

Solidarity

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We are publishing this statement in the wake of the events in Coburg on Saturday 28th May which was a shocking example of disunity on the Left.

“Solidarity” entered the English language from the French at the Chartist Convention in London in April 1848 and popularised by *The People’s Paper*, the paper of Ernest Jones and Julian Harney – leaders of the left-wing of the Chartists and founders of the Communist League, for whom Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

The 1864 Rules of International Workingmen’s Association began with the maxim: “the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves,” and went on to say that all efforts at the emancipation of the working class had hitherto failed for want of solidarity. These two principles: self-emancipation of the working class and solidarity, together make the irreducible and inseparable foundations of the workers’ movement.

The French workers had invented the word *solidarité* on the barricades of Paris in the first working class uprising against the bourgeoisie. The French had learnt the hard way that without solidarity the army could defeat them one barricade at a time, as they had in 1832. By 1848, the Chartist movement, which had united 5/6 of the population of Britain against the ruling capitalist class had also learnt their lesson the hard way. As they saluted the heroism of the French workers, the *People’s Paper* declared: “Solidarity is a word of French origin, the naturalisation of which, in this country, is desirable.”

The two founding principles of communism – self-emancipation of the working class and solidarity – are inseparable. That self-emancipation is necessary is almost self-evident; if the working class is to take public political power it can learn and equip itself for that task only through the work of freeing itself and abolishing the conditions of its own exploitation. No-one can do that on their behalf. This process of self-emancipation is the way in which working class self-consciousness, that is, class consciousness, is constructed. Without self-emancipation there can be no working class, only billions of individual wage-workers, socially and politically controlled by their masters.

The opposite of self-emancipation is attaining freedom as the gift of another party. Such a thing is actually impossible; a class which is freed by the action of another class or group is only thereby subordinated to their liberators, even if these be well-meaning. How then is a socialist group, whether a group of communists such as the Communist League, or a mutual aid organisation like the First International, to foster the liberation of the working class if the liberation of the working class is to be *their own* achievement. The answer to this lies in the principle of *solidarity*.

The need for solidarity arises from the fact that the working class does not come into the world readymade as a single, homogeneous, organised stratum of society. It comes into the world divided into strata, trades, national, religious and ethnic groups, and spread across the globe in numerous cultural and linguistic communities. It can only realise its own emancipation by uniting all of these disparate sections of the working class into one movement with common aims and objectives. Along the way the aims and

objectives of different sections of the class may differ, but their autonomy within the movement remains until they voluntarily submit themselves to a shared discipline.

When one group finds itself under attack, *provided they fight back*, then other sections of the working class have a duty to come to their aid. This duty and its practice is called 'solidarity'. The results of solidarity are three-fold. In the first place, as a result of the aid received from others (even including non-proletarian forces) the struggling group may survive. Secondly, they learn who their friends are, and coming at their hour of need, they will not ever forget this.

But more importantly, through their struggle, whether successful or not, their collective self-consciousness, agency and self-confidence is enhanced. However, this is not automatically the case; sometimes 'helping' someone is a violation of solidarity.

If another group comes along like the U.S. cavalry and saves them, then the 'rescued' group may be grateful, but their working class self-consciousness is not enhanced but actually subsumed under that of the rescuing party. Indeed, this is very often the reason for mounting a rescue mission. For example, philanthropic organisations may rescue people in distress for no other reason than to recruit them to their own religious doctrine.

But there is an even more pressing danger involved in rescuing groups in distress. Coming from outside the concrete conditions in which a group is struggling, the rescuer is ignorant of the terrain, so to speak, and more often than not, in their well-meaning efforts to help actually make things worse. For example, strikers often rely on social pressure within a community to deter scabbing, but when an outside group comes in and throws their weight around, they can undermine delicate relationships, which make it easier for the scabs to force their way through, and as soon as the 'storm-troopers' leave the strikers find themselves in a worse situation.

The principle of solidarity, which guides how different sections of the workers' movement come to each others' aid, avoids such dangers and ensures that the self-consciousness of both the struggling party and the party offering solidarity is enhanced in the very process of bringing them closer together. It is a simple rule:

when coming to the aid of another party, do so under *their* direction.

You do it their way, not your way. If your own beliefs are such that you cannot place yourself under their direction, if you believe that they are so misguided, then solidarity is impossible. But if they are part of the workers' movement then ensuring that they are not defeated is important, and you will surely be able to find *some* way of supporting them according to their own practices. This may be by donating to their fighting fund or sending a message of solidarity or whatever. But if you are going to participate in the struggle of another section of the workers' movement, then the principle of solidarity demands that you do so *under their direction*. The working class is unified by voluntary association, not by conquest.

Any part of the workers' movement is obliged to offer solidarity to other parts of the workers movement and its allies, however remote. If the strictures of solidarity, as outlined above, make solidarity action either impossible or undesirable, then there are a number of other options.

If the struggling group is *not* part of the working class or one of its allies, then you may decide to act in ways which *will* eradicate their self-consciousness, and come to their aid

according to your own practices. Equally, you could simply join in their struggle on the other side.

If the other party is pursuing a *common end*, but there is no possibility of collaboration – as is frequently the case of parties sharing a common enemy but little else – then mutual ‘exchange’ or instrumentalisation is in order. This means *negotiating* a public agreement to coordinate each others’ actions in an agreed way which meets the objectives of both parties. This is the basis of alliance politics, which is appropriate for conducting events such as protests, in which the various participants have nothing in common except for being against the IMF, or whatever.

Finally, you may decide self-consciously and deliberately to *take over* another’s action. This approach, which is the diametric opposite of solidarity, is the method of *colonization* or sometimes called *philanthropy*. It could be characterised as a hostile take-over, and within the workers’ movement such a take-over would only be carried out through negotiation.

To demonstrate how fundamental solidarity is to the workers’ movement, it should be observed that, alongside equality, solidarity is the guiding principle of majority voting which is the fundamental decision-making process of the workers’ movement. In any working class organization actions are decided upon by majority vote (the principle of equality) and thereafter every member of the organization is obliged to offer *solidarity* to the majority by adhering to the majority decision whether they like it or not. A minority which violates solidarity with the majority is called a *scab*.

See also [Toward a Discourse Ethic of Solidarity](#) by Nancy Fraser