

## Constructive policy versus destructive war - Marie Louise Berneri

These two excerpts appeared originally in the anarchist paper War Commentary, and have been republished in the posthumous collection of Berneri's articles, *Neither East Nor West* (Freedom Press, 1952) and more recently in Robert Graham's *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas Vol. 2* (Black Rose Books, 2009). Berneri puts forth a scathing criticism of the hypocrisy of "left wing" parliamentary politics and of the capitalist war machine.



### A CONSTRUCTIVE POLICY

We are often accused of lacking a constructive policy. People grant that we have made a valuable analysis of the present situation, and that "our paper has a real value in pricking complacency and stimulating thought." But we are asked to put forward "practical" solutions for the struggle against fascism and capitalism.

Needless to say we do not accept the charges made against us. We admit that our readers will not find in our pages prescriptions for curing humanity from all the ills that beset it. What some of our readers obviously would like are slogans, manifestos, and programs which offer to the working-class in a few lines the means of achieving not only the end of fascism but also of bringing about the era of workers' happiness.

We refuse to adopt such recipe-programs because we are convinced that the present weakness of the working-class is due to the fact that every party, in order to gain popularity and power, has simplified its programs, reducing to ridiculous proportions the nature of the struggle that will bring freedom to the exploited.

Political slogans have become like patent medicine advertisements promising health, beauty, and happiness in exchange for a tablet of soap, or a cup of cocoa. Vote Labour, and everything will be alright! Pay your trade union dues and security will be assured! A workers' government will achieve the revolution. Write to your MP or to such-and-such a Minister, march through the streets in a disciplined manner, with a powerful band and shout till you're hoarse, and all your wishes (demands) will be granted!

That is what parties alleged to have “realist” policy and holding in the greatest contempt the “anarchist Utopians,” have been advocating for a quarter of a century whenever a difficulty arose. These remedies have proved useless against unemployment and fascism, Italian aggression in Abyssinia [Ethiopia], Anglo-French boycott of the Spanish revolutionaries, rearmament and war. And yet the same methods are again advanced to meet the problems created by the present situation.

The leit-motif of left parties is that the workers should take as much control as they can of the government. This appears constructive enough. But it only means that Labour leaders will enter the Government by adopting the policy of the Right. For the workers it means sacrifices and the loss of every kind of liberty in order to secure the privilege of seeing “their” Ministers sitting on the Cabinet benches. No improvements are obtained and all official channels for making discontent heard are lost.

Another “practical” solution advocated by the Labour Party is to issue a declaration of war or peace aims. Apparently the world should know of our love of freedom and justice. May we “utopians” suggest to the editorial board of the [pro-Labour] Daily Herald that if the Labour Party is anxious to show the world how “democratic” we are, it could for instance refuse to be associated with a government which imprisons Nehru for four years (may we add that petitions, open letters, etc., etc., will not have the slightest effect?).

It is not by changing ministers – such guilty men! – or issuing declarations that fascism and capitalism will be conquered. The problem is more complex than that. We do not intend to add our voice to those who delude the workers that their “leaders” will get them out of the mess. The problems need a complete transformation in the present attitude of the working class. You cannot change the present regime while there is no revolutionary spirit, while the workers will not understand a few fundamental truths:

1. That workers and capitalists cannot have a common cause.
2. That imperialism is the prime cause of war, and the cause must be eradicated.
3. That governments, Tory and Labour, are always instruments of oppression, and that the workers must learn to do without them.
4. That parties seek power for their own benefit – a small minority. Therefore all power must be seized and retained in the hands of syndicates which comprise the great majority of the men and women producers.

We cannot build until the working class gets rid of its illusions, its acceptance of bosses and faith in leaders. Our policy consists in educating it, in stimulating its class instinct, and teaching methods of struggle. It is a hard and long task, but to the people who prefer such expedient solutions as war, we would point out that the great world war which was to end war and safeguard democracy only produced fascism and another war; that this war will doubtless produce other wars, while leaving untouched the underlying problems of the workers. Our way of refusing to attempt the futile task of patching up a rotten world, but of striving to build a new one, is not only constructive but it is also the only way out.

December 1940

## THE PRICE OF WAR AND LIBERATION

British Bombing has brought death to many thousands of people in the past few weeks. At [the Allied summing meeting in] Quebec, politicians who provide themselves with shelters well out of reach of bombs, are planning to continue massive bombing as a means of carrying on the “war against fascism.”

Hamburg, Milan, Genoa, Turin, are covered with ruins, their streets heaped with bodies and flowing with blood. “Hamburgizing” is coming into use as a new term for wholesale destruction of cities, and the mass murder of their populations through terrorist raids. The Press boasts of the R.A.F.’s power to carry such destruction to all the cities of Germany and Central Europe. It screamed with indignation when the Germans bombed churches and hospitals, but when the smell of carnage goes up from once beautiful and populous towns they find words of rejoicing. When the water mains were hit in Milan, and the centre of the city was flooded, they find it a subject for a joke. “Lake Milan” the clever journalist calls it. What does it matter to him if “the water is flowing between the ruins and the debris of bombed buildings, and people living in the district were forced to remain in the wreckage of their homes for four days until the water subsided and they could get out...” “Lake Milan” is indeed a splendid joke. But while the

journalists chuckle in the Fleet Street pubs, the hospitals and rescue squads are working day and night to try and palliate some of the pain and disfigurement, the hunger and exposure of the victims.

Our cartoonists also find wholesale destruction a matter for humorous comment. "Berlin is off the air, and will soon be off the map too!" But when the newspapers publish descriptions and photographs of the destruction and misery in Hamburg and Milan, the people of Clydeside and Coventry, Plymouth and the East End of London, will be reminded of the days and nights when their houses were bombed, when their relatives were killed or waited in the hospitals for their turn...When the papers talk gloatingly of the streams of refugees frantically pouring out of Hamburg with the remnants of their belongings on their backs, of the people of Milan "camping out under the trees," the people of England's bombed cities will remember their own attempts to get away from the night terror, will remember that when they streamed out of Plymouth into the countryside, they found the big houses of the rich closed to them, and they were left to wander without food or shelter.

For who suffers in the big industrial towns when they are bombed, if not the workers who have led lives of misery and toil just like the workers of Clydeside or Coventry? When the port of Naples is bombed, it is the thickly populated working class district which surrounds the harbour that suffers most. The bombs do not hit the sumptuous villas of rich Fascists which are scattered along the shores of the bay of Naples; they hit those high storied houses so crowded one on top of the other that the streets are no more than dark passages between them; houses where people live four or five in a room.

When German cities are bombed it is not the Nazi elite which suffers. They have deep and comfortable shelters just like the elite in this country. Their families have been evacuated to safe districts or to Switzerland. But the workers cannot escape. The city proletariat, the French, Dutch, Belgian, and Scandinavian workers are forced by Himmler's factor Gestapo to go on working in spite of heavy bombing. For them escape is impossible.

Workers in British munition factories and aircraft factories are asked to rejoice at this wholesale destruction from which there is no escaping. Photographs, showing great heaps of ruins, are plastered all over the walls with the caption "This is your work." The ruling class wants them to be proud that they have helped to destroy working class families. For that is what they have done. They have helped their masters to stage massacres compared with which the destruction of Guernica, the bombing of Rotterdam and Warsaw look like playing at war. Such posters should outrage humanity, make them feel sick at the role capitalist society calls upon them to play.

The Italian workers have shown that, in spite of twenty years of fascist oppression, they knew better where their class interests lay. They have refused to be willing tools in the hands of the bosses. They have gone on strike, have sabotaged war industry, have cut telephone wires and disorganized transport. What is the answer of Democratic Britain to their struggle against fascism? Bombing and more bombing. The Allies have asked the Italian people to weaken Mussolini's war machine, and we now take advantage of their weakness to bomb them to bits.

Our politicians professed to want revolution in Europe to overthrow fascism. But it is now clearer than ever that what they are most afraid of is that fascism should be overthrown by popular revolt. They are terrified of revolution, terrified of "Anarchy." They want to establish "order," and as always they are prepared to wade through rivers of blood to secure their idea of order – order in which the workers accept their lot of poverty and pain with resignation.

How many times in the past have we heard that anarchism means bombs, that anarchists work for wholesale destruction? How many times has ruling class police and repression been instituted because an anarchist has attempted to assassinate a single ruler or reactionary politician? But one single Hamburgizing raid kills more men and women and children than have been killed in the whole of history, true or invented, of anarchist bombs. The anarchist bombs were aimed at tyrants who were responsible for the misery of millions; ruling class bombs just kill thousands of workers indiscriminately.

"Disorder," "Anarchy," cried the bourgeois Press when single-handed resolute like [the anarchists] Sbardelotto, Schirru and Lucetti tried to kill Mussolini...Now the same capitalists want to rub whole cities off the map of Europe; want to reduce whole populations to starvation, with its resulting scourge of epidemics and diseases all over the world. This is the peace and order they want to bring to the workers of the world with their bombs.

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