

Review

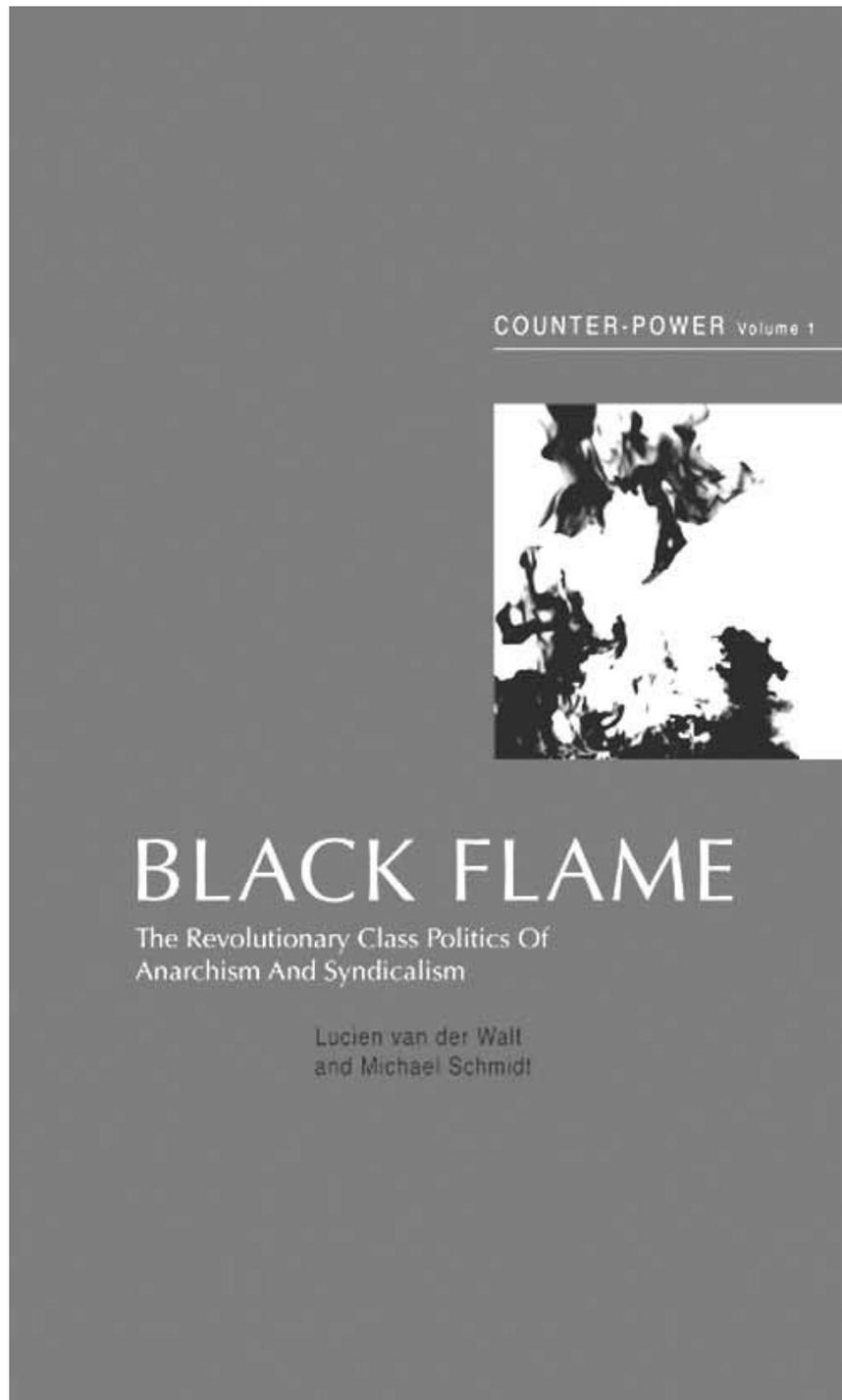
Black Flame: Counter Power Volume 1
 Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt
 (AK Press, San Francisco, 2009)

Reviewed by Mandy Moussouris

There are very few people who have a basic understanding of the ideology of Anarchism. Most associate the term anarchy with chaos, disorganisation and destruction but nothing can be further from the truth. Schmidt and Van der Walt's book, *Black Flame* effectively debunks this myth and reveals a working-class struggle history, based on principles of equality, justice and democracy. This is a history which has been excluded from school books and history books and even main stream left-wing literature.

Black Flame sets out to both clarify what Anarchism is and to demonstrate the significant impact Anarchism has had in the struggle of the working class on a world-wide scale over the past 150 years. The arguments in the book are backed by considerable evidence based on the authors' extensive knowledge of anarchist theory, movements and struggles across the world. It provides a rich, well researched and dense account of the Anarchist movement and the theories behind it.

The book begins by unpacking the theory of Anarchism. It looks at different theorists associated with the ideology, draws out their arguments and uses them to build an understanding of what Anarchism is and what it is not. The conclusion being: 'Instead of capitalism and centralised state control, the Anarchists favoured a stateless, self-managed, and planned economy in which the means of production were controlled by the working class and peasantry, class divisions had



been abolished, and distribution took place on the basis of need.'

Tenets like these illustrate the similarities with marxism and the book provides a lot of detail around the links between Anarchism and Marxism as well as the fundamental differences. One example being of how Bakunin (considered by most to be the father of Anarchism), who was part of the First International was purged because he accurately predicted that Marx's position on the state would lead to dictatorship and state capitalism. Examples of this can now be seen in the Soviet Union, Cuba, China and other communist states.

Another key area of focus is on the two strains of Anarchism: Mass and Insurrectionist. Insurrectionist Anarchists believed in propaganda of the deed and undertook a number of high profile assassinations of capitalists and royalty. It is this legacy which has condemned all forms of Anarchism to the misconception that it is chaotic, disorganised and destructive.

The authors, whilst acknowledging Insurrectionism as part of the movement, show how this was but a small part of its history which has unfortunately obscured the much larger and more successful part of the movement: Mass Anarchism.

For the Mass Anarchists the Insurrectionists were a vanguard who 'reinforced the passive reliance of the masses on leaders and saviours' thus undermining the power of the class and each individual in it, to liberate itself. For the Mass Anarchists the end must justify the means and their strategy was strongly based in education, mobilisation, democracy, empowerment and struggle.

It is this approach which links the Mass Anarchist movement with Syndicalist Trade Unions. Once again the authors provide extensive evidence to argue that Syndicalism

and Anarcho-syndicalism in particular formed the underlying strategy of the Mass Anarchist Movement. Accounts of many early working-class struggles illustrate the Anarchist base upon which a large part of the labour movement was built.

Links with farm workers and the peasantry were also an important part of the movement's strategy and whilst Marx saw the peasantry as a counter revolutionary force the Anarchists embraced all workers, including the peasantry. The Spanish Revolution was the most significant example of how important and effective such a strategy was. Only much later was this strategy picked up on by Marxists like Mao.

For South Africans in particular, the final chapter: 'Anarchist Internationalism and Race, Imperialism and Gender' provides important insight into the Anarchist perspective on issues which continue to undermine our struggles.

It shows how Anarchism, based on the fundamental tenets of equality and solidarity, was non-racial, non-sexist and supportive of the struggles against imperialism long before other socialist movements. In South Africa while the Communist Party of South Africa was supporting white workers' calls for the colour bar in the early 20th century, the Anarchists were organising multi-racial unions which included all workers.

What is unique about *Black Flame* is that it illustrates the universality of Anarchism, which until now, other literature has not done as it has tended to focus on the European Anarchist tradition. This new focus is supported by countless examples of large movements in a myriad of countries globally from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Cuba and the United States to South Africa, Egypt, Korea and Japan and of course, Spain, Italy, Russia, the UK and Ireland.

For Anarchists, no one is free until all are free and the only way to

achieve our freedom is through the solidarity of the global working class in their struggle against the exploitative capitalist system and the inherently authoritarian state. The examples provided show that through its history the movement has remained true to these principles.

This analysis of Anarchism poses important questions for Anarchists and activists alike. How do we build the movement? How do we deal with disunity in the movement? How do we ensure that the movement stays true to its principles, includes all and liberates all and each of us? It poses these questions but also provides many important answers for activists in the 21st century.

Volume 1 is the first part of two volumes, which took ten years to finish and which was initially started as a pamphlet. Whilst the value of the book in terms of its rich and detailed account of Anarchist theory, strategy and history is an invaluable and original addition to academic literature on Anarchism, I would very much like to see an accessible version as this history is one which belongs to the working class and thus should be available to all of us. The target audience for this book is relatively academic and whilst comrades who are used to reading Marx should have no problem reading the book, it is not accessible to a more general readership.

That being said I would highly recommend *Black Flame* to activists as this much information and insight on Anarchism cannot be found in any other book on the subject. LB

Mandy Moussouri has long worked in the trade union movement and is currently working in the development field as an educator and researcher. Copies of the book are available for R110 by post from Lucia.vanderWalt@vitsacza