### Marx, Bakunin or What?

#### **Alan Woodward**

N HER article 'The Philosophical Roots of the Marx-Bakunin Conflict' (What Next? No.27), Ann Robertson takes a partisan view of that conflict which leaves much of the political reality still hidden. I do not feel competent to comment on the philosophical aspects of the article, but organisation, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the revolutionary agency and reforms are political issues, and can be discussed as such. My comments are made from a perspective of workers' council socialism, a theory that in some ways straddles Marxism and anarchism.

Here are some of the salient facts that relate to the subject:

- 1864: International Working Men's Association formed; Marx forms a working alliance with the English trade union leaders and together over the next few years they politically defeat the large number of the followers of the inconsistent Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, founder of anarchism.
- 1868: Bakunin is delegated to the IWMA and attends the Brussels Congress.
- 1869: The Basel Congress passes comprehensive resolution which outlines the anarchist perspective for extending and constructing union organisation. This is already being put into practice by libertarian organisers in Spain, Italy and elsewhere.
- 1871: The Marx group, unable to get a majority for a Congress, calls a Conference in London which is a technical device to decide and implement administrative matters only. However, they pass changes that are centralist, controversial and strongly contested by the Bakuninists. They are discussed and reversed at a separate supra-national Federation Congress.
- 1872: The Congress at The Hague at which Marx and Co expel Bakunin and attempt to move the location of the General or Executive Council to New York from London. This decision is reversed by seven out of eight of the national Federations in the IWMA, as was the expulsion, over the next six months.
- 1873: The IWMA Congress restructures itself, abolishes the General Council and re-forms on an anarchist Federal basis. Future Congresses are held

almost every year without the Marxists and business is carried on as usual.

• 1879: Congress held by the anarchists of the Swiss Jura Federation which continues to meet thereafter.

#### On Organisation

It is apparent that Bakunin's supporters, far from merely setting up secret societies and relying on the instincts of the masses, as both Marx and Ann Robertson allege, were in fact energetically and successfully setting up both unions and branches of the IWMA, to such an extent that they were the majority. Bakunin in fact dissolved his official secret societies and thereafter functioned with unofficial liaisons in much the same way as Marx, Engels, etc.

Despite rumours to the contrary, anarchists were keenly concerned with the organisation of workplace control. The perspective of workers' control was prophetic and significant. Proudhon adopted it in a specific form from the workers of Lyons after 1840. Its essential features were an association of labour and:

- Every associated individual to have an indivisible share in the enterprise.
- Each worker to take his share of heavy, dirty, or dangerous work.
- Each to be trained for, and to do, all the operations of the workplace or industry.
- Remuneration to be proportional to skill and responsibility of the job.
  - Profits to be shared in proportion.
- Each to be free to set his own hours, work as defined and leave the association at will.
- Managers and technicians to be elected, and work regulations to be subject to collective approval.
  - Office holders to be elected.<sup>2</sup>

Though aspects of his philosophy were to be politically defeated in the IWMA, Proudhon's principles of labour organisation were to be adopted under the guidance of Bakunin. The Russian came to attend at the 1869 Basel Congress despite a pedantic attempt by Marx – just one of many – to obstruct his participation.

#### Anarchist Flagship Resolution

The Congress was the setting for the adoption of a strong blueprint for anarchist ideas, in the form of a resolution by Eugene Hins of the Belgian delegation. Rudolf Rocker outlines at length the resolution and its significance:

"The Congress declares that all workers should strive to establish associations for resistance in their various trades. As soon as a trade union is formed, the unions in the same trade are to be notified so that the formation of national alliances in the industries may be begun. These alliances shall be charged with the duty of collecting all material relating to their industry, of advising about measures to be executed in common, and of seeing that they are to be carried out, to the end, that the wages system may be replaced by the federation of free producers. The Congress directs the General Council to provide for the alliance of the trade unions of all countries."

Hins, in moving the motion, pointed out that "this double form of organisation of local workers' associations and general alliances for each industry, on the one hand the political administration of the committees, and on the other the general representation of labour, regional, national, and international, will be provided for. The councils of the trade union and industrial organisation will take the place of the present government, and this representation of labour will do away, once and forever, with the governments of the past."

Thus was drawn up the ideology and even organisational form for much of the European working class organisation for the next half century. Even the embryo of workers' council socialism can be seen in the decisions taken here. Curiously Hins and the more influential Cesar de Paepe both spoke in this debate about the concept of building a State within the State, which must have caused Bakunin some heartache. It can be seen as marker for the future, however, regarding syndicalism.

#### Points Arising

Three main conclusions can be drawn. Firstly the pre-figurative element of existing and proposed workers' organisation – labour councils – is a clear statement of the priority of workplace organisation over political parties in socialism, as advocated by the Marxists. Among these the concepts of political party organisation and the dictatorship of the proletariat were central.

The proposal of a "Chamber of Labour" (trades union council type organisation) was also made by the Belgians. On this Nettlau quotes Bakunin: "the serious, final, complete liberation of the workers is possible only upon one condition, that of the appropriation of capital, that is of raw materials, and all tools of labour, including land

by the whole body of workers.... The organisation of the trade sections, their federations in the International and their representation by the Chambers of Labour, not only create a great academy, in which the workers of the International, combining theory and practice, can and must study economic science, they also bear in themselves the living germs of the new social order which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself."4

#### Roots of Syndicalism

Secondly, the adoption of the Belgian proposals for labour organisation, with only implied political aspects, reflected differences within the anarchist camp. It would be wrong to believe the propaganda of the Marxists who portrayed anarchism as a single mass movement, structured round a conspiratorial centre, aimed at the destruction of the IWMA. The reality was more complex, though Marx did not recognise it.

In fact there were tensions within the group between the overtly political anarchism of Bakunin and the growing confidence of the workers in their industrial organisation. This tendency, that was to develop into anarchosyndicalism, emphasised the primacy of basic workers' organisation with a potential for total rejection of political ideas and, much later, to engage in conventional union processes of collective negotiation. For now, we can note the Belgian decision to reject the role of the IASD in that country but see how the Marxist repressions had the effect of uniting the disparate movement.

#### Anarchism Rules OK?

The final important conclusion was that the adoption of the resolution by sections of the IWMA in Belgium, Holland, the Swiss Jura, France and Spain, and the implementation in those countries, was a tremendous defeat for Marx and the old guard on the GC. From now on there would be a new philosophy – Bakuninism – and it is from this point that the authoritarian Marxists were fighting a rearguard action, and resorted to political manipulation as outlined below.<sup>5</sup>

A brief venture into this form of practical political liberation appeared obliquely and in a small degree in the Paris Commune of 1871 and was to characterise the later anarchist theory of syndicalism in the following decades. Since then the idea of workers' control has become a central one for many union members, workers' council socialist organisations, and a universal feature of nearly all twentieth century revolts.

It is worth noting here in parenthesis that the general question of anarchists and the issue of post-revolutionary organisation was examined by James Guillaume in 1867. A virtual programme was spelt out in 20 pages featuring:

- A medical service and housing units free to users.
- Peasants' control of land and workers' control of workplaces.
- The outline of a structure that would be one of federations of organisations of workers in productive units, public services and other institutions on the basis of the right to recall delegates and ultimately to withdraw from the structure.<sup>6</sup>

This third idea was so central that anarchists at this time were often called Federalists. The significance of the Federation – not an easy concept to grasp, so deep has the idea of unitary organisation reached into the mind – is that its innate democracy helps ensure a defence against power accumulation.

#### The Concept of Autonomy

This has also over the years become equally central to anarchism. Political parties are shunned, with some organisations like the French CGT banning their members from joining such parties, and even after the experience of the Spanish anarchists in 1936-9 the concept prevails. It is not to be confused with political apathy, which itself is predicated on the idea that voting is the primary form of political activity.

Having said that, workers' council socialism does accept the notion of autonomy in one form. Workplace organisation should be independent of the official trade union movement under capitalism and function with its own structures, activities like unofficial strikes, occupations and work-ins, and lastly political commitment to revolution.

Progress through Elections and the Right to Vote

The second point of departure was that the Marxist project required that the workers be organised on a political party basis but this was not the policy of the IWMA. That is until the London Conference when this extremely controversial minority view became policy as a result of the "administrative" changes. The whole electoral strategy was a trap, anarchists believed, in which the workers' representatives would become controlled in the house of representatives by the political agents of capitalism – a not unfounded fear, readers may think.

However, to regard electoral abstention as a totally sacrosanct negative principle rather than a tactic appears now as dogma. The anarchist concept of abstention from parliamentary voting was based on opposition to conventional parliamentary activity.

It was originally viewed as an essential tactic

by the early anarchists – Proudhon in 1863 against the dictatorship of Napoleon III – and of course ties in precisely with the rejection of "The State " as the mechanism for change. The State as such is defined as a centralised and authoritarian body in contrast to a freedom-based federation. In his final work, *On The Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, Proudhon advocates complete separation from conventional politics.

In practice some compromise over the State has been the rule. Proudhon himself stood for and was elected to the Assembly in 1848, though his inconsistent performance there puzzled friend and foe alike. He later disowned it.

More recently, the Spanish anarchist workers voted pragmatically in 1930 for the new republic but abstained three years later, allowing a very reactionary government into office. The alternative policy of insurrection was a disaster for the anarchist participants.

In the crucial Popular Front election in 1936, although the CNT/FAI policy was officially for continued abstention, this was largely tokenism and many supporters voted against the political Right.<sup>7</sup> Revolutionary events followed.

Yet the issue continues to divide anarchists, many of whom regard the issue as one of principle. Guerin relates how Errico Malatesta, at the Alliance of the Left in 1924, while conceding that elections can have good or bad results and that anarchist votes can be crucial, still maintained his advice for abstention. The argument that electoralism results in trapping the successful candidates, and that it provides a "cover" for the exercise of real power by capitalists, has generally won the day, even with the German council communists in 1919.

However, some anarchist organisations have engaged in parliamentary action. Guy Aldred, the leading British anarchist of the twentieth century, favoured the Sinn Féin tactic – standing, getting elected but not taking the seat. A version of the tactic was used with astonishing success by Bobby Sands in the Irish Hunger Strikes of 1981, standing for election from his deathbed in prison and helping ultimately to defeat Thatcher.

The Bolsheviks supervised the election of tribunes of the people in the Russian Duma before World War I, but with certain safeguards against their defection. 11 These concerned selection of candidates, political action linking in with extraparliamentary activity, and the use of "instructions", or mandates, from electors. Today some Leninist groups exercise a degree of control over the activities, payment, etc, of their elected parliamentary representatives. Such discipline would be essential.

A section of political activists today feel that the tactic of voting in parliamentary elections, in addition to local electoral activity, can be beneficial:

- To exercise a negative veto and prevent the extreme right wing taking office through non-violent methods, such as alliances of left candidates in Germany in 1932, which could have marshalled the divided working class into action against Nazism. <sup>12</sup> See also Spain in the 1930s, above.
- As a part of consolidating mass movements for social reform objectives like opposition to war, though to make it the sole mechanism as happened in 2003 against the Iraq invasion is clearly mere reformism.
- As a means of progressing a popular movement against capitalism, subordinate to direct action, but necessary to widen the struggle, as Rosa Luxemburg pointed out in Germany in the post-war crisis of 1918-19.

#### **Ends and Means**

A further area of disagreement between the two political currents was that of the agency for revolutionary change. Marx nominally designated the organised working class and dismissed the land workers out of hand, unlike Bakunin. There is a good deal by Ann Robertson about the incapacity of peasants to become organised, firstly into collective and secondly into revolutionary organisations. Marx is quoted at length.

Now, it is understandable the any writer can make mistakes and wrongly prophesy the future. However, it is absurd to repeat the errors as a means of discrediting his original opponents. The agrarian collectives of much of eastern Spain during the civil war against fascism are an incredible example of revolutionary society, refuting every criticism of the Marxists. <sup>13</sup> There are other instances in revolutionary history as well, not least Russia and Ukraine. <sup>14</sup>

Nor can the Bakuninists be written off as merely champions of the lumpenproletariat – the poverty stricken, unemployed, disabled and such like. An examination of both the actions and the basic principles of Proudhon's anarchism shows his concern for workers' control of which he was a strong advocate. His proposals for dual control of workshops made during the 1848 uprising are aimed at achieving this objective. It is worth repeating that the control of the workplaces by the organised workers was, and is, central to anarchist ideas.

#### The State or the Federation?

Bakunin and the anarchists believed in their own version of organisation but regarded the centralised and top down concepts of the Marxists as fatal to freedom. His words were quite distinctive, and it would appear that the anarchist suspicion of the Marxist project had a sound base. Bakunin's prophecy of what amounts to a new ruling group, or red bureaucracy, was startlingly accurate:

"I wonder how Marx fails to see that the establishment of a ... dictatorship to perform, in one way or another, as chief engineer of the world revolution, regulating and directing a revolutionary movement of the masses in all countries in a machine like fashion – that the establishment of such a dictatorship would be enough of itself to kill the revolution and distort all popular movements."

And: "... the construction of a powerfully centralised revolutionary state ... would inevitably lead to the establishment of a military dictatorship.... hence the triumph of the Jacobins or the Blanquists would be the death of the revolution.... such revolutionaries ... dream of muzzling it [the revolution] by the act of some authority that would be revolutionary in name only, and will only be a new reaction in that it would again condemn the masses, to be governed by decrees, to immobility, to death; in other words, to slavery and exploitation by a new pseudo-revolutionary aristocracy." <sup>16</sup>

Bakunin's characterisation of Marx's politics as authoritarian was made before the shabby treatment he received from the latter. The situation, it will be remembered, was that Marx's working alliance with the reformist English trade union leaders had seen off the ill-prepared Proudhonists who had originated the institution. But Mikhail Bakunin, who accepted Marx's economic analysis, was a different matter, and his libertarian politics were more acceptable to the European workers. Hence his support grew and from 1869 seriously challenged the Marxist dominance. The response of Marx in 1871/2 was, as predicted, authoritarian.

Firstly, he used a number of unconstitutional measures or dirty tricks to restrict anarchist representation on the IWMA central organisation. Next a manoeuvre of which Stalin would have been proud – Bakunin's ex-associate Nechaev had, without the Russian's knowledge, sent a threatening letter to a printer and Marx used this to get the libertarian leader expelled.

There were also allegations of "secret organisations", though Marxist and Bakuninist organisations were pretty much the same. While there is much uncertainty, it is conceivable that Bakunin did make brief attempts to resuscitate his old organisations, but even so it was the open challenge of the Bakuninists that Marx feared, and this argument was a pretext.

Finally in case the repression failed, the desperate Marx tried to move the whole structure to the wilds of the USA. This failed coup consolidated the oppositional stance of the two main sections of the labour movement.

The Marxist Leninist Party It will be seen that the libertarian objection to Marxism was that the commitment to the working class as the agency of change was simply rhetoric. The reality was that the Party would seize control of society and not let go of it again, such was their obsession with power. Personal freedom would be in danger. This suspicion may well have been re-inforced by the events mentioned above.

Interestingly, the magnificent and tragic events of the Paris Commune in 1871 resulted in a curious events – two publications on the event, virtually identical, by the two warring writers with their conflicting ideas! Daniel Guerin comments that Marx revised his ideas, as expressed with Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* some twenty years earlier, by scrapping his stages view of revolution. Guerin's anthology prints extracts from *The Paris Commune and the Role of the State* and *The Civil War in France* for comparison, plus comment by Franz Mehring, Maximilien Rubel and Arthur Lehning.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequent experience of anarchists and workers is almost certain to have fuelled the intergroup rivalry and consequent "chauvinism". Lenin's dissolution of the Russian workers' councils and by-passing of all levels of the soviets in 1918 confirmed for the anarchists the description of "authoritarian", even without the Stalinist debacle.

Many socialists believe the degeneration of the Marxist Leninist revolutionary party can now be regarded as inevitable, as the decline of the International Socialists of 1962 into the Socialist Workers Party of 2004 illustrates. Equally many also feel that after the excesses of the last hundred years that the original Bakuninist caution was eminently justified.

We would be interested, by the way, to hear from Ann Robertson how the proletariat were to be educated by Marx into class consciousness. Political consciousness possibly but there is a theory that workers can reach the first stage as a result of their own direct and general experience. We are also astonished to read a major article on Bakunin that does not even mention Proudhon, the originator of most of his political ideas.

Bakunin or Marx or an Alternative?

So what is my position in the political row? The idea of workers' council socialism was originally constructed within a year of the German revolution of 1918 when the destruction of those responsible for the insurrection was being implemented. This was the work of the Social Democratic Party, SPD, who had secretly allied itself to the German ruling class. The trade union leaders simply followed their masters, continuing their war time betrayal of the starving and oppressed workers and their families.

The new German Communist party, the KPD, decided at its foundation conference to use direct

revolutionary methods and boycott the parliamentary processes and official unions. Leaders of the revolutionary movement were firmly in the Leninist camp though they had differed from the Russian Bolsheviks for more than a decade over their centralist politics. German communist leader Rosa Luxemburg, until her assassination on SPD orders, assumed this "impulsive" decision could be reversed, but subsequently the Leninists, who assumed that the revolution was over, had reverted back to reformist policies – and, even worse, instructed all the other Communists to follow suit.<sup>18</sup>

#### Two German Communist Parties

The majority of the German communists, many veterans of the workers' councils, were expelled and after much debate concluded that they had to go on alone. They had formed the German Workers Party, KAPD, and linked this to their small but strong base in the workers' movement, at that time still armed and ready to fight. The huge Red Army of the Ruhr was the biggest and probably best workers' militia force ever assembled. The KAPD became known as Council Communist as it grew beyond Left Opposition to Bolshevism, and emphasised reliance on the workers' councils.

In the course of their split with the Russian led Communist Third International, the leaders like Anton Pannekoek, 19 Herman Gorter, 20 etc, previously one hundred per cent Leninists, developed a theory:

- Revolutionary struggle had to be continued.
- Workers' organisation, councils in the workplaces, provided a base.
- Area councils in the locality supplemented these.
- Militias, based on workplace and area councils, headed the revolutionary military struggle against the regular troops and Freikorps who went on to become a key section of Hitler's fascists.
- The revolutionary organisation was quite different to the Bolshevik revolutionary party in that it worked with but did not dominate the workers' industrial movement.
- Concepts of personal responsibility were counterposed to the Party-imposed passivity of the official communists.

The parallels with the experience and ideas of groups like the Friends of Durruti, watching the defeat by Spanish fascism in 1936-8, can be clearly seen. Like the later group, the Council communists were crushed by Stalinism and Fascism, but the idea lives on.

#### A Natural Feature

Workers' councils have figured in more than a dozen major attempted revolutions in the last century, and countless smaller insurrections. They seem to be formed automatically in such situations and develop a form of collectively based socialist organisation as the struggle goes on.

A modern programme for council socialism would feature building working class resistance in the present situation through:

- The defence of the welfare state against closure, cuts and privatisation.
- Anti-war campaigns, and other fields including possible electoral work at this stage.
- Organisations fighting racism and discrimination against citizens and asylum seekers.
- The promotion of socialists ideas, perspectives and literature, as an integral part of this activity.

Council socialism requires a revolutionary party which complements but does not dominate the labour movement – guiding, advising, educating, co-ordinating and leading by consent – Luxemburg rather than Lenin.

The aim would be a society of federated structures of:

- Co-operatives run by associations of free labour through mutual aid.
- Co-ordinated and comprehensive social services.
- International unity rather than nationalism and war.

#### Conclusion

The consequences of the theoretical division between Bakunin and Marx have been huge. Historically we have seen, not a unified labour movement, but in fact three main components of the movement – Labourism, as well as Marxism/socialism and anarcho-syndicalism.

Conventional thinking places the three categories along a continuum from the most modest reformism to outright revolutionism. Closer examination reveals that all three have practised both the most modest reformism and physically violent activity, at different moments in time, location and circumstance.

Another common feature is that, curiously, each component functions quite independently and separately. Each group of supporters limit their activity, knowledge, references and contacts to their own chosen field and think of their equivalents in the most stereotyped and crude concepts while fighting much the same struggles. This component-identity or "chauvinism" is truly amazing and is an enormous tribute to the pervasiveness of capitalist ideology, as Karl Marx commented.

They also share another feature – each component reflects within itself political differences with a range of political divisions into sub-groups or parties. Identification with the selected group/

party breeds fierce defence of its particular concepts and organisation and so we see the resulting "chauvinism" where group members argue endlessly with other groups.

This is strongest in Marxist socialist groups and least marked within anarchism. At times, the scene represents almost the caricature of warring subterranean creatures. Needless to say, such divisions neglect the fight against the real enemy, capitalism.

There have been sporadic attempts to link the two main components:

- Joseph Dietzgen's turn to assist the victims of the Haymarket "bomb" conspiracy in 1886, despite a lifetime of association with Marx and the anger of Engels.<sup>21</sup>
- Daniel Guerin's anarchist publications, some of which are mentioned above, and years of work building bridges, post-1960.
- The German council communists' attempts to construct a theory from the two sources from 1920, from an impeccable Leninist background.
- The Friends of Durruti Group's attempt to salvage some reconstruction of revolutionary organisation from the looming defeat of anarchism by the counter-revolutionary Stalinists and Franco's fascists in the Spanish civil war, 1936-39.<sup>22</sup>

But these are a few exceptions, and the barriers of division are continually being erected with scares, smears and misinformation. If we are to even think of winning the common struggle, some unity will have to be reached and the truth about past events, beyond Marx and Bakunin, both clarified and placed firmly in the history books.

#### Notes

- 1. P.J. Proudhon, *The General Idea of the Revolution* (1989), introduction by Robert Graham, pp.xi, xx. 2. Daniel Guerin, *Anarchism From Theory to Practice* (1970) p.46. An excellent introductory account by an ex-Marxist who attempts to relate the two ideologies and provides a comprehensive introduction to Russian, Italian and Spanish council movements.
- 3. Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism* (1938) pp.71-8 (Pluto Classic edition, 1989). This book is a concise, constructive political summary of the role of anarcho-syndicalism in the labour and political movements but, though highly recommended, it has no serious analysis of the politics of Marxism on this issue.
- 4. Max Nettlau, *The Anarchism of Proudhon and Bakunin*, in Rocker, p.77.
- 5. See below p.7.
- 6. James Guillaume, *Ideas on Social Organisation* (1876) reprinted in Daniel Guerin, ed, *No Gods, No Masters An Anthology of Anarchism* (1998), in two

vols, translated by Paul Sharkey, Vol.1, pp.208-26.

- 7. See Guerin (1970), pp.17-20.
- 8. Guerin (1970), p.19
- 9. John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Deep The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist* (1988) pp.192-7.
- 10. Peter Berresford Ellis, *A History of the Irish Working Class* (1985) for the general picture.
- 11. A.Y. Badayev *Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma* (1987). Be sure to read the introduction by T. Cliff. 12. Leon Trotsky, *Fascism, Stalinism and the United Front* (1989).
- 13. See Sam Dolgoff, ed, *The Anarchist Collectives Workers' Self-Management in the Spanish Revolution* 1936-1939 (1990); or Gaston Laval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (1975), written by an experienced anarcho-syndicalist but lacking a real analysis of the political dimension
- 14. For the less well known but extensive Ukrainian collectives, see Voline, *The Unknown Revolution*, 1917-21 (1990).
- 15. Letter to the Brussels newspaper *La Liberté* in October 1872, quoted in Guerin.
- 16. From the Programme of the International Brother-

hood, pp.2-3, quoted in Guerin p.154.

17. Guerin, pp.167-80

18. Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control*, 1917-21 (1970), a key book on 1917 revolution, which demolishes the idea that Lenin was for workers' power. Fully annotated, and there has been no reply from the Leninists.

- 19. For the best overall statement, though not without flaws, see Anton Pannekoek, *Workers' Councils* (2002). Ignore the accompanying material in the book as presently published which is irrelevant.
- 20. See Herman Gorter, *An Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* (1999) for early council communist reply to Lenin's attack on his opponents in *Left-Wing Communism*. Still in print today, and contains the basic council socialist arguments.
- 21. See an account of the event and the eight hour day strike see Jeremy Brecher, *Strike!* (1972), an anarchist history of US strikes. Read the updated 1999 version if possible.
- 22. Agustin Guillamón, *The Friends of Durruti Group:* 1937-1939 (1996), and Abel Paz, *Durruti, the People Armed* (1976).

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