the revolution comes from the circumstance that capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses." [**Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936-37**, pp. 513-4]

This position follows naturally from Trotsky's comments that the party *"crystallises"* the *"aspirations"* of the masses. If the masses reject the party then, obviously, their *"cultural level"* has fallen and so the party has the right, nay the duty, to impose its dictatorship over

them. Similarly, the destruction of organs of working class self-management can be justified because the vanguard has taken power -- which is **exactly** what Trotsky argued.

With regards to the Red Army and its elected officers, he stated in March 1918 that *"the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree"* because the Bolshevik Party held power or, as he put it, *"political power is in the hands of the same working class from whose ranks the Army is recruited."* ["Work, Discipline, Order", **How the Revolution Armed**, vol. 1, p. 46-7] Of course, power was actually held by the Bolshevik party, not the working class, but never fear:

*"Once we have established the Soviet regime, that is a system under which the government is headed by persons who have been directly elected by the Soviets of Workers', Peasants' and Soldiers' Deputies, there can be no antagonism between the government and the mass of the workers, just as there is no antagonism between the administration of the union and the general assembly of its members, and, therefore, there cannot be any grounds for fearing the **appointment** of members of the commanding staff by the organs of the Soviet Power."* ["Work, Discipline, Order", **Op. Cit.**, vol. 1, p. 47]

He made the same comments in 1920 with regard the factory committees:

"It would be a most crying error to confuse the question as to the supremacy of the proletariat with the question of boards of workers at the head of factories. The dictatorship of the proletariat is expressed in the abolition of private property in the means of production, in the supremacy of the collective will of the workers [a euphemism for the Party -- M.B.] and not at all in the form in which individual economic organisations are administered." [quoted by Maurice Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 66]

This point is reiterated in his essay, *"Bolshevism and Stalinism"* (written in 1937) when he argued that:

"Those who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the party leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat." [**Writings 1936-37**, p. 430]

And, obviously, without party dictatorship the soviets would return to the *"mud."* In other words, the soviets are only important to attain party rule and if the two come into conflict then Trotskyism provides the rule of the party with an ideological justification to eliminate soviet democracy. Lenin's and Trotsky's politics allowed them to argue that if you let the proletariat have a say then the dictatorship of the proletariat could be in danger.

Thus, for Trotsky, the *"dictatorship of the proletariat"* is independent of allowing the proletariat to manage its own affairs directly. However, without the means of manage its own affairs directly, for working class people to control their own lives, the proletariat is placed into the position of passive electors, who vote for parties who rule for and over them, in their own name. Moreover, they face the constant danger of the *"vanguard"* nullifying even these decisions as *"temporary vacillations."* A fine liberation indeed.

As libertarian socialist Maurice Brinton argues, none of the Bolshevik leaders *"saw the proletarian nature of the Russian regime as primarily and crucially dependent on the exercise of workers' power at the point of production (i.e. workers' management of production). It should have been obvious to them as Marxists that if the working class did not hold economic power, its 'political' power would at best be insecure and would in fact degenerate."* [Op. Cit., p. 42]

With direct working class sovereignty eroded by the Bolsheviks in the name of indirect, i.e. party, sovereignty it is hardly surprising that the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes the dictatorship **over** the proletariat as Bakunin predicted. With the elimination of functional democracy and self-management, indirect democracy would not be able to survive for long in the face of centralised, top-down decision making by the ruling party.

So hopeless was Trotsky's understanding of socialism and the nature of a working class social revolution that he even considered the Stalinist dictatorship to be an expression of the *"dictatorship of the proletariat."* He argued that the *"bureaucracy has expropriated the proletariat politically in order to guard its social conquests with **its own** methods. The anatomy of society is determined by its economic relations. So long as the forms of property that have been created by the October Revolution are not overthrown, the proletariat remains the ruling class."* ["The Class Nature of the Soviet State", **Writings of Leon Trotsky 1933-34**, p. 125]

Just to stress the point, according to Trotsky, under Stalinism **the proletariat was the ruling class** and that Stalin's dictatorship eliminated what remained (and it was not much) of working class political influence in order *"to guard its social conquests"*! What social conquests could remain if the proletariat was under the heel of a totalitarian dictatorship? Just one, state ownership of property -- precisely the means by which the (state) bureaucracy enforced its control over production and so the source of its economic power (and privileges). To state the obvious, if the working class does not **control** the property it is claimed to own then someone else does. The economic relationship thus generated is a hierarchical one, in which the working class is an oppressed class. Thus Trotsky identified the source of the bureaucracy's economic power with "socialism" -- no wonder his analysis of Stalinism (and vision of socialism) proved so disastrous.

Trotsky argues that the *"liberal-anarchist thought closes its eyes to the fact that the Bolshevik revolution, with all its repressions, meant an upheaval of social relations in the interests of the masses, whereas Stalin's Thermidorian upheaval accompanies the reconstruction of Soviet society in the interest of a privileged minority."* ["Stalinism and Bolshevism", **Op. Cit.**, p. 491] However, social relations are just that, **social** and so between individuals and classes - ownership of property cannot tell the whole story. What social relations did Bolshevism bring about?

As far as the wage labour social relationship goes (and do not forget that is the defining feature of capitalism), the Bolsheviks opposed workers' self-management in favour of, first, *"control"* over the capitalists and then one-man management. No change in social relationships there. Property relations did change in the sense that the state became the owner of capital rather than individual capitalists, but the **social** relationship workers experienced during the working day and within society was identical. The state bureaucrat replaced the capitalist.

As for politics, the Bolshevik revolution replaced government with government. Initially, it was an elected government and so it had the typical social relationships of representative government. Later, it became a one party dictatorship -- a situation that did not change under Stalin. Thus the social relationships there, again, did not change. The Bolshevik Party became the head of the government. That is all. This event also saw the reconstruction of Soviet Society in the interest of a privileged minority -- it is well known that the Communists gave themselves the best rations, best premises and so on.

Thus the Bolshevik revolution did **not** change the social relations people faced and so Trotsky's comments are wishful thinking. The *"interests of the masses"* could not, and were not, defended by the Bolshevik revolution as it did not change the relations of authority in a society -- the social relationships people experienced remain unchanged. Perhaps that is why Lenin argued that the proletarian nature of the Russian regime was ensured by the nature of the ruling party? There could be no other basis for saying the Bolshevik state was a workers' state. After all, nationalised property without workers' self-management **does not change social relationships**, it just changes who is telling the workers what to do and appropriating their product.

The important point to note is that Trotsky argued that the proletariat could be a ruling class when it had **no** political influence, never mind democracy, when subject to a one-party state and bureaucratic dictatorship and when the social relations of the society were obviously capitalistic. No wonder he found it impossible to recognise that dictatorship by the party did not equal dictatorship by the proletariat.

Therefore, the claim that Trotskyists see the *"dictatorship of the proletariat"* as *"the rule of one class over another"* is a joke. Rather they see it as the rule of the party over the rest of society, **including** the working class. Even when that party had become a bureaucratic nightmare, murdering millions and sending hundreds of thousands to forced labour camps, Trotsky still argued that the *"working class"* was still the *"ruling class."* Not only that, his political perspective allowed him to justify the suppression of workers' democracy in the name of the *"rule"* of the workers. For this reason, anarchists feel that the real utopians are the Leninists who believe that party rule equals class rule and that centralised, hierarchical power in the hands of the few will not become a new form of class rule. History, we think, supports our politics on this issue (as in so many others).

Mitchinson asserts that *"Anarchism's utopian calls to abolish the state overnight demonstrates neither the understanding of what the state is, nor the programme of action necessary to achieve the goal it sets itself."* However, as made clear, it is Marxism which is utopian, believing that rule by a party equals rule by a class and that a state machine can be utilised by the majority of the population. As Kropotkin argued, Anarchists *"maintain that the State organisation, having been the force to which minorities resorted for establishing and organising their power over the masses, cannot be the force which will serve to destroy these privileges."* [Anarchism, p. 170] Luigi Fabbri sums up the difference well:

"The mistake of authoritarian communists in this connection is the belief that fighting and organising are impossible without submission to a government; and thus they regard anarchists . . . as the foes of all organisation and all co-ordinated struggle. We, on the other hand, maintain that not only are revolutionary struggle and revolutionary organisation possible outside and in spite of government interference but that, indeed, that is the only effective way to struggle and organise, for it has the

active participation of all members of the collective unit, instead of their passively entrusting themselves to the authority of the supreme leaders." ["Anarchy and 'Scientific' Communism", pp. 13-45, **Bloodstained**, Friends of Aron Baron (ed.), p. 26]

Mitchinson moves on to the usual Marxist slander that as *"a modern philosophy anarchism developed in the 19th century alongside the explosive growth of capitalism and its state machine. It represented a rebellion by a section of the petty bourgeoisie at the loss of their position in society, driven to the wall by the growth of monopoly."* We have refuted this assertion in another appendix ([Reply to errors and distortions in David McNally's pamphlet "Socialism from Below"](#)) and so will not do so here.

14. Why do anarchists reject the Marxist notion of the *"conquest of power"*?

Mitchinson now decides to quote some anarchists to back up his spurious argument:

"Their case was argued by Mikhail Bakunin and his supporters in the First International. At an anarchist conference in 1872 they argued 'The aspirations of the proletariat can have no other aim than the creation of an absolutely free economic organisation and federation based on work and equality and wholly independent of any political government, and such an organisation can only come into being through the spontaneous action of the proletariat itself...no political organisation can be anything but the organisation of rule in the interests of a class and to the detriment of the masses...the proletariat, should it seize power, would become a ruling, and exploiting, class...'"

To understand this passage it is necessary to place it in historical context. In 1872, the proletariat was a **minority** class within all nations except for the UK -- the majority of the working class being either artisans or peasants (hence the reference to *"the masses"*). To urge that the proletariat seize power meant to advocate the class rule of a **minority** of the working masses, the dictatorship of a **minority** over the majority (a dictatorship in the usual sense of the word), and dictatorships always become exploitative of the general population.

Thus Mitchinson's "analysis" is ahistoric and, fundamentally, unscientific and a mockery of materialism.

Moreover, anarchists like Bakunin also made clear that the Marxist notion of *"proletarian dictatorship"* did not even mean that the proletariat **as a whole** would exercise power:

"What does it mean, 'the proletariat raised to a governing class?' Will the entire proletariat head the government? The Germans number about 40 million. Will all 40 million be members of the government? The entire nation will rule, but no one would be ruled. Then there will be no government, there will be no state; but if there is a state, there will also be those who are ruled, there will be slaves.

"In the Marxists' theory this dilemma is resolved in a simple fashion. By popular government they mean government of the people by a small number of representatives elected by the people. So-called popular representatives and rulers of the state elected

by the entire nation on the basis of universal suffrage -- the last word of the Marxists, as well as the democratic school -- is a lie behind which the despotism of a ruling minority is concealed, a lie all the more dangerous in that it represents itself as the expression of a sham popular will.

*"So . . . it always comes down to the same dismal result: government of the vast majority of the people by a privileged minority. But this minority, the Marxists say, will consist of workers. Yes, perhaps, of **former** workers, who, as soon as they become rulers or representatives of the people will cease to be workers and will begin to look upon the whole workers' world from the heights of the state. They will no longer represent the people but themselves and their own pretensions to govern the people."*
[Bakunin, **Statism and Anarchy**, p. 178]

Thus anarchists reject the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat for two reasons. First, because it excluded the bulk of the working masses when it was first used by Marx and Engels. Second, because in practice it would mean the dictatorship of the party **over** the proletariat. Needless to say, Mitchinson does not mention these points.

Mitchinson argues that "[a]lthough this sounds radical enough it nonetheless amounts to a recipe for inaction and disaster" and quotes Trotsky to explain why:

"To renounce the conquest of power is voluntarily to leave the power with those who wield it, the exploiters. The essence of every revolution consisted and consists in putting a new class in power, thus enabling it to realise its own programme in life. It is impossible to wage war and to reject victory. It is impossible to lead the masses towards insurrection without preparing for the conquest of power."

For anarchists the question immediately is, "power to who"? As is clear from the writings of Lenin and Trotsky they see the "conquest of power" **not** in terms of "putting a new class in power" but, in fact, the **representatives** of that class, the vanguard party, into power -- needless to say, Mitchinson fails to quote Trotsky on the necessity of party dictatorship (see [last section](#)). Anarchists, in contrast, argue that organs of working class self-management are the means of creating and defending a **social** revolution as it is the only means that the mass of people can actually run their own lives and any power over and above these organs means dictatorship **over** the working class, a new form of state and class power. As Rudolf Rocker argued:

"Let no one object that the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' cannot be compared to run of the mill dictatorship because it is the dictatorship of a class. Dictatorship of a class cannot exist as such, for it ends up, in the last analysis, as being the dictatorship of a given party which arrogates to itself the right to speak for that class. Thus, the liberal bourgeoisie, in their fight against despotism, used to speak in the name of the 'people'.

. .

"We already know that a revolution cannot be made with rosewater. And we know, too, that the owning classes will never yield up their privileges spontaneously. On the day of victorious revolution the workers will have to impose their will on the present owners of the soil, of the subsoil and of the means of production, which cannot be done -- let us be clear on this -- without the workers taking the capital of society into their own hands, and, above all, without their having demolished the authoritarian

structure which is, and will continue to be, the fortress keeping the masses of the people under dominion. Such an action is, without doubt, an act of liberation; a proclamation of social justice; the very essence of social revolution, which has nothing in common with the utterly bourgeois principle of dictatorship.

"The fact that a large number of socialist parties have rallied to the idea of councils, which is the proper mark of libertarian socialist and revolutionary syndicalists, is a confession, recognition that the tack they have taken up until now has been the product of a falsification, a distortion, and that with the councils the labour movement must create for itself a single organ capable of carrying into effect the unmitigated socialism that the conscious proletariat longs for. On the other hand, it ought not to be forgotten that this abrupt conversion runs the risk of introducing many alien features into the councils concept, features, that is, with no relation to the original tasks of socialism, and which have to be eliminated because they pose a threat to the further development of the councils. These alien elements are able only to conceive things from the dictatorial viewpoint. It must be our task to face up to this risk and warn our class comrades against experiments which cannot bring the dawn of social emancipation any nearer -- which indeed, to the contrary, positively postpone it.

"Consequently, our advice is as follows: Everything for the councils or soviets! No power above them! A slogan which at the same time will be that of the social revolutionary." [Anarchism and Sovietism]

Or, as the Bakunin influenced Jura Federation of the First International put it in 1874, *"the dictatorship that we want is one which the insurgent masses exercise directly, without intermediary of any committee or government."* [quoted by Peter Marshall, **Demanding the Impossible**, p. 631] In other words, a situation in which the working masses defend their freedom, their control over their own lives, from those who seek to replace it with minority rule.

15. What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?

Mitchinson argues that:

"Anarchists see in the degeneration of the Soviet Union into a totalitarian dictatorship proof that Bakunin was right. In reality, only Leon Trotsky and Marxism have been able to explain the causes of that degeneration, finding its roots not in men's heads or personalities, but in the real life conditions of civil war, armies of foreign intervention, and the defeat of revolution in Europe."

Needless to say, anarchism explains the causes of the degeneration in a far more rich way than Mitchinson claims. The underlying assumption of his "critique" of anarchism is that the **politics** of the Bolsheviks had no influence on the outcome of the revolution -- it was a product purely of objective forces. He also subscribes to the contradictory idea that Bolshevik politics were essential for the success of that revolution. The facts of the matter is that people are faced with choices, choices that arise from the objective conditions that they face. What decisions they make will be influenced by the ideas they hold -- they will **not** occur automatically, as if people were on auto-pilot -- and their ideas are shaped by the social

relationships they experience. Thus, someone placed into a position of power over others will act in certain ways, have a certain world view, which would be alien to someone subject to egalitarian social relations.

So, obviously the *"ideas in people's heads"* matter, particularly during a revolution. Someone (like Lenin and Trotsky) in favour of centralisation and centralised power, who equates party rule with class rule, will act in ways (and create structures) totally different from someone who believes in decentralisation and federalism. In other words, **political ideas do matter** in society. Nor do anarchists leave our analysis at this obvious fact -- as noted, we also argue that the types of organisation people create and work in shapes the way they think and act. This is because specific kinds of organisation have specific authority relations and so generate specific social relationships. These obviously affect those subject to them -- a centralised, hierarchical system will create authoritarian social relationships which shape those within it in totally different ways than a decentralised, egalitarian system. That Mitchinson denies this obvious fact suggests he knows nothing of materialist philosophy.

Moreover, anarchists are aware of the problems facing the revolution. After all, anarchists were involved in that revolution and wrote some of the best works on it (for example, Voline's **The Unknown Revolution**, Arshinov's **The History of the Makhnovist Movement** and Maximov's **The Guillotine at Work**). They point to the obvious fact that the politics of the Bolsheviks played a key role in how the revolution developed. While the terrible objective conditions may have shaped certain aspects of the actions of the Bolsheviks it cannot be denied that the impulse for them were rooted in Bolshevik theory. After all, anarchist theory could not justify the suppression of the functional democracy associated with the factory committees or the soldiers election of officers in the Red Army. Bolshevik theory could, and did.

Indeed, Trotsky was still claiming in 1937 that the *"Bolshevik party achieved in the civil war the correct combination of military art and Marxist politics."* [*"Stalinism and Bolshevism"*, **Writings 1936-1937**, p. 430] In other words, the Bolshevik policies implemented during the Civil War were the correct, Marxist, ones. Also, although Lenin described the NEP (New Economic Policy) of 1921 as a *"retreat"*, at no stage did he describe the suppression of soviet democracy and workers' control in such language. In other words, Bolshevik politics did play a role, a key role, in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution and to deny it is to deny reality:

*"[I]n relation to industrial policy there is a clear-cut and incontrovertible link between what happened under Lenin and Trotsky and the later practice of Stalinism. We know that many on the revolutionary left will find this statement hard to swallow. We are convinced however that any honest reading of the facts cannot but lead to this conclusion. The more one unearths about this period [1917-21], the more difficult it becomes to define -- or even see -- the 'gulf' allegedly separating what happened in Lenin's time from what happened later. Real knowledge of the facts also makes it impossible to accept . . . that the whole course of events was 'historically inevitable' and 'objectively determined.' Bolshevik ideology and practice were **themselves** important and sometimes decisive factors in the equation, at every critical stage of this critical period."* [Maurice Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 84]

We should also point out that far from *"Leon Trotsky and Marxism"* explaining the degeneration of the Russian revolution, Trotsky could not understand that a *"totalitarian*

dictatorship" could be an expression of a new minority class and presented a decidedly false analysis of the Soviet Union as a "*degenerated workers' state*." In addition, Trotsky's own reservations were only really voiced after he had lost power and he never acknowledged how his own policies (such as the elimination of soldiers democracy, the militarisation of labour, etc.) played a key role in the rise of the bureaucracy and subsequently Stalin.

Ultimately, every explanation of the degeneration of the Russian revolution by Trotskyists ends up as an appeal to "*exception circumstances*" -- they blame the rise of Stalinism on the Civil War, to the "*exceptional circumstances*" created by that war. This can be faulted for two reasons.

First, as Trotsky himself argued (with respect to the Spanish Anarchists) "*did not the leaders of German social democracy invoke, in their time, the same excuse? Naturally, civil war is not a peaceful and ordinary but an 'exceptional circumstance.'*" . . . *we do severely blame the anarchist theory, which seemed wholly suitable for times of peace, but had to be dropped rapidly as soon as the 'exceptional circumstance' of the . . . revolution had begun.*" ["*Stalinism and Bolshevism*", **Op. Cit.**, pp. 423-4] Needless to say, he did not apply his critique to his own politics, which were also a form of the "*exceptional circumstances*" excuse. Given how quickly Bolshevik "*principles*" (as expressed in **The State and Revolution**) were dropped, we can only assume that Bolshevik ideas are also suitable purely for "*times of peace*" as well.

Second, this "explanation" basically argues that **if** the bourgeois did not defend their power in 1917 then Leninism would have worked out fine. As Mitchinson himself noted above, belief that the bourgeois will just go away without a fight is "*an infantile flight of fancy.*" As Lenin argued, "*the development of the revolution itself **always** creates an **exceptionally** complicated situation*" and "*[r]evolution is a most intense, furious, desperate class struggle and civil war. Not a single great revolution in history has taken place without civil war. And only a 'man in a muffler' can think that civil war is conceivable without an 'exceptionally complicated situation'.*" ["*Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*", **Collected Works**, vol. 26, p. 118 and p. 119]

If the Civil War did solely produce the degeneration of the Russian Revolution then all we can hope for is that in the next social revolution, the civil war Lenin argued was inevitable is not as destructive as the Russian one. Hope is not much of a basis to build a "scientific" socialism -- but then again, neither is "fate" much of a basis to explain the degeneration of the Russian Revolution but that is what Trotskyists do argue.

We discuss the Russian Revolution in more detail in [section H.6](#) and will not do so here. However, we can point out the experience of the anarchist Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution. Facing exactly the same objective conditions they encouraged soviet democracy, held regular congresses of workers and peasants (the Bolsheviks tried to ban two of them), defended freedom of the press and of association and so on. If objective conditions determined Bolshevik policies, why did they not also determine the policies of the Makhnovists? As discussed in more detail in the appendix [Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?](#), this practical example indicates that the usual Trotskyist explanation of the degeneration of the Revolution is false.

Mitchinson continues by stating:

"The position of anarchism only serves to endorse the bourgeois slander that Stalinism was inherent in Bolshevism."

This appeal against slander is ironic from someone who writes an article full of it. But, of course, it is **bourgeois** slander that he objects too -- Trotskyist slander (and falsification) is fine. It is, moreover, a dubious position to take as the Stalinists likewise attacked Trotsky's critique of Stalinism in similar terms (some, ironically, used the same insults they have previously used against Emma Goldman and her critique of Bolshevism when the party machine ordered them to attack Trotsky).

The question of whether it is a "*bourgeois slander*" to argue (with supporting evidence) that "*Stalinism was inherent in Bolshevism*" is an important one. Trotskyists often point out that anarchist and libertarian Marxist critiques of Bolshevism sound similar to bourgeois ones and that anarchist accounts of Bolshevik crimes against the revolution and working class give ammunition to the defenders of the status quo. However, this seems more like an attempt to stop critical analysis of the Russian Revolution than a serious political position. Yes, the bourgeois do argue that Stalinism was inherent in Bolshevism -- however they do so to discredit all forms of socialism and radical social change. Anarchists, on the other hand, analyse the revolution, see how the Bolsheviks acted and draw conclusions from the facts in order to push forward revolutionary thought, tactics and ideas. Just because the conclusions are similar does not mean that they are invalid -- to label criticism of Bolshevism as "*bourgeois slander*" is nothing less than attempt to put people off investigating the Russian Revolution and learning from it to inform current struggles and ideas.

So there are essential differences between "*bourgeois slander*" against the Bolsheviks and the anarchist critique. Bourgeois slander is based on an opposition to the revolution **as such** while the anarchist critique affirms it. Bourgeois slander is not the result of the experiences of the working masses and revolutionaries subject to the Bolshevik regime as the anarchist critique is. Similarly, bourgeois slander ignores the nature of capitalist society while the anarchist critique points out that the degeneration of the Bolshevik state and party were a result of the revolution not breaking with bourgeois ideas and organisational structures. Ultimately, it is **not** a case of "*bourgeois slander*" but rather an honest evaluation of the events of the Russian Revolution from a working class perspective. As Emma Goldman stressed with regards to Stalinist Russia but is equally applicable to the regime under Lenin and Trotsky:

"The fact that the bourgeois press has in the past and does now misrepresent Russia should not have bearing on those who all their lives have fought for libertarian ideas. After all, the most important phase of a critical attitude to Russia is the premise from which one starts. I do not criticize Russia because Stalin is too revolutionary, but because he is not revolutionary at all. You will agree that that is not the position of the capitalist papers . . . Other governments do not pretend to be the advance guard of the masses. They do not claim to work for socialism or communism. Nor can other governments boast of three revolutions in twelve years. We therefore have the right to demand more from such a government than any other. I expect nothing from the bourgeoisie. In fact I marvel that there are still a few liberties left in capitalist countries. But I do demand more from a revolutionary government. Yet far from living up to its pretense it denies its principles every day." [Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, **Nowhere at Home**, pp. 55-6]

To use an analogy, it is common place for the bourgeois press and ideologists to attack trade unions as being bureaucratic and unresponsive to the needs of their members. It is also common place for members of those trade unions to think exactly the same. Indeed, it is a common refrain of Trotskyists that the trade unions **are** bureaucratic and need to be reformed in a more democratic fashion (indeed, Mitchinson calls for the unions to be "*transformed*" in his essay). Needless to say, the bourgeois comments are "correct" in the sense that the trade unions do have a bureaucracy -- their reasons for stating that truth serve their interests and their solutions aid those interests and not those of the members of the unions. Could a Trotskyist say that it was a "*bourgeois slander*" if the capitalist press point to the bureaucratic nature of the unions when their own papers do the same?

To talk about "*bourgeois slander*" hinders the process of working class self-emancipation. As intended, in all likelihood. That it echoes the Stalinist attacks on Trotsky and Trotskyists should have given Mitchinson pause for thought.

16. Did anarchists reject "*the need for organisation in the shape of trade unions*"?

Mitchinson now decides to "expose" anarchism:

"In its early days, this modern anarchism found a certain support amongst the workers. However, through the course of struggle workers learned the need for organisation in the shape of the trade unions, and also for political organisation which led to the building of the mass workers parties."

To see the total nonsense of this claim we need only to turn to Marx. In his words, Bakunin thought that the "*working class . . . must only organise themselves by trades-unions.*" [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 48] Bakunin himself argued "*the natural organisation of the masses . . . is organisation based on the various ways that their various types of work define their day-to-day life; it is organisation by trade association.*" [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 139] Kropotkin argued that the "*union [syndicat] is absolutely necessary. It is the only form of workers' grouping which permits the direct struggle to be maintained against capital without falling into parliamentarism.*" [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism**, p. 269] As noted in [section H.2.8](#), these positions were typical within the revolutionary anarchism.

So much for anarchism being against trade unions. As for mass workers parties, well, history proved Bakunin right -- such parties became corrupted, bureaucratic and reformist (see [section J.2.6](#)). For Mitchinson, the years since 1871 simply have not existed.

He goes on to argue that "*Bakunin and co. denounced participation in parliament, or the fight for reforms as a betrayal of the revolution, they 'rejected all political action not having as its immediate and direct objective the triumph of the workers over capitalism, and as a consequence, the abolition of the state.'*"

We must first note that the Bakunin quote presented does not support Mitchinson's assertions -- unless you think that reforms can only be won via participation in parliament (something anarchists reject in favour of reforms by direct action). The reason **why** Bakunin rejected "*all*

political action" (i.e. bourgeois politics -- electioneering in other words) is not explained. We will now do so.

Bakunin did denounce participation in parliament. History proved him right. Participation in parliament ensured the corruption of the Social Democratic Parties, the Greens and a host of other radical and socialist organisations. Mitchinson seems to have forgotten the fights against reformism that continually occurred in the Social Democratic Parties at end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries, a fight which ended with the defeat of the revolutionary wing and the decision to support the nation state in the first world war. The actual experience of using parliament confirmed Bakunin's prediction that when *"the workers . . . send common workers . . . to Legislative Assemblies . . . The worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois . . . For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them."* [The Basic Bakunin, p. 108]

What is not true, however, is that claim that Bakunin thought that *"the fight for reforms [w]as a betrayal of the revolution."* Bakunin was a firm believer in the importance of struggles for reforms, but struggles of a specific kind -- namely struggles to win reforms which are based on the **direct action** by workers themselves:

*"What policy should the International [Workers' Association] follow during th[e] somewhat extended time period that separates us from this terrible social revolution . . . the International will give labour unrest in all countries an **essentially economic** character, with the aim of reducing working hours and increasing salary, by means of the **association of the working masses** . . . It will [also] propagandise its principles . . . [Op. Cit., p. 109]*

Mass struggle had a politicising effect on this who are involved:

"And indeed, as soon as a worker believes that the economic state of affairs can be radically transformed in the near future, he begins to fight, in association with his comrades, for the reduction of his working hours and for an increase in his salary. . . through practice and action . . . the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle will bring him more and more to recognise his true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeois, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes." [Op. Cit., p. 103]

This argument for reforms by direct action and workers' associations was a basic point of agreement in those sections of the First International which supported Bakunin's ideas. In the words of an anarchist member of the Jura Federation writing in 1875:

*"Instead of begging the State for a law compelling employers to make them work only so many hours, the trade associations **directly impose** this reform on the employers; in this way, instead of a legal text which remains a dead letter, a real economic change is effected **by the direct initiative of the workers** . . . if the workers devoted all their activity and energy to the organisation of their trades into societies of resistance, trade federations, local and regional, if, by meetings, lectures, study circles, papers and pamphlets, they kept up a permanent socialist and revolutionary agitation; if by linking practice to theory, they **realised directly**, without any*

bourgeois and governmental intervention, all immediately possible reforms, reforms advantageous not to a few workers but to the labouring mass -- certainly then the cause of labour would be better served than . . . legal agitation." [quoted by Caroline Cahm, **Op. Cit.**, p. 226]

So much for Bakunin or the libertarian wing of the First International being against reforms or the struggle for reforms. Anarchists have not changed their minds on this issue.

17. Why do anarchists reject political activity?

After spreading falsehoods against Bakunin, Mitchinson states that:

"Marxism fights for the conquest of political power by the working class and the building of a socialist society, under which the state will wither away.

"Until then should workers refrain from political activity? Should they reject all reforms that might improve their existence? Nothing would please Blair or the bosses more."

It is ironic that Mitchinson mentions Blair. He is, after all, the leader of the Labour Party -- as mass workers party formed from the trade unions to use political action to gain reforms within capitalism. The then (and current!) state of Labour confirms the comment that *"in proportion as the socialists become a power in the present bourgeois society and State, their socialism must die out."* [Kropotkin, **Anarchism**, p. 189] It is as if the history of Social Democracy (or even the German Greens) does not exist for Mitchinson. How strange, to ignore the results of socialists actually using *"political activity"* (and we must stress that anarchists traditionally use the term *"political action"* to refer to electioneering, i.e. bourgeois politics, only). Obviously reality is something which can be ignored when defending a political theory.

Needless to say, as noted in the [last section](#), anarchists do not *"reject all reforms."* We have quoted Bakunin, now we quote Kropotkin: *"the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers' organisations which carry on the **direct** struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector, -- the State" as such struggle, "better than any other indirect means, permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State."* [**Anarchism**, p. 171]

Thus we do not think that political action (electioneering) equals the struggle for reforms nor even being the best means of winning reforms in the first place. Anarchists argue that by direct action is the best means to win reforms.

Mitchinson continues his diatribe:

"Of course not, we must advocate the struggle for every gain no matter how minor, and use any and every field open to us. Only the dilettante can reject better wages or a health care system. Precisely through these struggles, and the struggles to

transform the workers organisations the unions and the parties, we learn and become more powerful and bring closer the day when it will be possible to transform society for good."

As noted, anarchists do not reject reforms. Only a dilettante misrepresents the position of his enemies. To re-state the obvious, again, anarchists agree with Mitchinson on the need to win reforms but we argue that they must be achieved by direct action, which necessitates the creation of new forms of working class organisation based on firm libertarian principles and tactics -- organisations like workers' councils, factory committees, community assemblies and so on.

However, when looking at the fields of struggle open to us, we evaluate them based on a materialist basis -- looking at the implications of the tactics in theory and how they **actually worked out in practice**. Mitchinson refuses to do this. Anarchists, on the other hand, base their politics on such an evaluation. For example, Bakunin would have been aware of Proudhon's experiences in the French National Assembly during the 1848 revolution:

"Since I first set foot on this parliamentary Sinai, I ceased to be in contact with the masses: by absorbing myself in my legislative work, I had completely lost view of current affairs . . . One has to experience this isolation called a national assembly to understand how the men who are the most completely ignorant of the state of a country are nearly always those who represent it . . . the fear of the people is the evil of all those who belong to authority: for power, the people are the enemy."

[Proudhon, **Property is Theft!**, pp. 425-6]

Similarly, the practical experiences of a socialist elected into Parliament would be easy to predict -- they would be swamped by bourgeois politics, issues and activities. Anarchism gained such socialists elected to parliament as Johann Most and Ferdinand Nieuwenhuis who soon realised the correctness of the anarchist analysis. Thus **actual experience** confirmed the soundness of anarchist politics and its predictions. Mitchinson, on the other hand, has to deny history -- indeed, he fails to mention the history of Social Democracy in his article.

Thus the claim that we should use *"every field open to us"* is idealistic nonsense, at total odds with any claim to use scientific techniques of analysis (i.e. to being a scientific socialist) or a supporter of materialist philosophy. It means the rejection of historical analysis and the embrace of ahistoric wishful thinking.

Moreover, why do the workers need to *"transform"* their own organisations in the first place? Perhaps because they are bureaucratic organisations in which power is centralised at the top, in a few hands? Why did this happen, if fighting for reforms by any suitable means (including electioneering) was their rationale? Perhaps because the wrong people are in positions of power? But why are they the wrong people? Because they are right-wing, have reformist ideas, etc. Why do they have reformist ideas? Here Mitchinson must fall silent, because obviously they have reformist ideas because the organisations and activities they are part of are reformist through and through. The tactics (using elections) and organisational structure (centralisation of power) bred such ideas -- as Bakunin and other anarchists predicted. Mitchinson's politics cannot explain why this occurs, which explains why Lenin was so surprised when German Social Democracy supported its ruling class at the outbreak the First World War.

18. How do anarchists struggle for reforms under capitalism?

Mitchinson continues his distortion of anarchism by arguing:

"Marxists fight for every reform, whilst at the same time explaining that while capitalism continues none of these advances are safe. Only socialism can really solve the problems of society."

As noted repeatedly, anarchists also fight for every reform possible -- but by direct action, by the strength of working people in their "*natural organisations*" and "*social power*" (to use Bakunin's words). We also argue that reforms are always in danger -- that is why we need to have strong, direct action based organisations and self-reliance. If we leave it to leaders to protect (never mind **win** reforms) we would not have them for long. Given that Labour governments have whittled away previous reforms just as much as Conservative ones, anarchists feel our strategy is the relevant one. As Rudolf Rocker suggested:

"Political rights do not exist because they have been legally set down on a piece of paper, but only when they have become the ingrown habit of a people, and when any attempt to impair them will be met with the violent resistance of the populace. . . . One compels respect from others when he knows how to defend his dignity as a human being . . . The people owe all the political rights and privileges which we enjoy today, in greater or lesser measure, not to the good will of their governments, but to their own strength." [Anarcho-Syndicalism, p. 75]

As such, Mitchinson simply tells anarchists what they already know. He continues:

"Our modern day anarchists, Reclaim the Streets and others, have no support in Britain amongst the organised workers."

Which is not true, as RTS and other anarchists do seek influence with the organised workers (and the unorganised ones, the unemployed, etc.). They have invited rank-and-file trade union activists to their demonstrations to speak, trade unionists are members of anarchist organisations, etc. Anarchists are at the forefront of supporting strikers, particularly when their union bureaucracy betrays their struggle and does not support them. For example, during the Liverpool dockers strike of 1995-1998, RTS and the dockers formed a common front, organised common demonstrations and so on. The trade unions did nothing to support the dockers, RTS and other anarchist groups did. That in itself indicates the weakness of Mitchinson's claims.

In addition, anarchists do not seek to become part of the trade union bureaucracy and so their influence cannot be easily gauged. It would also be useful to point out that Trotskyists have little support amongst organised workers as well although they do attempt to get elected into the officialdom.

After asserting these dubious "facts" about anarchist influence, he continues:

"Some radicalised youth however are attracted to their 'direct action' stance. There is a vacuum left by the absence of a mass Labour youth organisation which, fighting for

a socialist programme, could attract these young workers and students. With no lead being given by the tops of the unions, and Labour in government attacking young people, that vacuum can be temporarily and partly filled by groups like Reclaim the Streets."

Needless to say, Mitchinson does not pose the question **why** the Labour government is attacking "young people" (and numerous other sections of the working class). Why has the Labour Party, a mass workers party which uses elections to gain reforms, been attacking (as it has always done, we must note) its supporters? If its because the leaders are "right-wing" then why have the membership supported them? Why have the "right-wing" gained such influence? Also, why is there no "mass Labour youth organisation"? And why should "young people" join an organisation which is part of the party which is attacking them? And why are the "tops of the unions" not giving a "lead"? Perhaps because its not in their interests to do so? Because they hate direct action and radical workers as much as the bosses? In short, Mitchinson's "analysis" is question begging in the extreme.

He continues:

"What action do they propose though? In their press statement (2/5/00) they explain, 'We were not protesting. Under the shadow of an irrelevant parliament we were planting the seeds of a society where ordinary people are in control of their land, their resources, their food and their decision making. The garden symbolised an urge to be self-reliant rather than dependent on capitalism.'"

First, we should point out that having access to land **is** a key way for workers to be independent of capitalism. Perhaps Mitchinson forgets the discussion of the colonies in chapter 33 of **Capital**? In it Marx discusses how access to land allowed immigrants to America and Australia to reject wage labour (i.e. capitalism) by providing them with the means to survive without selling themselves on the labour market to survive. The state had to be used to enforce the laws of supply and demand by restricting access to the land. Or, perhaps, he had forgotten Marx's discussion in chapter 27 of **Capital** of the role of enclosures in creating a dispossessed mass of people who were forced, by necessity, to become the first generation of wage slaves? Either way, access to the land **was** (and still is, in many countries) a means of being independent of capitalism -- and one which the state acts to destroy.

Second, the garden was a **symbol** of a communist society, not an expression of the type of society RTS and other anarchists desire. So, as a **symbol** of a anti-capitalist vision, the garden is a good one given the history of state violence used to separate working people from the land and propel them into the labour market. However, it is only a **symbol** and not, obviously, to be taken as an example of the future society RTS or other anarchists desire. Only someone lacking in imagination could confuse a symbol with a vision -- as the press release states it "*celebrated the possibility of a world that encourages co-operation and sharing rather than one which rewards greed, individualism and competition.*"

Third, as their press release states, "*Guerrilla Gardening is not a protest; by its very nature it is a creative peaceful celebration of the growing global anticapitalist movement.*" Mitchinson attacks the action for being something it was never intended to be.

He attempts to analyse the RTS press release:

"The fact that parliament appears powerless to prevent job losses or the destruction of the environment, only demonstrates that it serves the interests of capitalism."

Very true, as Kropotkin argued the *"State is there to protect exploitation, speculation and private property; it is itself the by-product of the rapine of the people. The proletariat must rely on his own hands; he can expect nothing of the State. It is nothing more than an organisation devised to hinder emancipation at all costs."* [**Words of a Rebel**, p. 27] He argues elsewhere that *"small groups of men [and women] were imbued with the . . . spirit of revolt. They also rebelled -- sometimes with the hope of partial success; for example winning a strike and of obtaining bread for their children . . . Without the menace contained in such revolts, no serious concession has ever been wrung by the people from governing classes."* [**Evolution and Environment**, p. 103] Mitchinson seems to agree:

"However, under pressure from below it is possible to introduce reforms through parliament that are in the interests of ordinary people."

Thus reforms **are** possible, but only if we rely on ourselves, organise pressure from below and use direct action to force parliament to act (if that is required). Which is what anarchists have always argued. Without anti-parliamentary action, parliament will ignore the population -- we have to rely on our own organisations, solidarity and direct action to change things for the better. Faced with such a movement, parliament would introduce reforms regardless of who was a member of it. Without such a movement, you end up with Tony Blair. Thus Mitchinson is confused -- by his own logic, the anarchists are correct, we have to work outside of parliament and electioneering in order to be effective.

He continues:

"It is no use declaring parliament to be irrelevant, and turning your back on it when the majority do not agree, and still look to government to make their lives better. This is the mirror image of the sects attitude to the Labour Party. Any and every avenue which can be used to improve our lives must be used."

How do you change the opinion of the majority? By changing your position to match theirs? Of course not. You change their position by argument and proving that direct action is more effective in making their lives better than looking to government. Mitchinson would have a fit if someone argued *"it is no use declaring capitalism to be wrong and fighting against it when the majority do not agree and still look to it to make their lives better."* If the majority do not agree with you, then you try and change their opinion -- you do not accept that opinion and hope it goes away by itself!

Mitchinson seems to be following Lenin when he argued that *"[y]ou must not sink to the level of the masses . . . You must tell them the bitter truth. You are duty bound to call their bourgeois-democratic and parliamentary prejudices what they are -- prejudices. But at the same time you must **soberly** follow the **actual** state of the class-consciousness and preparedness of the entire class"*. ["*Left-wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*", **Collected Works**, vol. 31, p. 58] Obviously, you cannot tell workers the bitter truth and at the same time follow their prejudices. In practice, if you follow their prejudices you cannot help but encourage faith in parliament, social democratic parties, leaders and so on. Progress is achieved by discussing issues with people, not ducking the question of political issues in favour of saying what the majority want to hear (which is what the capitalist media and

education system encourage them to believe in the first place). As a means of encouraging revolutionary thought it is doomed to failure -- as shown by the lack of success Leninist parties have shown after applying this advice.

Also, just to stress the point, any and every avenue which can be used to improve our lives must be used but only if it actually **is** effective and does not place obstacles in the path of social change. Parliamentary action has been proven time and time again to be a false way for radical change -- it only ends up turning radicals into supporters of the status quo. It makes as much sense as arguing that any and every avenue must be used to cure a disease, including those which have proven to make your condition worse.

19. How does Mitchinson distorts the use of the term "*Self-reliance*"?

Mitchinson proclaims that:

"In any case this 'self-reliance' is no alternative. Self-reliance won't get electricity into your house, educate your children or treat you when you are ill."

No anarchist and no one in RTS ever claimed it would. We use the term "*self-reliance*" in a totally different way -- as anyone familiar with anarchist or RTS theory would know. We use it to describe individuals who think for themselves, question authority, act for themselves and do not follow leaders. No anarchist uses the term to describe some sort of peasant life-style. But then why let facts get in the way of a nice diatribe?

He continues:

"We have the resources to cater for all of society's needs, the only problem is that we do not own them."

Actually, the **real** problem is that we do not **control** them. The examples of Nationalised industries and the Soviet Union should make this clear. In theory, they were both owned by their populations but, in practice, they were effectively owned by those who managed them -- state bureaucrats and managers. They were not used to cater for our needs, but rather the needs of those who controlled them. For this reason, as we explore in [section H.3.13](#), anarchists argue that common ownership without workers' self-management in the workplace and community would be little more than state capitalism (wage labour would still exist, but the state would replace the boss). The reality of the Bolshevik regime confirmed this critique.

He continues with his distortion of the concept of "*self-reliance*":

"Individualism (self-reliance) cannot be an alternative to socialism, where all the resources of society are at all of our disposal, and equally we all contribute what we can to society."

First, anarchists are socialists and most seek a (libertarian) communist society where the resources of the world are at our disposal. In other words, socialisation of the means of life has been the goal of anarchists from the start (see [section I.3.3](#) for more on this).

Second, self-reliance has little to do with "*individualism*" -- it has a lot to do with **individuality**, however. The difference is important as Emma Goldman explains:

"Individuality is not to be confused with the various ideas and concepts of Individualism; much less that 'rugged individualism' which is only a masked attempt to repress and defeat the individual and his individuality. So-called Individualism is the social and economic laissez-faire: the exploitation of the masses by classes by means of trickery, spiritual debasement and systematic indoctrination of the servile spirit . . . That corrupt and perverse 'individualism' is the strait-jacket of individuality . . . This 'rugged individualism' has inevitably resulted in the greatest modern slavery, the crassest class distinctions . . . 'Rugged individualism' has meant all the 'individualism' for the masters, while the people are regimented into a slave caste to serve a handful of self-seeking 'supermen' . . . [and] in whose name political tyranny and social oppression are defended and held up as virtues while every aspiration and attempt of man to gain freedom and social opportunity to live is denounced as . . . evil in the name of that same individualism." [Red Emma Speaks, p. 112]

Third, in a part of the press release strangely unquoted by Mitchinson, RTS argue that their action "*celebrated the possibility of a world that encourages co-operation and sharing rather than one which rewards greed, individualism and competition.*" RTS are well aware that self-reliance does not equal individualism and they are very clear that oppose the individualism of the current system and desire co-operation. Given that Mitchinson quotes from their press release, he must know this and yet he asserts the opposite.

Mitchinson seems to equate self-reliance with "*individualism*" and so, presumably, capitalism. However, capitalists do not want self-reliant workers, they want order takers, people who will not question their authority. As David Noble points out, after an experiment in workers' control General Electric replaced it with a regime that was "*designed to 'break' the pilots of their new found 'habits' of self-reliance, self-discipline, and self-respect.*" [Forces of Production, p. 307]

Capitalists know the danger of self-reliant people. Self-reliant people question authority, think for themselves, do not follow leaders and bring these abilities into any groups they join. Thus self-reliance is not purely an individual thing, it also refers to groups **and** classes. Anarchists desire to see a self-reliant working class -- a class which makes its own decisions and does not follow leaders. Thus, for anarchists, self-reliance refers to **both** individuals and groups (just as self-management and self-liberation does). Needless to say, for those in authority or those seeking authority self-reliance is an evil thing which must be combated. Hence Mitchinson's diatribe -- it is the cry of the would-be leader who is afraid his followers will not respect his authority.

20. Is anarchism an example of "*Philosophical idealism*"?

Mitchinson turns to the May Day demonstration:

"Guerrilla gardening and its related varieties that have sprung up in various places, is nothing more than an offshoot of the old utopian idea of changing society by example."

Actually, it was a specific demonstration to encourage people to get involved in collective action, to have a good time and challenge authority and the status quo. It was an attempt to change society by example only in the sense that it would encourage others to act, to challenge the status quo and get involved in collective action. If Mitchinson was consistent he would have to oppose **every** demonstration that occurred before the final insurrection that created the "workers' state" -- a demonstration is, by its very nature, an example to others of what is possible, an example of our collective strength and our desire for change. You may be critical of the nature of the guerrilla gardening action (and many anarchists are), but you cannot misrepresent its nature as Mitchinson does and be expected to be taken seriously.

He continues:

"The roots of this scheme lie in idealist philosophy. Philosophical idealism refers to the notion that people's actions are a consequence of their thoughts, that ideas and not our conditions of life determine our outlook. When, through a long process of accumulation, we change people's minds, then they will live differently, capitalism will simply be redundant. The capitalist class themselves will presumably sit idly by and watch their system fall apart."

Given that the "anti-capitalist" demonstrations have met extensive state violence, it is clear that those involved are well aware that capitalist class will not just watch its power disappear.

Also, calling RTS's action *"idealist philosophy"* is quite ironic for someone who seems intent in ignoring the history of Social Democracy and dismisses attempts to analyse the Bolsheviks in power as *"bourgeois slander"*. However, Mitchinson in his diatribe forgets one of the basic arguments of materialism -- namely that ideas themselves are part of the material world and so influence society and how it develops. He rejects the notion that peoples thoughts and ideas determine their actions. He obviously thinks that people operate on auto-pilot, not thinking about their actions. In reality, what people do is dependent on their thoughts -- they think about their actions and what motivates them influences their activity. If thoughts did not determine people's actions then Mitchinson would not have spent so much time writing this article.

Thus Mitchinson is well aware of the importance of ideas in social change, at least implicitly. Indeed, he argues for the need for a *"mass Labour youth organisation which, fighting for a socialist programme, could attract these young workers and students."* To state the obvious, a socialist programme is a means to *"change people's minds"* and present the possibility of creating a new society. Does he seriously think a socialist revolution is possible without changing people's minds, getting them to desire a socialist society?

Moreover, if he had read Bakunin he would be aware that anarchists consider the class struggle as the way to change people's ideas:

"the germs of [socialist thought] . . . [are to] be found in the instinct of every earnest worker. The goal . . . is to make the worker fully aware of what he wants, to unjam within him a stream of thought corresponding to his instinct . . . What impedes the swifter development of this salutary thought among the working masses? Their ignorance to be sure, that is, for the most part the political and religious prejudices with which self-interested classes still try to obscure their conscious and their natural instinct. How can we dispel this ignorance and destroy these harmful prejudices? By

*education and propaganda? . . . they are insufficient . . . [and] who will conduct this propaganda? . . . [The] workers' world . . . is left with but a single path, that of **emancipation through practical action** . . . It means workers' solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means **trade-unions, organisation** . . . To deliver [the worker] from that ignorance [of reactionary ideas], the International relies on collective experience he gains in its bosom, especially on the progress of the collective struggle of the workers against the bosses . . . As soon as he begins to take an active part in this wholly material struggle, . . . Socialism replaces religion in his mind . . . through practice and collective experience . . . the progressive and development of the economic struggle will bring him more and more to recognise his true enemies . . . The workers thus enlisted in the struggle will necessarily . . . recognise himself to be a revolutionary socialist, and he will act as one."* [**The Basic Bakunin**, pp. 102-3]

Thus anarchists are aware that experience determines thought but we are also aware that thought is essential for action. We recognise the importance of ideas in the class struggle but we also realise that the ideas people have change as a result of that struggle. To state otherwise is to misrepresent anarchist thought.

21. How is Mitchinson's critique self-contradictory?

Mitchinson continues his distortion:

"Whilst believing in a revolutionary struggle to overthrow capitalism, anarchists argue that it must be replaced by... nothing."

This is ironic for quite a few reasons. First, Mitchinson had previously claimed that anarchists did not aim to overthrow capitalism, just the state: now he is claiming we **do** believe in overthrowing capitalism. Second, he quoted Trotsky saying that anarchists just ignore the state: now Mitchinson states we aim to overthrow the capitalism via revolutionary struggle. How do you overthrow something via revolutionary struggle by ignoring it? His critique is not even internally consistent.

Moreover, he is well aware what anarchists want to replace capitalism with, after all he quotes an anarchist conference which stated that they aimed for *"the creation of an absolutely free economic organisation and federation based on work and equality"*. This would be based on the organisations created by the working class in its struggle against exploitation and oppression, with Bakunin arguing that the International Workers Association should become *"an earnest organisation of workers associations from all countries, capable of replacing this departing world of States and bourgeoisie."* [**The Basic Bakunin**, p. 110] In other words, the *"future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom upwards, by the free association of workers, first in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal."* [**Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 206] Even Engels acknowledged that the anarchists aimed to *"dispose all the authorities, abolish the state and replace it with the organisation of the International."* [Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Op. Cit.**, p. 72] Anyone with even a basic knowledge of anarchist theory would know this -- and [section I](#) gathers together anarchist views on what will replace capitalism.

It gets worse, for given that Mitchinson had previously stated that *"Marx saw a future society without a state"* as well and that he quotes Trotsky on how *"Marxists are wholly in agreement with the anarchists in regard to the final goal: the liquidation of the state"* we can only assume that Marxists also aim at replacing capitalism with *"nothing."*

This sentence, more than any other, shows the level which some Marxists will sink to when discussing anarchism. It shows that the standard Marxist critique of anarchism is little more than an inconsistent collection of lies, distortion and misrepresentation. Mitchinson not only contradicts his ideological gurus, he even contradicts himself. That is truly impressive.

22. How did Trotsky make the trains run on time?

Mitchinson asks:

"Yet with no central apparatus, no organisation, how would the trains run on time, how could organ transplants be organised, how could the world's resources be channelled into permanently overcoming famine."

First, we must note the usual fallacy -- being opposed to a *"central apparatus"* does not imply *"no organisation."* Instead of centralised organisation, anarchists propose **federal** organisations in which co-ordination is achieved by collective decision making from the bottom up. In other words, rather than delegate power into the hands of a few "leaders", an anarchist organisation leaves power at the bottom and co-ordination results from collective agreements that reflect the needs of those directly affected by them. Thus a federal organisation co-ordinates activities but in a bottom-up fashion rather than top-down, as in a centralised body.

Second, anarchists are quite clear on who would make the trains run on time -- the railway workers. Anarchists are firm supporters of workers' self-management. Anyone with even a basic understanding of anarchist theory would know that. Moreover, the experience of workers' self-management of the railways by the CNT during the Spanish Revolution indicates that anarchism can, and does, ensure that the trains run on time -- along with all the other industries which workers seized and ran during the social revolution of 1936 (see [section I.8](#)).

In contrast, the experience of Russia -- when the Bolsheviks did create a *"central apparatus"* -- proved a failure. As discussed in [section H.6.2](#), the centralised economic notions of the Bolsheviks produced a system marked by waste, corruption, inefficiency and bureaucracy. As eye-witness Emma Goldman summarised:

"In Kharkoff I saw the demonstration of the inefficiency of the centralised bureaucratic machine. In a large factory warehouse there lay huge stacks of agricultural machinery. Moscow had ordered them made 'within two weeks, in pain of punishment for sabotage.' They were made, and six months already had passed without the 'central authorities' making any effort to distribute the machines to the peasantry, which kept clamouring for them in their great need. It was one of the countless examples of the manner in which the Moscow system 'worked,' or, rather, did not work." [*"The Crushing of the Russian Revolution", To Remain Silent is Impossible*, p. 40]

Rather than "*overcoming famine*", the Bolshevik regime was marked by it along with the mismanagement of industry caused by its favoured "*central apparatus*" -- which spawned a vast bureaucracy (and, needless to say, the bureaucrats never went hungry). That this was no regime to praise or mimic can be seen from the attempts to make "*the trains run on time*", which involved Trotsky (when he was placed in charge of the railways) subjecting the railway workers to military discipline:

*"Due to the Civil War -- and to other factors less often mentioned, such as the attitude of the railway workers to the 'new' regime -- the Russian railways had virtually ceased to function. Trotsky, Commissar for Transport, was granted wide emergency powers [in August 1920] to try out his theories of 'militarisation of labour.' He started out placing the railwaymen and the personnel of the repair workshops under martial law. When the railwaymen's trade union objected, he summarily ousted its leaders and, with the full support and endorsement of the Party leadership, 'appointed others willing to do his bidding. He repeated the procedure in other unions of transport workers.'" [Maurice Brinton, **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control**, p. 67]*

Trotsky ruled the "*central apparatus*" he created, called **Tsektran**, "*along strict military and bureaucratic lines.*" [Brinton, **Op. Cit.**, p. 67] The trains did start moving again, of course, but only for a few months for there was a "*disastrous collapse of the railway network in the winter of 1920-1.*" [Jonathan Aves, **Workers against Lenin**, p. 102]

This raises wider questions, not least on whether socialism means that workers manage their own activity or does some other group? Trotsky and Lenin in power decided for the latter -- and built the "*centralised apparatus*" required to ensure that result. Nor did Trotsky justify his militarisation of labour in terms of necessary evils resulting from appalling objective conditions caused by the civil war (and other factors, such as the impact of the policies and structures the Bolsheviks imposed which usually go unmentioned in Leninist accounts). Rather he saw it as a matter of "*principle*":

"The very principle of compulsory labour service is for the Communist quite unquestionable . . . The only solution of economic difficulties from the point of view of both principle and of practice is to treat the population of the whole country as the reservoir of the necessary labour power . . . and to introduce strict order into the work of its registration, mobilisation and utilisation." [Trotsky, **Terrorism and Communism**, p. 135]

Why "*principle*"? Perhaps because Marx and Engels had stated in **The Communist Manifesto** that one of the measures required during the revolution was the "*[e]stablishment of industrial armies*"? [Selected Writings, p. 53]

Given how badly the Bolshevik "*central apparatus*" actually worked and how well the anarchist workers' self-management did, it seems strange that Mitchinson brings it up. It also seems strange, given what Trotsky did to the railway workers, that he talks uses the "*trains running on time*" example, after all it is what apologists for Italian fascism praised Mussolini for. It seems likely, then, that he was unaware of how Trotsky made the trains run on time as he is of how anarchists did -- for if he were aware of the former, he would not use a phrase so associated with fascism as it undoubtedly leads the informed reader to draw some obvious and unfortunate conclusions!

23. Can centralised planning meet the needs of the whole of society?

Our Marxist then quotes **Maybe**:

"The radical social movements that are increasingly coming together don't want to seize power but to dissolve it. They are dreaming up many autonomous alternative forms of social organisation, forms that are directly linked to the specific needs of locality. What might be an alternative to capitalism for people living currently in a housing estate in Croydon is completely different to what might be suitable for the inhabitants of the slums of Delhi."

He comments on these very sensible words:

"It cannot be of no concern to us what form a new society will take in different countries or even different regions. The economic power we have created over centuries can and must be used in a planned, rational way to eradicate hunger, disease and illiteracy. It must be used in the interests of the whole of society."

The obvious conclusion to draw from Mitchinson's comments is that the needs of actual people, what sort of society they want, is irrelevant to Marxism, a strange position to take. Also ignored is the fact that different cultures will have different visions of what a free society will be like. Thus, for Mitchinson, everyone, everywhere, will be subject to the same form of society -- *"in the interests of society."* However, as Bakunin argued, the state *"is an arbitrary creature in whose breast all the positive, living, individual or local interests of the people clash, destroy and absorb each other into the abstraction known as the common interest, the **public good** or the **public welfare**, and where all real wills are dissolved into the other abstraction that bears the name of **the will of the people**. It follows that this alleged will of the people is never anything but the sacrifice and dissolution of all the real wants of the population, just as this so-called public good is nothing but the sacrifice of their interests."* [Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings, pp. 265-6]

The different needs of different areas and regions must be the starting point of any social reconstruction, the basis on which we create specific programmes to improve our societies, eco-systems and world. If we do not recognise the diversity inherent in a world of billions of people, millions of eco-systems, thousands of cultures, hundreds of regions then we cannot use the resources of society to improve our lives. Instead we would have uniform plan imposed on everything which, by its very nature, cannot take into accounts the real needs of those who make up *"the whole of society."* In other words, the resources of the world must not be used by an abstraction claiming to act *"in the interests of society"* but rather by the people who actually make up society themselves -- if we do that we ensure that our interests are met directly as we manage our own affairs and that the use of resources reflects the specific requirements of specific people and eco-systems and not some abstraction called *"the interests of society"* which, by its centralised nature, would sacrifice those interests.

Of course, it seems somewhat strange that Mitchinson thinks that people in, say, New Delhi or Croydon, will not seek to eradicate hunger, disease and illiteracy as they see fit, co-operating with others as and when they need to and creating the federative organisations required to do so. The need to share experiences and resources does not conflict with the

different areas experimenting in different ways, expressing themselves in ways which suit their particular needs and difficulties. As any ecologist could tell you, different eco-systems need different forms of care. The same with communities -- Mitchinson would crush local needs in the name of an artificial construct.

He continues:

"That can only be achieved by the democratic planning of society where the power at our fingertips could be used with due respect for the future of the planet, the conservation of its resources, our own working conditions, and living standards. Whether we like it or not, growing a few carrots on empty plots of land will not eradicate hunger and famine."

Needless to say, Mitchinson's comments about *"growing a few carrots on empty plots of land"* is pure stupidity and an insult to the intelligence of his audience. RTS is not suggesting that and no revolutionary anarchist thinker has -- rather we urge, to quote Kropotkin, that *"the guiding word of the coming revolution, without which it will fail in its historic mission: the complete expropriation of all those who have the means of exploiting human beings; the return to the community of the nation of everything that in the hands of anyone can be used to exploit others."* [**Words of a Rebel**, pp. 207-8] This would apply to workplaces, housing, land -- all the means of life -- so that they can be used to meet the needs of society and the planet, based on a recognition that this can only genuinely happen by taking into account the needs of unique individuals, communities and eco-systems.

How can *"democratic planning"* of the whole *"of society"* take into account the needs of specific localities, eco-systems, communities? It cannot. Respect for the future of our planet means respecting the fundamental law of nature -- namely that conformity is death. Diversity is the law of life -- which means that a future socialist society must be libertarian, organised from the bottom up, based on local self-management and a respect for diversity. Such a federal structures does not preclude co-ordinated activity (or the creation of democratic **plans**) -- the reverse in fact, as federalism exists to allow co-ordination -- but instead of being imposed by a few "leaders" as in a centralised system, it is the product of local needs and so reflective of the needs of real people and eco-systems.

As for his comment about *"due respect of the future of the planet"* is obviously inspired by *"the youth"* being concerned about ecological issues. However, Leninism's desire for centralised states and planning excludes an ecological perspective by definition. As Bakunin argued:

"What man, what group of individuals, no matter how great their genius, would dare to think themselves able to embrace and understand the plethora of interests, attitudes and activities so various in every country, every province, locality and profession."
[Op. Cit., p. 240]

Diversity is the basis of any eco-system. Centralism cannot, as Bakunin makes clear, embrace it. This was confirmed by the Bolshevik experience during the early years of the Russian Revolution where centralisation was embraced due to the assumption in Marxist ideology that it was more "efficient". In practice, it was only efficient in spawning a vast bureaucracy and its privileges -- the needs of society were rarely met, with waste and lack commonplace for the general population (the bureaucrats of the state and party were more fortunate). This was

also seen under the Stalinist system, a regime which Trotskyists tend to be ambiguous about - praising its "planning" but blaming all its many obvious limitations purely on the bureaucracy. Such a perspective forgets that many of the apparent "successes" were the product of hyper-exploitation of the working people of both town and country as well as nature whilst the bureaucracy itself was, in part, increased by the necessities of central planning. As such, glib comments about central planning do not convince and fail to understand how best to actually meet the needs of society -- needs which must reflect the diversity of humanity and the environment within which we live.

24. Is technology neutral?

Mitchinson goes on:

"We have the power to do just that, but only if we combine new technology, industry and the talents and active participation of millions."

Needless to say, he fails to indicate how the millions **can** participate in a "centralised apparatus" beyond electing their "leaders." Which indicates a central fallacy of Marxism: it claims to desire a society based on the participation of everyone yet favours a form of organisation -- centralisation -- that precludes that participation.

In addition, he fails to note that technology and industry have been developed by capitalists to enhance their own power. As we argue in [section D.10](#), technology cannot be viewed in isolation from the class struggle. This means that industry and technology was not developed to allow the active participation of millions. The first act of any revolution will be seizing of the means of life -- including industry and technology -- by those who use it and, from that moment on, their radical transformation into **appropriate** technology and industry, based on the needs of the workers, the community and the planet. Mitchinson obviously shares the common Marxist failing of believing technology and industry is neutral. In this he follows Lenin. As S.A. Smith correctly summarises:

"Lenin believed that socialism could be built only on the basis of large-scale industry as developed by capitalism, with its specific types of productivity and social organisation of labour. Thus for him, capitalist methods of labour-discipline or one-man management were not necessarily incompatible with socialism. Indeed, he went so far as to consider them to be inherently progressive, failing to recognise that such methods undermined workers' initiative at the point of production. This was because Lenin believed that the transition to socialism was guaranteed, ultimately, not by the self-activity of workers, but by the 'proletarian' character of state power . . . There is no doubt that Lenin did conceive proletarian power in terms of the central state and lacked a conception of localising such power at the point of production." [Red Petrograd, pp. 261-2]

The Russian workers, unsurprisingly, had a different perspective:

"Implicit in the movement for workers' control was a belief that capitalist methods cannot be used for socialist ends. In their battle to democratise the factory, in their emphasis on the importance of collective initiatives by the direct producers in transforming the work situation, the factory committees had become aware -- in a

partial and groping way, to be sure -- that factories are not merely sites of production, but also of reproduction -- the reproduction of a certain structure of social relations based on the division between those who give orders and those who take them, between those who direct and those who execute . . . inscribed within their practice was a distinctive vision of socialism, central to which was workplace democracy." [Op. Cit., p. 261]

The movement for workers' control was undermined and finally replaced by one-man management by the kind of "central apparatus" Mitchinson urges us to build (see M. Brinton's classic work **The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control** for more details). Those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it. This quickly spawned a massive and corrupt bureaucracy. As Alexander Berkman -- and eye-witness to that bureaucracy and its inefficiency, waste, power and privileges -- argued:

"The role of industrial decentralization in the revolution is unfortunately too little appreciated. Even in progressive labor ranks there is a dangerous tendency to ignore or minimize its importance. Most people are still in the thralldom of the Marxian dogma that centralization is 'more efficient and economical.' They close their eyes to the fact that the alleged 'economy' is achieved at the cost of the worker's limb and life, that the 'efficiency' degrades him to a mere industrial cog, deadens his soul, and kills his body. Furthermore, in a system of centralization the administration of industry becomes constantly merged in fewer hands, producing a powerful bureaucracy of industrial overlords. It would indeed be the sheerest irony if the revolution were to aim at such a result. It would mean the creation of a new master class." [What is Anarchism?, p. 229]

He goes on:

"The economic power we have created can be compared to the destructive force of lightning, untamed and anarchic under the market, yet organised into cables and wires electricity transforms our lives. Industry is not the enemy, nor are machines. The state is, but it is a symptom not the disease. It is capitalism and its ownership of the economy, its stewardship of society that we have to replace."

However, unlike electricity, "economic power" requires people to operate it. The question is not whether "machines" are the enemy (often they are, as machines are used by capitalists to weaken the power of workers and control them). The question is whether the future society we aim at is one based on workers and community self-management or whether it is based on an authoritarian system of delegated power. It is clear that Marxists like Mitchinson desire the latter -- indeed, as is clear from his diatribe, he cannot comprehend an alternative to hierarchical organisation.

Given that one of the things capitalism and the state have in common is a hierarchical, top-down structure, it is clear that any revolutionary movement must fight both -- at the same time. One cannot be considered as "a symptom" of the other, they are interwoven and need to be abolished together. As part of this process, what had been developed under both -- and so shaped by the priorities of power, privileges and profits as well as resistance to those -- need to be modified rather than glibly accepted as unproblematic. Yes, such a transformation would take time and we would have to use the legacy of the system we have abolished but it

needs to be recognised. That Mitchinson does not raise this shows how superficial his critique of capitalism is.

25. Do anarchists ignore the "*strength of the working class*"?

Mitchinson asserts that:

"The task of our time is to combine the strength and experience of the working class and its mighty organisations with the power and energy of the youth internationally, on the basis of a clear understanding of what capitalism is, what the state is, and a programme for changing society. That requires a combination of theory and action. In that combination lies the strength of Marxism."

The first question is surely **what** "*mighty organisations*" of the working class is he talking about. Is it the Labour Party? Is it the trade unions? Given that the Labour Party was in office at the time that Mitchinson wrote his article and was busy, yet again, attacking the working class, he probably meant the latter -- if so, the question is how effective have these "*mighty organisations*" been recently? The answer must be "not very." Why is that? In union there is strength, as anarchists have long been aware. Why has this strength been so lacking? Simply because the unions are centralised, bureaucratic and run from the top down. They have placed numerous barriers in front of their members when they have taken militant action. That is why anarchists urge workers to form rank-and-file controlled organisations to manage their own struggles and take back the power they have delegated to their so-called leaders. Only in this way, by building truly revolutionary organisations like workers' councils (soviets), factory committees, community assemblies and so on can we really create a **mighty** force. In other words, anarchists are well aware of the strength of working class people and their power to change society -- indeed, anarchism is based on that awareness and organise appropriately!

The second question is surely to ask whether Mitchinson is aware that **Reclaim the Streets** had been building links with rank and file trade union militants for years -- long before Mitchinson decided to enlighten them with "*the strength of Marxism*." In other words, "*the strength of Marxism*" seems to rest in telling radical working class people to do what they have already been doing! Such strength is truly amazing and must explain the prominent role Leninists have had in the numerous anti-capitalist demonstrations and organisations of the late 1990s and early 2000s (and earlier and later!).

Needless to say, **anarchism** provides "*a clear understanding of what capitalism is, what the state is, and a programme for changing society. That requires a combination of theory and action.*" This has been proven when we corrected Mitchinson's numerous errors and distortions regarding anarchist theory. Moreover, as far as combining theory and action goes, it is clear that **anarchism** has been doing that of late, **not** Marxism. While anarchists have been at the forefront of the anti-capitalist demonstrations, working with others as equals, Marxists have been noticeable by their absence. Combining theory and practice, non-hierarchically organised direct action closed down the WTO and presented a clear message to the oppressed around the world -- **resistance is fertile**. What have Marxists achieved? Apparently producing articles such as these, distorting the politics and activities of those who

actually **are** changing the world rather than just interpreting it. That they cannot produce an honest critique of anarchism indicates the uselessness of their politics.

Ultimately, as shown in [section H.2.7](#), anarchists have always seen the working class as our agent of change precisely because we recognise both its potential strength and that it has -- as an oppressed and exploited class -- a self-interest in ending capitalism, the State and other forms of hierarchy. To imply otherwise means showing a woeful ignorance of anarchism.

26. What does Mitchinson's article tell about the nature of Trotskyism?

Mitchinson finishes his diatribe as follows:

"If you want to fight against capitalism, do so fully armed with a socialist programme and perspective. Join with us in the struggle for the socialist transformation of the planet."

It is clear that to be *"fully armed with a socialist programme"* means to critique that which you know nothing about, spread slanders and lie about what your opponents actually think. There **is** much to be critical of in any anti-capitalist demonstration or social movement as well as the various groups that have helped organise and take part in them. Anarchists have been the first to point these out. However, we have a lot to learn from them as well -- they are struggling against capitalism and, as Kropotkin argues, *"Anarchism . . . originated in everyday struggles"* and *"the Anarchist movement was renewed each time it received an impression from some great practical lesson: it derived its origin from the teachings of life itself."* [**Evolution and Environment**, p. 58 and p. 57]

Thus we must critique these movements honestly and as equals -- Mitchinson, as can be seen, does neither. He slanders those involved and dismisses out of hand their experiences and the reasons that have brought them to struggle in a specific way against the dominant society. In this he follows Lenin, who argued in **'Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder** that western revolutionaries ignore their own experiences in their own -- and similar -- countries and instead follow the "lessons" of experiences gained in a predominantly pre-capitalist, absolutist state. The stupidity of such an approach is clear.

Mitchinson presents those in struggle with the ultimatum "subscribe to our platform or be denounced." Little wonder that Leninists are non-existent in the groups that have taken part and organised the anti-capitalist demonstrations -- not willing to learn from those involved in the class struggle, all they can do is act as petty sectarians. Sectarians expect working class people to relate to their predetermined political positions, whereas revolutionaries apply our politics to the conditions we face as members of the working class. For Leninists revolutionary consciousness is not generated by working class self-activity, but is embodied in the party (see [section H.5](#)). The important issues facing the working class -- and how to fight -- are to be determined not by workers ourselves, but by the leadership of the party, who are the "vanguard of the working class". Hence Mitchinson's dismissal (in a particularly dishonest manner, we must stress) of those involved in struggle and their experiences. True "revolution" obviously lies in the unchanging ideas generated at the start of the twentieth century in a monarchy developing towards capitalism, **not** in the experiences and desires of living people fighting for freedom in the here and now. Yes, these ideas and movements can

be confused and unclear -- but they are living and subject to change by the influence of revolutionaries who act in a libertarian manner (i.e. as equals, willing to learn as well as teach).

The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci once wrote that *"to tell the truth is a communist and revolutionary act."* However, even he did not apply this when discussing anarchism and the activities of anarchists [Gwyn Williams, **Proletarian Order**, pp. 193-4]. Be that as it may, Gramsci's point is correct. Telling the truth is a revolutionary act. If we judge Mitchinson's article by this standard then we can only conclude that neither he nor the politics he defends are revolutionary or communist.

Thus we find his ending comment truly a *"flight of fancy"* -- after reading our comments above, we hope you agree with us. If you seek a **true** socialist transformation of this planet rather than its degeneration into centralised state capitalism, discover more about anarchism.