

Reply on the Abolition of the State

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Jason Schulman replies

Like most left anarchists and too many Marxists, Wayne Price still holds to the vision of the councilist polity. But it is long since time to give up on this vision. Even in revolutionary Russia, workers' councils never functioned like a government in continuous session; they met discontinuously, with executive committees managing their affairs. The crisis of governmental authority in Russia in 1917 was "solved" not by soviets but by Sovnarkom, the government formed by the Bolsheviks (and, initially, their allies), and its ability to reach out through the Bolshevik Party as a national organization. Since 1917, soviet-type forms have appeared in many strike waves and revolutionary crises, but they have never in practice formed an alternative, authoritative decision-making center for all of society. The problem of institutional forms which will make authority truly accountable needs to be addressed in another way than that of fetishizing workers' councils.

I do not accept Price's definition of the state. Neither, in practice, did Marx or Engels, for what it's worth. Regardless of their not-very-well-thought-out ideas on the state's "withering away," Marx and Engels at least understood that the immediate goal of a workers' political revolution would be the radical democratization of the state, not its abolition — this is what the "dictatorship of the proletariat" amounts to. What would this require? For starters, the right to elect and recall all public officials; public officials to be paid only an average skilled workers' wage; universal military training and service, democratic political and trade union rights within the military, and the right to keep and bear arms; the abolition of official secrecy laws and of private rights of copyright and confidentiality; self-government in the localities: i.e., the removal of powers of central government control and patronage and abolition of judicial review of the decisions of elected bodies; generalized trial by jury; and the abolition of constitutional guarantees of the rights of private property and freedom of trade. Such a state would be, in Mike McNair's words, an undiluted democratic republic, but it would still be a (workers') state. I realize this might not be enough for Wayne. Well, one can't please everyone.

Jason Schulman