

Report on 7th Annual “East – West” meeting of anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary anarchists

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I attended conference as an delegate of Finnish Anarchist Federation (SAL). I'm also member of Finnish syndicalist organisation Solidaarisuus. Organiser of the conference was local AIT-branch FSA, which is operating in both parts of former Czech Republic. Among other participators were delegates from CRAS-AIT (Russia), CNT-AIT (France), FIJL (Spain), WSA-AIT (USA), Brousse collective (Belgium), FAB (Byelorussia), FAK (Russia, Cuban area), Lipetsk free student union (Russia) and some other organisations and individuals which I unfortunately forgot, for example from Ukraine, Germany and Latvia.

I arrived conference Thursday 27th, thus I missed discussions of day before. On Thursday, program was decided to have four parts:

- 1) Reports on social and political situation of countries of delegates present
- 2) Reports Situation of anarchist movements of delegates present
- 3) Reports on fascist/ultra right activities in Eastern Europe
- 4) Concrete proposals of common activities

Before starting program FSA-people said a word about present situation of East-West network and their aims on the conference. East-West meeting of year before was a complete disaster, no western comrades participated to the conference of Lvov, Ukraine. They stressed the importance to support eastern movements, and the large possibilities of anarchist activities in the worsening social situation in the Eastern Europe. They were disappointed of 6-year history of "conference-solidarity" and were demanding concrete common work instead of empty rhetorics year after year. Thus, as their view, restructuring of East-West network was needed.

POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SITUATION IN EASTERN EUROPE

Russia

Recent economical crisis was just starting during the conference, but situation before was not good either. Actually, talking of "new crisis" is far from truth because changes to live a decent life have been continuously diminishing around all the other Russia than the central cities during last 10 years. Crisis doesn't mean a lot to people who haven't been able to buy any product from shops in many years.

Atomization of the society has prevented peoples from finding collective means of surviving during continuous catastrophe. Neo-liberal thinking is mainstream in Russia as well, people don't trust government but they neither trust each other.

Byelorussia

Byelorussia has taken a lots of steps back to the totalitarian times, but social situation is worse than in "old times". Pensions are around 7–12\$/month, average salary is 50\$/month. Politics of Lukashenko have guaranteed safer jobs, but ones sacked for political reasons can ever have a new job. This is why strikes are very seldom seen, last struggle was one of Minsk metro 1995 — every worker was sacked, and been drop-out since then.

All the opposition has been allied against Lukashenko — nationalists might guard outside during meetings of radical left! Sentences to political activists are harsh, recently two youngsters got 2 and 3 years of prison because of writing anti-Lukashenko tags! Participators of illegal meetings

get huge fines (100\$) if caught by police, whom Lukashenko has hired 150 000. State officials earn their salary by smuggling products to and from Russia.

Ukraine

Any political activities are possible in Ukraine as long as they don't disturb money-earning of Ukrainian government. When anarchist attacked stealing of the EBRD funds, government replied with harsh repression (some weeks after the conference I heard that secret police had twice destroyed the house of one activist and stolen all her valuable or other important property).

Economical imbalance has led to growing of paramilitias and violent street gangs. Later ones use to rule parts of the big cities and randomly kill "aliens" from other parts.

Miners of the Donbass-area organised a large protest action during spring and marched to Kiev, but government managed to use "divide and rule"-strategy against the miners.

The anarchist present were actively cooperating with Rainbow Keepers, radical ecologist movement which is operating in large areas of former Soviet union but which has lately suffered of internal fighting. Greens of Ukraine have been successful in the areas of RK activity, but they have betrayed all their promises, and they haven't got any link to RK. Ukrainian anarchists present at the meeting received strong critique from others when they told some local groups had supported communists in last elections, claiming that it was the "only oppositional force defending the people".

Slovakia

Forthcoming elections shaped political situation of Slovakia. Government has lately increased social benefits over a line they can't hold just for the elections. Every Slovakian party is far-right, even Hungarian minority has own right-wing movement.

Czech Republic

Situation in Czech Republic is better than in many other countries of Eastern Europe. Still since 1990, costs of living have increased by 500% while salaries have only raised 200–300%. 25% of the people are living under minimum, 90\$ a month. Unemployment rate is about 6%, many are working part-time. Mass sackings are reality of today, railways sacked 40 000 last year and 15 000 this year. 11 hospitals have been closed down since 1989, queue for any operation is about 6 months at least. Billiards in local currency have been stolen by rich in insurance business. Czech economy is completely dependent on decreasing tourist industry.

Latvia

Situation in Latvia is not as bad as in other parts of former Soviet Union, but it's getting worse all the time. Latvian economy is completely dependent on Russian transit, and Russia tries to crush Latvian economy for political reasons.

Spain

During last years of right-wing governance, privatization and increasing labor flexibility has been the word. Unemployment benefits have been cut 50%. Most the new jobs are part-time, one man made a sad record with 14 different jobs a month. Most of the people have been managed to stay in the middle class anyway.

France

Pushing around of unemployed people is not so much a problem in France than it's in the other EU countries, although benefits aren't high enough allowing people to stay on them. Recent 35 hour reform has been complete betrayal of working class, because the new legal definition of weekly worktime will be average of the year — bosses can choose the working hours and length of the day as they want. CNT-AIT of France has made a pamphlet on recent reform, and it's the only union opposing this reform, others try to claim that they have been successful negotiators.

Finland

There is 5-party government in Finland — the most right-wing party, Coalition is in the government happy together with most left-wing party, Left alliance. Other government parties are Swedish party and Greens, biggest one is Social Democratic party.

During right wing government before 1995 labour movement was organising large protests against budget cuts, since then the policy has been continued but no protests have been organised by official unions. Institutionalized labor movement has traditionally been very strong in Finland, right now 74% of the workers are members of the unions. But bureaucratic and authoritarian unions are weak against the global trend of smashing the working class. Finnish economy is depending on paper, metals and high-tech electronics such as Nokia, all these sectors have been oligopolized and huge companies are moving their production to south.

Official unemployment rate is 13%, but because rating criteria has changed maybe 5 times since 1990 and every time rate has decreased, you can't really say how many are without work. Pushing of unemployed is government way in Finland, after 6 months on benefit you have to accept filthiest work or go to education.

(I didn't write down about situation of USA or Germany, because that was nothing new for me. E-mail of every internet activist is full of US stuff every day.)

SITUATION OF ANARCHIST MOVEMENTS

Russia

During last 10 years Russian movement has suffered many splits. Main actors now are CRAS-AIT and KAS, Rainbow Keepers and ADA. Russians thought right now these 4 organisations haven't got serious conflicts between each other. Another story is organisations claiming to be anarchist but have nothing to do with it. Difference of CRAS-AIT and KAS is that CRAS-AIT follows AIT's guidelines but KAS is also influenced by IWW and Swedish SAC. Nowadays KAS has only groups in Siberia, two organizations are active in different geographic areas and have fairly good relations.

Rainbow Keepers have recently splitted. Movement is difficult to categorize, every people ever attended actions is considered as member and only a few of activists has a theoretical approach. Social ecologists would be fairly good label for them. RK wasn't invited to conference.

ADA works as an all-anarchist federation, the only official structure is annual conference. All the kinds of anarchists, some strange such as anarcho-capitalists.

CRAS-members present were participating demonstrations and distributing their magazine. KAS is more able to work as an union in their areas, providing legal aid to their members and so on.

Kubanians are active in anti-fascism, feminism, ecology and counter-culture. The city of Lipetsk and all Kuban is in so-called "red belt", where both bolsheviks and nazis have big popular support. FAK is participating to actions of RK.

Byelorussia

Byelorussians present were active in ecology, anti-fascism and counterculture. Their group is a local group of FAB, but they criticized FAB and considered it too passive organisation. Group had contacts and actives in different trade unions and student activists. Unlike many parts of ex-USSR, fascism is not very popular in Byelorussia.

Official propaganda hasn't (yet?) focused a lot in fighting against anarchists.

Ukraine

Ukrainian anarchist groups are highly autonomous — not because ideological reasons but because they have serious financial problems in achieving means of communication. Ukrainians present (I forget the group — guess it was AFEU or ARG) had bad relations with RKAS, although RKAS has decent relations with RK in general. Ukrainians have been active in work against Lukashenko and EBRD (European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, big player in Ukrainian economy along with IMF and World Bank).

Slovakia

Interesting organisations in Slovakia are FSA and anti-fascist organisation Free Alternative, which is relatively weak. A separate Slovakian Anarchist Federation was founded some years ago, but it hasn't been very successful in organising, and nowadays it works together with FSA.

Czech Republic

Recent history of Czech anarchist movement highly influenced the climate of conference and the way it was organised, but I'll save those views to end of this report.

Right now there is 3 anarchist/syndicalist organisations in Czech republic. I understood FSA, Federation of Social Anarchists, organization hosting the conference was founded 1992, was a part of Czechoslovakian Anarchist Federation CSAF until 1996 and splitted then. FSA is AIT affiliate.

FSA describes its way of organising as "FORA-model", not as pure anarcho-syndicalist organisation, views of Friends of Durruti were also popular in FSA. Organisation is publishing two papers, more theoretical "Free labour" and free "Voice of direct action", which have been distributed

to workplaces through a network of workers around the country. Books have been published as well, such as later Bookchin, mostly to Czech language but also something to Slovakian. During the seminar there was one political prisoner at Czech Republic, Vaclav Jez jailed for self-defence against neonazis.

Split of CSAF was mentioned as a great success, because organisation was practically incapable to any activity due to interior schisms which resulted splitting. Critique against CSAF is a version of lifestyle vs. social anarchism debate with flavor of personal and strategical disagreements. CSAF was accused for concentrating on non-creative, countercultural activity, opposing necessary radical means of anti-fascist work and cooperating with officials in anti-fascist activity.

Main activities of CSAF include squatting houses in Prague and organising Street parties, "Counterstream", eco-anarchist group inside CSAF has worked f.e. for closing Czech and Slovakian NPP's. Counterstream is also a part of Rainbow Keepers network. CSAF has connections to Swedish SAC and CNT-Vignolles.

Solidarita is a small group which left CSAF few years ago. According to FSA, it is inspired from SAC, Spanish CGT and French OCL.

Spain

CNT-E has more than 2000 members, more than 100 syndicates of which most are illegal. Women's organisation Mujeres Libres has at least 3 active groups, and hosts a school at Madrid. FIJL, Federaci n Ib rica de Juventudes Libertarias — a sort of youth organisation of FAI although not officially connected — has 22 locals, each with 3–6 groups in which 2–5 actives. Only anarchists are allowed to join FIJL, magazine Jake Libertario is printed with 1000 copies. In Spain there exist a division of labor, every organisation has its own field of activity. Only FIJL activists were present, and they only spoke on behalf of their own organisation.

There is some autonomist groups such as "Anarchist Evolutionary Collective", there is no problem with these people, FIJL aims to a sort of "positive" competition with these groups, such as organising better seminars, demonstrations and parties than others but not criticizing activities of others. Radical ecological ideas aren't very familiar, one group exists which sometimes writes articles to magazine of CNT-E.

CGT was criticized for bureaucracy, close ties to political parties, and allowing police syndicate to work in the same bureau at Barcelona.

France

CNT-AIT has 25 local groups. Groups are quite independent, some consist workers, some students. Main work is distribution of propaganda. CNT-AIT allows members of other unions to join.

French FA was labelled "centrist", it is not very tight organization. In some cities relations between CNT-AIT and FA are more, in some less warm. Movement of unemployed has been quite strong lately, mainly organised by institutionalized unions but lots of libertarians are present in the grassroots. Zapatista-solidarity was popular some years ago.

Finland

Finnish Anarchist Federation SAL has 10 locals on paper, in practice organization is distro and membership paper, membership is around 150 making it one of the biggest existing anarchist organizations compared to size of population. Most groups are working in networks built around few special questions, such as local environmental struggles and Shell-boycot campaigning, also involving non-anarchists.

Finnish anarchists are regularly imprisoned for refusing to participate any form of military service, standard sentence 197 days is usually served in open prisons, wich comrades from East would rather call hostels.

Other anarchist groups are anarcha-feminist league Peppi working mostly at Helsinki and student groups at few cities.

Solidaarisuus is Finnish syndicalist organisation, non-anarchists are welcomed as well if they keep party politics outside. (Later note: a referendum to join IWW has been passed to january 1999). Solidaarisuus has 60 members, active locals at three cities. Common activities are Food not Bombs-actions and demonstrations inside Finnish welfare institutions. Workplace-organising is a goal but seldom done, Finnish workplaces without existing unions are ones very difficult to organise — such as places where one worker stays about one week.

Radical animal liberation and other radical environmental movement has been a dominating part of Finnish “alternative movement” during last years, it has very problematic public image due to massive sabotage wich has resulted damages of more than 5 million \$ to fur farms for example. Maybe half of the animal liberators identify themselves as anarchists.

FASCISM AND ANTI-FASCISM

Czech Republic

There is around 800 hammerskins at Czech Republic, 2000 applied membership. Registered Patriotic Front has 500 members, organisation has ties to Combat 18 and Blood and Honour. Ultra right has dropped from parliament wich makes it a worse problem, now they can distribute freely more hardline propaganda. Ultra-right Republican party has about 80 000 members.

One of the main reasons of CSAF split was disagreement with anti-fascist strategies, small Czechian AFA beat heavily 45 nazis during first months of it's existence — FSA doesn't organise such activities nor opposes them, but CSAF critisized heavily such strategies. Some CSAF activist have worked at moderate organisation called HOST, wich collects information about ultra-right and gives it to officials.

Russia

Situation is really alarming, hundreds of ultra-right groups have been emerging since the beginning of eighties, most dangerous group is Russian National Unity with 2000–20 000 activists and one million supporters. Magazine of organization has a distribution of one million copies.

Organization is dangerous because of it's clever strategy to avoid forms of activity wich result bad media, violent actions are committed relatively seldom, exception being attacks against Caucasians and other people with “wrong outlook” at marketplaces.

Many of the members have right to carry firearms, and organization has a good business of offering guarding and ticket-control services for collective traffic. RNL and RNP are more hardline fractions splitted from RNU “because RNU receives money from jewish politicians and bankers”.

Strange neonazist group is Russian Nationalist Bolshevist party, it’s a fraction of European liberation front based in Belgium. They write articles about Makhno, Guevara, Lenin... flag is black shackle and hammer in white circle on red background.

Zhirinovski is not a real threat, his party ever opposed Jeltsin at Duma elections.

United network branch of Russia, Moscow AFA, considers left as dangerous as right, politically it’s near Jabloko party and defends Pinochet, Franco, market economy and Social Darwinism.

Another anti-fascist group is Left Anti-Fascist Resistance, mainly Militant-section Trots. CRAS comrades have bad relations with these folks.

Among strange Russian phenomenas is also group called Revolutionary Militant Council wich made some symbolical bombings of old statues in Moscow, one guy was arrested and anarchist renegade, fascist Kostchenko and Komsomol are raising lots of money riding with his martyrdom.

Slovakia

Nationalism is common with all the parties. “Motherhood of Slovakia” is a fascist propaganda organization, officially “cultural heritage organization” with close ties to many political parties. Roman catholic church is among promoters of heritage of first Slovakian state, fascist satellite dictatorship of nazi Germany during WW II. Neonazis are publishing hate-records through official state institutions, in newspapers you can read advertisement decorated with svastikas. Although nazis are visible part of everyday living, fortunately they are not very united.

France

There is not a succesful nazi party at France. CNT-AIT representatives thought that FN is not a real threat compared to threat of working with social democrats for anti-fascist aims. FN is more useful to state than a threat to it.

Finland

Although culturally Finland is a sort of Idaho or Texas of Europe, fashs haven’t had any support at elections since WW II. Only 0.1% of Finns have different skin color, to them racism is common phenomena. Street violence is a threat at some smaller cities. Most of moderate Antifa-groups have ceased to exist, more radical activity is very seldom.

USA

Various ultra-right groups from militias, opposers of Spanish education and Ku-Klux Klan to Wise-Use groups, pro-lifers and Christian Coalition jerks. Anyway, fascists at the governement are the worst ones after all.

Anti-fascist groups are for example organising counter-demonstration, protecting abortion clinics and monitoring police violence.

RESOLUTIONS

Role of existing East-West network structure was put in question, 6 former meetings have resulted almost nothing. Comrades from East analyzed this was due to looseness of the network. Comrades of the East laid their hopes on bringing international solidarity more tighter to IWA agenda and practice. This discussion was tightly around IWA business, only few representatives were anymore around from non-IWA sections. I warned about making East-West Network just inside IWA-business, I was replied that non-IWA sections are warmly welcomed if they share some common ideological points. I guess it's up to organisers to decide who to invite and who not, not a problem to me.

The resolution of conference was just a draft when I left, I never received it for to add my name. Guess it was mainly aimed to IWA bureau, asking for more help to Eastern comrades in difficult economic situation.

Some personal notes on conference and situation of Czech Republic

Almost all delegates from other Eastern groups than FSA or CRAS left the conference one by one. Prague has become some kind of center of revolutionary tourism from X-USSR countries, cheap enough and not too big language barrier. Thus conference was not their main ambition for visiting Prague, and if they felt themselves not welcomed after minor disputes about cooperation with communists or promoting legalization of marihuana, they had a small treshold for walking out from the conference. I think it should have been avoided, but everyone has a change to choice with whom to cooperate. One reason was that these people had good relations with CSAF, and were impressed for their way of their organizing such as squatting — thus they didn't like the way FSA's were talking about CSAF.

Some of their criticism against CSAF made sense, such as criticizing cooperation with officials in anti-fascist activities, some comments on enviromental activities as "neolithism" sounded like a wise use crap. I think the very backround of FSA's splitting from CSAF was an attempt to get out from the subculture, wich I think is the main task for anarchist movement nowadays. FSA selected quite radical way to do this, I wish them luck in their path. I met CSAF activists during one evening after the conference, and I hear their counterarguments against some FSA claims.

Important: Views presented here are mine, they are not views of other people participated. For official resolution of the conference, please do contact FSA-AIT, I ever received the resolution of the conference for undersigning. Feel free to redistribute this report.

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