

After Winter Must Come Spring

**A Self-Critical Analysis of the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist
Federation**

Former Members of Fire by Night Organizing Committee

2000

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On May 23, 1998 the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation dissolved. Several days later, after a series of meetings, a number of its former members launched the Fire by Night Organizing Committee. In this pamphlet, we try to evaluate our experiences with Love and Rage. We hope to draw lessons from our experience that will help us move forward in our continued struggle for social justice and freedom. The first part of this pamphlet relates to the history of Love and Rage: its origins, its course of development, and the events leading up to its final dissolution. The second part examines both the accomplishments and the failures of Love and Rage and looks for their roots in our theory and methods of work. The final section begins to address our vision of a reinvigorated revolutionary movement in the United States, and how we see Fire by Night contributing to its construction. Over the years, many Love and Rage members pointed out the weaknesses that are acknowledged here, but were not listened to. Some of them left the organization out of frustration. Others stuck it out to the end. Some of them are part of Fire by Night, while others are not. This pamphlet is dedicated to all of those people who struggled to make Love and Rage the organization it should have been, but never was.

Part I: A Brief History

Love and Rage was founded as a “continental revolutionary anarchist newsmonthly” with a section in Spanish, at a conference in Chicago in November 1989. The roughly 75 people who founded Love and Rage included several representatives of anarchist collectives from across the United States and Canada, a number of individual anarchist activists, and about 20 former members of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL), a small Trotskyist group that had turned towards anarchism in the late 1980s. The prospects for building a revolutionary anarchist organization in North America looked particularly bright. During the 1980s, a vibrant anarchist movement composed mainly of small collectives and affinity groups had sprouted and established itself as a radical and militant voice within a number of larger social movements. From nuclear disarmament to South African and Central American solidarity to ACT UP to campus organizing, anarchists played an important role, pushing for democracy in these movements and for direct action in the streets. At the same time, the traditional Marxist left was in a state of advanced decomposition. The Tiananmen Square massacre, the collapse of the Soviet empire, and the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas all suggested the irrelevance of the old Marxist left and the importance of anti-authoritarianism to any revived movement. Increased activity in the social movements suggested space for a new force — a serious and dedicated revolutionary anarchist organization — that could consolidate the scattered anarchist groups and individuals to deepen their impact on the tone and character of this upsurge. Love and Rage was the only revolutionary organization of national scope founded in this period whose creators didn’t come out of the upsurge of the 1960s and 70s. With the exception of the ex-RSL members, we had little or no experience trying to build a serious revolutionary organization. Despite this fact (or because of it), we were very optimistic about our new project. This optimism allowed us to accomplish things that many predicted we wouldn’t, but it also led to a number of the mistakes that would ultimately spell the demise of Love and Rage eight years later.

From Newspaper to Network

From the beginning, most people involved in Love and Rage saw the newspaper as a vehicle to build a continental organization, or at least a firmer infrastructure for a revolutionary anarchist movement. By building the structure necessary to write, produce and distribute a genuinely continental newspaper, we were putting in place the basic elements of an organization. We used the newspaper to build anarchist participation in the Earth Day 20th anniversary actions being organized by the Left Greens and the Youth Greens in the spring of 1990. During the Gulf War, Love and Rage issued a call for an anarchist contingent to a March on Washington that broke away from the main demonstration and carried out an attack on World Bank headquarters. The Gulf War marked an important turning point for radical politics in the US. While opposition to the war was massive, it proved unable to put a brake on the wholesale slaughter of at least 100,000 Iraqis by US-led forces or even register much on American national consciousness. Ironically, the lull in

activity following the war contributed to the growth of Love and Rage as many smaller anarchist projects fell apart and their members looked for something to grab onto. After a year and a half of monthly publication and intense participation in the Earth Day and Gulf War work, supporters of the newspaper held our second conference in the summer of 1991 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There we formally constituted ourselves as the Love and Rage Network. The Network took on two ill-fated organizing projects for 1992 that led to crisis a year down the line. One campaign advocated a boycott of the 1992 Presidential elections. The other, an Anti-Racist Summer Project targeted a working-class white neighborhood in East St. Paul, Minnesota where nazi skinheads and the KKK were actively organizing. The boycott campaign fizzled because Love and Rage was unable to build a strong and broad enough coalition. The Anti-Racist Summer Project, organized in conjunction with Twin Cities Anti-Racist Action (ARA), relocated activists from across the US and Canada to East St. Paul for the summer to work full time building a community-based anti-racist bulkhead there. But the plan of action was unclear and more time was spent wrangling with internal dynamics than in any sort of effective organizing against the white supremacists.

From Network to Organization

The failure of both our projects in 1992 brought on a crisis and some soul-searching. Two main perspectives emerged. One held that Love and Rage was too centralized and concentrated too much of its energy on building an organizational structure at the expense of building up strong local collectives. The opposing perspective stressed the maintenance and strengthening of a continental organization, united around a common politics and committed to developing and carrying out a common strategy. Folks in this camp proposed that we define membership in the organization, draft a set of bylaws, write a political statement, and concentrate our work in two or three key areas. This conflict came to a head at Love and Rage's 1993 conference in San Diego. The organization-minded camp won out and we changed our name to the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation.

Amor y Rabia

In 1992, our Mexican comrades established a local in Mexico City. They began publishing a Spanish-language edition of the newspaper, Amor y Rabia, a year later. With this development, the US-based newspaper eliminated its Spanish section and started distributing the Mexican Amor y Rabia to our Spanish-language readership. The Mexican and US/Canadian sections of the organization began working more closely together after the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) launched their uprising on January 1, 1994 in the state of Chiapas. We promptly recognized that the politics of the EZLN were distinct from those of previous national liberation movements in ways that were important to anti-authoritarians. Amor y Rabia and Love and Rage became important early sources of information about the Zapatista. We sought to provide direct material aid to the Zapatistas in a variety of forms. The most significant was the creation of the Martyrs of Chicago Direct Solidarity Encampment sponsored by Amor y Rabia for 14 months in the Zapatista community of Santa Rosa El Copal. The Martyrs of Chicago Encampment brought forth a number of internal contradictions in Amor y Rabia that ultimately led to its disintegration as an organization.

The Search for a Strategy

From the beginning, Love and Rage lacked unity on any sort of overarching strategy for anarchist revolution in North America. Instead we had what was sometimes called “a strategy for a strategy.” Since we didn’t have the critical mass of people or experience to really articulate a coherent strategy, the argument went, we should instead work on getting enough anarchist activists together around certain elementary points of unity and areas of activity so that the discussion of strategy could really begin. This may have worked had the momentum of 1989 held out. But a revolutionary organization cannot be built on the basis of waiting for objective conditions to propel things forward. It must have a plan of action, no matter how modest. The most important step we took towards developing a strategy was to set up working groups. Working groups were meant to concentrate our activism in two or three areas so that we might have a greater impact. In practice, our selection of areas of work only ratified the choices members had already made as individuals. In the summer of 1995 the New York City local made a collective decision to concentrate our organizing work in the student movement at the City University of New York. Love and Rage members had played leadership roles in the movement against tuition hikes and budget cuts that spring, which had culminated in a demonstration of about 25,000 young people, mostly Black and Latino and many of them high school students. The CUNY student movement was our most successful break with the mainly-white anarchist scene and it gave us a much fuller understanding of how white skin privilege works to divide white radicals from the struggles of people of color. The members involved often found themselves challenged politically by the radical activists of color who were their closest comrades in the student movement. Questions came up that were difficult for anarchists to answer. For example, Love and Rage members had argued against getting a police permit for a march on Wall Street on March 23, 1995. Although students fought back bravely and militantly against the police, they had not been seasoned by years of radical street actions as most anarchists had been. 3,000 police prevented the march of 25,000 college and high school students from leaving City Hall by brutally beating, macing and arresting students, many of whom were at their first demonstration. The student movement found itself unable to draw significant numbers to any event for years afterward. It became clearer to most activist members of the New York Love and Rage local that we needed to develop a strategy, one that would not rely on radical tactics alone, one that we could plan out and test in practice collectively.

The Debate

The debates that led to the dissolution of Love and Rage have echoes going back to the founding of the organization. But the last chapter in the conflict began essentially with the publication of an essay called “The Historical Failure of Anarchism.” The paper argued that the anarchist movement had failed to adequately confront its historical defeats, particularly in the Spanish Revolution, and so anarchism had become theoretically impoverished. It called on anarchists to re-examine certain assumptions and tenets, and to look at the experiences of non-anarchist revolutions in the 20th century for both positive and negative lessons. Most provocatively, it argued that the exclusive reliance on militias by anarchists in Spain had been a military disaster, and upheld the position of the Friends of Durrutti who had called for the formation of a revolutionary army. While this essay was not intended as an attempt to outline a strategic orientation for Love and

Rage, it quickly became the object of heated polemics that overshadowed the efforts to talk about a strategy for the organization. Two former members of the RSL wrote attacks on the essay that suggested that it was the first step down the slippery slope towards Stalinism. Many other members took issue with the essay as well. At this point, several members of the New York local sought to redirect the debate towards questions of organizing method, drawing variously on Paolo Friere's theories of pedagogy, Mao Ze Dong's theory of "Mass Line," and the Zapatistas' notion of "Mandar Obedeciendo" (leading by obeying). These members saw reflection on our own organizing as a necessary component of developing an effective revolutionary strategy. The ex-RSL members and several others attacked this organizing approach promoted by the New York members as reformist, and as a tailing after the lowest common denominator politics of the masses. Several ex-RSLers argued instead for the development of an "Anarchist Transitional Program" (presumably similar to the Transitional Program of the Trotskyists). This would be a program of demands, such as calling for a general strike, that anarchists should fight for in the course of reform struggles and would supposedly lead those struggles towards revolutionary conclusions. The debate over organizing method exposed how little anarchist theory has to say on the question. The main theoretical concepts on both sides of this debate were taken from outside anarchism, though some tried to dress them up with examples from anarchist history or calls to "read Malatesta."

The Breakup

While many members of Love and Rage agreed and disagreed with both sides on various debates, two distinct camps eventually emerged. Those caught in the middle never coalesced into a distinct tendency of their own and found themselves forced to either choose sides or watch from the sidelines. In the Fall of 1997, 13 members signed a factional document called "What We Believe," written by several ex-RSL members, which drew final lines in the debate. WWB laid out a list of principles it argued had been questioned by the writings or actions of other unnamed members. Much of WWB reiterated basic tenets of anarchism which were generally accepted by everyone in Love and Rage. However, on some key points WWB was quite contentious. The first was a statement that all of the theoretical weaknesses of anarchism could be answered from "within anarchism." This singled out for attack those members who wanted Love and Rage to develop new living theory with influences from Marxism, feminism, revolutionary nationalism and elsewhere. The second point of debate centered on the question of the system of white skin privileges. WWB stated that white workers have only "petty and apparent" privileges over workers of color. It dismissed the idea that whites get very real material benefits from the racist system we live under, benefits which have blocked their effective participation in revolutionary struggles. Finally, WWB called for building democratic mass movements even though many of the signatories had not been involved in any mass work whatsoever for years. WWB forced everybody in Love and Rage to take sides by proclaiming that anybody who did not accept the document's principles had no place in the organization. Many members of the organization felt either that the document did not address issues crucial to Love and Rage's progress or that it was trying to force us to take a fighting stance on positions before we had had a thorough debate. WWB appeared when the organization was in a profound crisis, and it deepened that crisis. The Minneapolis local had ceased to function after three key members relocated to other cities. The New York local was paralyzed by the debates that had been taking place in the organization

and stopped meeting after the summer of 1997. The Michigan-based Coordinating Committee elected at the March 1997 conference never met, with the result that no decisions could be made on the Federation level. Finally, a Federation conference was scheduled for May 1998 despite the complete non-functioning of all decision-making bodies. It was clear by this time that the organization was going to split. The only question was how ugly it would get and if anything was going to come out of it. Love and Rage's last conference took place on May 23, 1998 at Hunter College in New York City. The conference was mercifully brief and largely civil. The folks assembled presented their various projects and voted to dissolve the organization. Civility broke down only when we discussed a division of the resources. It became clear that the debts of the organization were greater than any resources and that the WWB faction had no intention of paying their share. Before the conference degenerated any further it was adjourned. Following the conference, a number of non-WWB-ers met in the Love and Rage office and founded the Fire by Night Organizing Committee.

Part 2: Accomplishments and Mistakes

Our Accomplishments

The breakup of Love and Rage was demoralizing for many members. It is therefore important to make a critical analysis that acknowledges the real successes of the organization. Love and Rage was probably the most significant explicitly revolutionary anarchist organization in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century in terms of participation in mass struggles and in its influence on discussions within the anarchist movement and the broader left. Love and Rage was for the most part an organization of activists who participated in broader struggles. We played an important role in building a militant and anti-authoritarian wing within the movement against the US war in the Persian Gulf. We consistently promoted the causes of political prisoners in the pages of the newspapers and our members did important work for prison solidarity in general, and in the defense of the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal in particular. Love and Rage played important roles in the fight against Operation Rescue, in building Anti-Racist Action (ARA), in building solidarity with the Zapatistas, in the struggle against cutbacks and in defense of open admissions at CUNY, and in local struggles for welfare rights and for a living wage. In our work building Anti-Racist Action, Love and Rage members were committed to breaking out of the confines of the while male-dominated punk scene the movement started from. In Minneapolis, Love and Rage activists helped build an ARA group led by young women, and in Detroit, they helped build an ARA group that was mostly people of color. The most significant single accomplishment of Love and Rage was probably the continuous publication of the English- and Spanish-language newspapers, which were the most reliably published anarchist periodicals in the US and Mexico in the 1990s. They were a source of international news that was otherwise largely unavailable in North America. For overseas readers, they were a consistent source of news about social struggles in the US and Mexico. The newspaper never simply rehashed a “line,” but published articles from a variety of anti-authoritarian perspectives. We also published criticisms about ourselves even if we thought they lacked merit, and refused to publish attacks on other anarchist projects even when this policy was not reciprocated. As a result, Love and Rage was a very non-sectarian newspaper despite the controversies that continued to circle around the organization. Love and Rage fought for the development of a critical anti-authoritarian analysis of white supremacy rooted in the particular historical experience of North American society. We also struggled against the then-dominant position within the anarchist movement that crudely equated all nationalisms, whether imperialist forms of nationalism or anti-imperialist national liberation struggles. Love and Rage covered the struggles for reproductive freedom, against sexual violence, for a just response to the AIDS epidemic, and for queer liberation. We promoted the development of a radical movement for women’s self-defense and empowerment. We sought to focus attention on the struggles of poor and working-class women and women of color. Over the years, we helped carve out significantly larger space for these politics within the anarchist movement. This space was filled by new groups and projects, many of whom had little aware-

ness of how recently these politics had been treated with complete hostility within the anarchist movement. Love and Rage developed an internal structure and a set of processes for debate and discussion that were a dramatic improvement on the practices of the larger anarchist movement. Love and Rage used a “modified consensus” method of decision-making that sought consensus but used majority votes to settle unresolvable issues. We tried to incorporate elements of feminist process developed by the women’s liberation movement into our decision-making process as well. While these processes functioned imperfectly, they moved us toward a real democratic internal life as an organization.

Our Mistakes

Along the way, Love and Rage made some real if modest contributions to the development of revolutionary theory and practice in a very difficult period. But the fact remains that we failed to build the kind of organization we were convinced was necessary to bring about the kind of revolutionary change we still see as a condition for real human freedom. It is tempting to blame this failure on the times, or to blame it on this individual or that group of people within the organization. But revolutionary organizations must be able to survive hard times and to deal with the inevitable limitations of the people who make them up. The failure to meet such challenges is fundamentally a political failure which must have its roots in the theory and practice of the organization.

Step by Step

One mistake made by some of the founders of Love and Rage was to think that people would, in a step-by-step fashion, come to see the necessity of the various component parts of a serious revolutionary organization. Some of the original proponents of the newspaper wanted to build a tighter organization from the start. Although they knew that others disagreed with them, they thought that people could struggle through differences over the ultimate vision as we went along, instead of splitting to work on separate projects. The main reason behind this error was that the anarchist tradition in which we placed ourselves had little historical experience and practically no serious theory for building the kind of organization we were trying to build. Some of our most basic ideas about our own project can be found in the Leninist tradition of which we were (and still are) critical. Many of these ideas are common sense features of any serious revolutionary organization: basic security precautions, the need for unity in theory and action, and a developed analysis of imperialism. Rather than honestly acknowledge a debt to Leninism, these members sought to restate the case for each of these elements within an anarchist framework and in reference to the historical experiences of the anarchist movement. We were convinced that we could redefine anarchism in a step-by-step manner as the success of each step pointed to the necessity of the next. The step-by-step approach worked to a degree. The newspaper became the basis for the Network, which led to the Federation. But many people were recruited to Love and Rage on the basis of what it was, because we weren’t clear enough about what we wanted it to become. Some of these people would be won to the need for the next step, whatever that happened to be, but others tended to oppose it. The process of putting in place the most elementary features of an organization became agonizingly slow and many good people left over the years out of frustration with this glacial pace.

The RSL

From our inception, we deliberately played down the role of the ex-RSLers in Love and Rage. This was a response to the rabid sectarianism of much of the anarchist movement at that time, which led to a wholly distorted account of Love and Rage, portraying it as a creation of, or even a continuation of the RSL. In fact, of the twenty ex-RSLers who started out in Love and Rage, half were gone within a year. Most of the others either became completely inactive or else were barely active in the organization. This was probably linked to the demoralizing experience of dissolving the organization they had spent two decades building. There were several issues, in particular the question of white skin privilege, on which most of the ex-RSLers were at odds with the majority position in the organization. They were able to carve out a certain space for their politics even if they were not putting them into practice through mass work. In this way, they defined a range of debate and a number of “agreements to disagree” that made it harder for the organization to more precisely define its politics. The biggest impact the ex-RSLers made on the politics of Love and Rage was by what they did not do. The ex-RSLers had been part of a common organizational project rooted in the traditions of Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism for two decades, and yet they never made any attempt at a collective critical summation of that experience for the benefit of Love and Rage. This failure contributed to one of the biggest weaknesses in the political culture of Love and Rage, our repeated failure to sum up our experiences and try to draw lessons from them.

The “Iskra Principle”

Lenin used the newspaper Iskra (The Spark) to build a clandestine network of writers, editors and distributors that became the skeleton of the Bolshevik Party in Russia at the turn of the century. Love and Rage was conceived along very similar lines. Ricardo Flores Magon did the same thing with Regeneracion and Malcolm X did it with Muhammad Speaks, but the truth is that the most coherent argument for this strategy was Lenin’s. It was those arguments that had convinced some of us and that we used to convince others. There are important things to be learned from reading Lenin. The importance of having a newspaper is not one of them. Leaving aside the fairly obvious point that a clandestinely-circulated revolutionary newspaper is going to have more of an impact in pre-radio turn-of-the-century Czarist Russia than in the electronic media-saturated late 20th century United States of America, this reliance on a newspaper creates big problems. The Bolsheviks’ single-minded reliance on their press reflected their elitist self-conception as an organization of middle-class intellectual leaders bringing socialist consciousness to the working class. The central place of the newspaper is thus part of what’s wrong with Lenin’s idea of a vanguard party. Organizations built around newspapers tend to be defined less by the practice of their members in actual struggles and more by their line on various questions, a line that springs mainly from the heads of the leadership of the organization rather than from a process of reflection on the struggle as it is actually taking place. This is why the hard-working activists who build up the mass movements despise the groups that place such an emphasis on pushing their newspapers. Love and Rage members shared this contempt for the newspaper pushers and we never really fell into that pattern. Although Love and Rage was not a line newspaper, the central place of the newspaper in the life of Love and Rage had a significant impact. For one, it impeded the development of a common strategic orientation because trying to come to some sort of strat-

egy would inevitably chase off some of the support upon which the broadly-defined newspaper depended. Also, an organization built around a newspaper will tend to attract more aspiring writers and fewer natural organizers, a dynamic which did not help counter our organizational weaknesses.

White Chauvinism

Love and Rage failed to consistently place the struggle against white supremacy at the center of our politics and to confront the inherent contradictions of being such a white organization. Love and Rage always had a few Black or Latino members in the US, but these members rarely played a leadership role in the organization. In terms of its public appearance in the United States and Canada, Love and Rage was for all intents and purposes a white organization. This reflected where we came from. The anarchist movement in the US is overwhelmingly white and closely associated with an overwhelmingly white counter-culture. While Love and Rage members engaged in a great deal of anti-racist work, we tended to treat racism as just one of a number of “issues” that members could choose to work on, rather than the strategically central question confronting revolutionaries in the United States. We thought of our work choices in a moralistic way instead of a strategic way. The purpose of a strategic focus would be to choose a particular struggle based on historical study of which communities have been able to mobilize the most powerful and most seminal movements in US history, not on who deserves to be liberated first. But we were unable to focus strategically and make the best use of our small numbers. Thus when members worked in movements around poverty, women’s liberation and queer liberation, we often did so without a clear strategic conception of how to deal with the question of white supremacy in those areas of work. The questions of our politics on white supremacy and the racial composition of the organization cannot be tidily separated. From the beginning, most — if not all — of us rejected the model of a “white solidarity organization” merely supporting the struggles of people of color. In contrast to this model, we were committed to building a genuinely multi-racial revolutionary anarchist organization. The problem was that without a clear analysis of the nature of white supremacy, the workings of white skin privilege and an organizational strategy for fighting them, the efforts of individual members to build such an organization were often at cross purposes. This problem always bubbled beneath the surface, but it finally erupted around two issues. The first was the decision of individuals to use the newspaper as a forum for heated polemics with Black nationalists. One white member of Love and Rage adopted the posture of a member of the Black community in these arguments. This was dishonest, opportunist and racist, but we had no clear policy to prevent or discipline such practices. The second incident involved the publication of an editorial declaring our commitment to becoming a multi-racial organization. The editorial attempted a compromise after two earlier editorials were rejected for their white chauvinism. We should never have tried to compromise on such issues. This in itself reflected our white chauvinism. Publicly declaring our commitment to becoming a genuinely multi-racial organization without having clarified in advance our analysis of white supremacy and our program for combating it only created the impression that we wanted to darken our ranks to make ourselves feel good, even if this was not the actual attitude of most of the organization. White chauvinism in Love and Rage also took the form of white guilt. We were at various times criticized by people of color both for our failure to systematically reach out to Black folks and for having a colonialist attitude in our efforts to do so. Rather than grapple with the difficult issues

involved, we tended to either accept these criticisms in their totality or to not respond to them. In this way, we not only gave credence to criticisms that were entirely baseless, we undermined our own ability to deal with the valid criticisms of our practice. In effect, we put our personal desires to be validated by people of color ahead of our commitment to understand and fight white supremacy.

US Chauvinism

A related problem in Love and Rage was US chauvinism. The root of this problem was our pretensions to being a continental organization. Love and Rage was always dominated by the US section of the organization. Our treatment of Canadian reality tended to be tokenistic, and reflected the widespread national chauvinist sentiment in the US (even among radicals and revolutionaries) that Canada is “just the 51st state.” The Canadian section of Love and Rage remained quite small, so there was never much pressure to really face these contradictions. The relations between the US and Mexican sections proved more problematic precisely because our Mexican section, Amor y Rabia, became a significant force within Mexico’s small anarchist movement. Love and Rage never formally acknowledged the existence of distinct national sections. In effect, we had separate organizations pretending to be one. The relationship of the US section to the Mexican section was largely one of solidarity, in the form of financial support for the publication of Amor y Rabia and various other activities of the Mexican section. In the end, we effectively ended out subsidizing the sectarian and authoritarian antics of a couple of leaders of the Mexican section (who had the most direct contacts with the US organization). That only served to discredit the larger organization. Put bluntly, having a Mexican section raised the standing of Love and Rage in the US, and we turned a blind eye to abuses we should have seen in order to preserve this relationship. This was only a disservice to our Mexican comrades, since it perpetuated problems in their organization. It was national chauvinism and opportunism on our part.

Sexism

Love and Rage had some very strong and intelligent women. Still, men outnumbered women by nearly two to one, and took up even more time in meetings than was proportional to their numbers. We tried to counter sexist dynamics by putting women in positions of leadership (although we did this sporadically) and by using feminist group process and facilitation. We had a sort of informal mentoring system for younger and newer women members who would be taken under the wing of a more experienced woman who would share her skills and help the newer member to make a place for herself in the organization. In the end, the individual and informal strategies we relied on were not enough to successfully combat the deeply entrenched male domination in Love and Rage. Aside from our inconsistent work in the struggle for reproductive freedom, and welfare organizing done by one or two members, Love and Rage never did any other explicitly feminist long-term work. As individual women and men, most of us struggled with men in the activist groups we worked in over their sexism and promoted women’s leadership in those groups. We usually had one working group that we attempted to give a “feminist lens,” but the success or failure of this integration of feminism into our other work was usually determined by the willingness of individual women to repeatedly push for the small measures it would entail even after the larger vision of it had been passed by a vote at the conference. Women in Love and Rage

reached a point of collectively coming together to criticize sexist dynamics in Love and Rage after some particularly glaring incidents. At one conference we held a meeting with a representative from BACORR, a radical reproductive freedom group in the Bay Area, about starting a national campaign that would struggle around issues of sterilization abuse and other related issues that affected primarily women of color and poor women, as well as clinic defense. No men from Love and Rage showed up at the meeting, although the ideas we were discussing addressed some of the men's criticisms that the clinic-defense focus of the feminist work we were doing only appealed to middle-class white women. Because the men weren't doing any explicit feminist work and we never developed an internal political education program, they never had to educate themselves about women's experiences of oppression and the history of women's resistance. Even after one woman put together a set of readings on revolutionary feminism and each local had agreed to start a study group using it, only the New York local ever began a study group. Our problems of organizational liberalism and lack of discipline led to an inability to get the organization as a whole to take up feminist questions in our theory and practice.

Organizational Liberalism

Many of the problems Love and Rage had can be connected to the general problem of organizational liberalism. We had a spirit of tolerance for practices that revolutionary organizations cannot afford to put up with. It took us nearly four years to establish any expectations of membership. After that, we progressively tightened up those expectations on paper, but since we never provided for any enforcement mechanism the expectations were meaningless. Many took advantage of the "do your own thing" atmosphere, dropping in and out of activity in some cases for years at a stretch. "Members" who never met the expectations of membership were frequently outspoken in their opposition to any attempt to further raise the expectations. Despite the fact that the dues structure was designed precisely to make sure those with the most money paid the highest rates, opposition to making it mandatory was framed in terms of not imposing it on the poorest members. As a result, a minority of members from all income brackets carried the weight of the organization while the majority paid their dues only when and if they felt like it. Organizational liberalism also contributed to a culture which effectively discouraged the sort of serious political debate that was a prerequisite for hammering out a political statement or strategy. Instead, there was a constant effort to deal with contradictions in the organization by finding compromise or consensus positions, even if those positions provided no real guidance for the organization. There was a consistent refusal to criticize ourselves or each other. Often, problems were only dealt with after they had gotten out of control. When members took on tasks for the organization, there was no effective mechanism to ensure that they were carried out. When the failure to carry out tasks was pointed out, this criticism was generally met with excuses rather than a serious evaluation of the problem. This common problem reached its most absurd proportions when the Michigan-based Coordinating Committee, the day-to-day decision-making body of the Federation between annual conferences, failed to meet once in the last year, while its members engaged in factional activity.

No Leadership Development

Anarchism tends to assume a theoretical posture of total hostility towards leadership. But every anarchist group or project that lasts any length of time has clearly identifiable, if informal, leadership. Some groups deny what is obvious to outside observers. Others grudgingly concede the truth, but only to say they are fighting against the problem. Love and Rage did both. The fact of leadership in organizations and movements creates problems. A position of leadership is in some sense unavoidably a position of authority. As anti-authoritarians, we need to create systems that make leaders accountable to the broader body of people who make up a movement or organization. We must also develop a practice of leadership that consciously subverts those authoritarian tendencies, and assists in generalizing leadership skills among the people. The structure of Love and Rage did not allow for the fact that the organization had leaders. Our structure was exquisitely democratic in providing for the fullest participation by everybody in the decisions of the organization. The Coordinating Committee, with responsibility for day-to-day decision-making, was conceived of mainly as an administrative body with no power to chart the course of the organization. The Federation Council was composed of delegates elected by locals who were expected to simply transmit the decisions of the membership. The result was a cumbersome process that was consistently unable to make decisions on time. Demonstrations and projects like speaking tours were finally endorsed a month or two after they were over! By failing to delegate real leadership responsibilities to these bodies, we only reinforced the power of the informal and therefore unaccountable leadership of the organization — the people who took things into their own hands to make sure the work kept getting done. Our failure to confront the issue of leadership meant that we were never able to solve these problems. The generally accepted notion of our relationship to mass movements was that we would simply participate in them as equals, arguing for our politics but not seeking leadership. (A more sophisticated version of this conception is the notion of the “leadership of ideas” promoted by the tendency in anarchism known as the Platformists, after “The Platform of the Libertarian Communists.”) This concept, while appealing, swept under the rug the real contradictions in our actual relationships with mass movements. Many members of Love and Rage played leadership roles, whether they were willing to acknowledge them or not, in building various mass organizations and coalitions including Anti-Racist Action, the Vermont Living Wage Campaign, and the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM!) at CUNY. In all of these formations we fought for the maximum level of internal democracy and against a dependence on leaders. But as experienced activists with accumulated skills, access to resources, and an overarching social analysis, we consistently found ourselves fulfilling leadership functions in these movements. The insistence that all activists in these movements participated as equals contradicted reality. It also protected us from being held responsible for mistakes that we committed as leaders, and undermined any systematic development of leadership skills among new people. It is clear to us now that there can be no social revolution without some sort of organized revolutionary leadership. We still recognize that leadership has inherent authoritarian tendencies which tend to reproduce the oppressive structures of this society and which must be fought. We are opposed to any conception of leadership that grants special privileges to leaders. We believe that one of the primary functions of a revolutionary organization must be the development of effective, responsible, and accountable leadership. This means, in addition to our insistence on movement democracy, the ongoing and systematic

political education and organizational skills training of its members, as well as the promotion of these same processes as broadly as possible within the mass movements.

Lack of Method

In the course of the debate that destroyed Love and Rage, two philosophies on the question of organizational method emerged. While both sides sought to emphasize the supposedly anti-authoritarian character of their theories, both drew on the works of decidedly authoritarian tendencies in Marxism. Several of the people who went on to found Fire by Night argued for what they described as the Zapatista theory of *Mandar Obedeciendo* or “leading by obeying,” which shares much in common with Paolo Friere’s ideas on pedagogy and the Maoist theory of the Mass Line. It attempts to address the inherent contradiction between the fact of leadership and the goal of the self-organization of the people. The basic principle is that the people learn by doing, and that the germ of revolutionary consciousness exists in and finds constant expression in the experiences of the oppressed in struggle. This germ exists alongside all sorts of other ideas, including many reactionary ones. Revolutionaries should, in struggle with the people, draw out the revolutionary content in how they already understand their conditions, clarify it, and distinguish it from the reactionary ideas. Through the constant repetition of this process, a more fully developed revolutionary consciousness emerges that is the organic product of people’s experiences in struggle. In contrast to this approach, several signers of WWB advocated the development of an Anarchist Transitional Program, as mentioned earlier. The advocates of a Transitional Program sought to depict the method of *Mandar Obedeciendo* as one of simply following the masses and upholding whatever they believed, in order to manipulate and gain leadership over the movement. The advocates of *Mandar Obedeciendo* argued that the idea of a tiny group developing a program that would supposedly become the revolutionary program of the masses, without the participation of the masses themselves in this process, was inherently vanguardist. From cradle to grave, these contradictory conceptions of organizing method coexisted in Love and Rage, so that we never overcame our confusion about what kind of organization we had. At times, Love and Rage followed the Trotskyist practice of re-writing the New York Times coverage of international news and then plugging in our instant anarchist analysis. At other times, we used the paper to draw out the lessons we were learning through our participation in various struggles. The lack of clarity about organizational method also led to a lack of clarity about the distinction between a mass organization and a revolutionary organization. Our attempts to develop new theory from the lessons of our mass work were not always rigorous. This further blurred the distinction as members of the organization rightly asked what Love and Rage had to offer that they weren’t getting in their mass work.

Theoretical and Practical Weaknesses of Anarchism

The debates that destroyed Love and Rage began with a critique of the failure of anarchism to draw the right lessons from its historical defeats and failures. They ended with a number of people in the organization doubting the viability of anarchism as a theoretical framework for revolutionary politics in the 21st century, in some cases to the point of saying they were no longer anarchists. The final test of any system of ideas is the results it produces in practice. We hold Christianity responsible for the Crusades, the witch hunts, and the intolerance of contemporary

fundamentalism. We hold Leninism responsible for mass starvation resulting from forced collectivization in the Soviet Union and China, as well as for the anti-democratic practices of various Leninist groups today. Similarly, anarchism must be judged by its results. Anarchism has had its brief moments as a serious revolutionary movement, but they have been few and have all gone down to defeat. Anarchism has been almost completely marginalized for over half a century and shows no real signs of emerging from its current semi-comatose condition. Revolutionary theory must be a living and vibrant body of ideas in constant contact with the actual struggles of oppressed people. Despite the best efforts of ourselves and others, this does not describe contemporary anarchism. This is not to suggest that anarchism has nothing to offer. Many of us have identified as anarchists for many years, and our politics continue to owe a great deal to anarchism. We believe that the reproduction of the authoritarian relations of this society within our movements, and in a new society, is one of the primary dangers confronting the revolutionary project. We do not currently see any other existing body of theory and practice as adequately answering our questions. If we want to develop a revolutionary politics that can fight for and win real human liberation in the 21st century, we must ruthlessly attack the flaws in all existing revolutionary theory and search for the ideas that can be used. Leaving aside the question of whether anarchism can be reconceived in a way that answers the questions that arose in these debates, we will identify the weaknesses of anarchist theory and practice that contributed to Love and Rage's downfall.

Philosophical Idealism

The first of these weaknesses is philosophical idealism, or the construction of a theory of society on a basis of abstract ideas rather than on the empirical investigation of material reality. This use of the term "idealism" should not be confused with the popular use of the word to speak of people who fight for an ideal of a better society. In this sense, we are proudly idealists. As anarchists, we defined ourselves as anti-statists — in other words, we viewed the state as inherently oppressive and as an instrument for the rule of a minority class. This is true, and can be supported with all sorts of evidence. But it does not help us figure out how to build directly democratic instruments of self-governance under conditions of social collapse, or to carry out the transition to a truly free society. In a revolutionary situation, the people will have to nationalize an economy, provide reparations to oppressed nations, repress counter-revolutionaries, equalize healthcare, coordinate an army, and figure out how to do all this efficiently without building a new oppressive state. What will we do with white neighborhoods like Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, which has traditionally greeted Black people who venture into the neighborhood with racist violence? Do we force them at gunpoint to integrate, try using the Mass Line to struggle with them, or let them have autonomous self-determination? What we need is a theory of the state that starts with an empirical investigation of the origins of the state, the state as it actually exists today, the various experiences of revolutionary dual power, and post-revolutionary societies. We expect such a theory would confirm the anarchist hostility to the state as an instrument for human liberation, but we also expect that it would challenge the simplistic way that anarchists treat the question of the state. Why did pre-state societies consistently give birth to or find themselves conquered by state societies? Why does the state perform socially useful as well as repressive and exploitive functions? Are all states (monarchies, liberal democracy, one-party dictatorships) equal? Why have the brief modern experiences of revolutionary self-government (the Paris Commune, the

Soviets and Workers Councils, the original Zapatistas in the Mexican Revolution, the Spanish Revolution) all gone down so quickly to defeat? These questions can only be answered after a serious investigation of the historical experience. Love and Rage never systematically undertook that investigation, but instead fell back on the formulaic responses of anarchist orthodoxy.

Moralism

Anarchism exists more as an ethical posture than a developed political theory. This is both a virtue and a vice. Anarchism's insistence on the ethical dimension of the society we are fighting for and the way we fight for it contrasts starkly with the repeated apologies for the repression of basic democratic rights, forced collectivization, and mass murder in the name of progress and "scientific" socialism. To acknowledge that the new society will inevitably bear some of the marks of the old, does not mean anything goes. The flip side of this is anarchism's persistent tendency to substitute a moral posture for a strategic political perspective. Ethical principles tend to offer better guidance on what not to do than on what to do. In Love and Rage, political positions were often not judged not on terms of their validity, but on their appeal to righteousness. This led to an over-eager embrace of the most strident formulations and a tendency to shut down debate when issues got complicated. The persistent refusal of the anarchist movement as a whole to learn any serious lessons from its defeats suggests to us the deep-rootedness of these theoretical weaknesses.

Part 3: The Left Next Time

Global capitalism has entered into a new period marked by a dramatic increase in the global integration of the economy, and an all-out war on the poor that has sought to roll back all of the gains of the various social movements of the past century. Resistance to the new world order breaks out every day, in every corner of the globe, and the potential for more resistance is immense. At the same time, the organized left has never been weaker. There is a crying need for a reinvigorated revolutionary left that is able to incorporate the lessons of the past century and respond creatively to the challenges of the next one. The left we need must be radically democratic, by which we mean there must be a break with the authoritarian and anti-democratic practices widely associated with Leninism. The left we need must be multi-racial, which means it must fully incorporate the insights and demands of the oppressed nationality movements, and must have leadership that is rooted in these movements. The left we need must be feminist. It must integrate an understanding of patriarchy as a historic and contemporary reality, and use the practices of feminist process developed by the women's movement. Women must be in real leadership, and not just as tokens. The left we need must uphold queer liberation and must include gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered leadership. The left we need must be independent of the capitalist political parties and institutions, and based in the communities of oppressed people. The left we need must be a true expression of the self-organization of the oppressed. In a revolutionary situation, it must be able to make use of the intellectual skills of individuals trained in political theory or economic planning without giving up the people's collective power to these individuals and creating a new ruling class. The precedents for the kind of left we need are few. But across the US and around the world, we see glimmers of it. We take particular inspiration from the Zapatistas in Mexico and the emerging international movement against neoliberalism that their example and prodding has inspired. We recognize that the Zapatistas are a new force, and do not imagine that they have all the answers. However, they have been able to overcome many of the sectarian divisions of the old left and reconceive the revolutionary project on a radical democratic foundation. Under conditions of siege by the Mexican Army, the EZLN has carried out decisions directly made by every woman, child and man in the indigenous villages that support it. While consensus decision-making on such a broad scale may not work in large cities, we can learn from the Zapatistas how important it is for a revolutionary movement to earn the support of its communities every step that it takes. The Fire by Night Organizing Committee is a product of the historical experiences of Love and Rage. We see the failure of anarchism in general and of Love and Rage in particular as part of the general failure of the revolutionary left in the 20th century. We believe that anarchism and the broader libertarian socialist tradition offer crucial insights into the failure of the state socialist experiences that must be integrated into any genuinely liberatory revolutionary politics in the 21st century. While we believe that the old categories that have historically divided the left are increasingly obsolete, and we repudiate the sectarianism of all tendencies on the left, we do not believe that we can simply put history behind us and all agree to get along. The construction of a reinvigorated revolutionary left will

require, among other things, grappling with the roots of the failures of every tendency on the left. It will require not just coming to agreement on a program, but also developing unity in practice through concrete common work.

Our Project

Fire by Night is a small organization committed to building an organized revolutionary left in the United States. We view our own organization as provisional, in the sense that we do not imagine that our small group is the nucleus of the organization we want to be a part of. In this sense, we regard all existing organizations on the left as provisional. None of them meet even the most basic criteria for the kind of organization that needs to be built. For our first year, we have taken on an intensive program of political study and training. To more fully understand the issues that destroyed Love and Rage, we have taken on detailed study sessions on the state, class structure, patriarchy and white supremacy. To research the historical failures of the revolutionary experiences of the 20th century, we are studying the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Spanish Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, the decolonization of Africa, the Cuban Revolution and Latin America, and the US in the 60s and 70s. With the aim of becoming more effective and well-rounded revolutionary organizers, we have planned topics on organizing method and organizational structure. We have committed ourselves to continued work in mass struggles, with a special focus on poor people's struggles and the student movement. Our local in the Bay Area works to organize tenants in public housing, who are fighting the city's plans to remove them to clear the way for gentrification. Our local in New York City continues to work with their comrades in CUNY, now to organize high school students, as well as their families and communities, to fight for access to public higher education. We are looking for people who share our perspective who want to work with us. We also want to develop relations with other revolutionary forces in the US — to talk, to clarify and struggle over differences, and to see what sort of basis exists for common work. We believe that the creation of a vibrant revolutionary left in the United States will require a ruthless self-criticism of our failures to date. We have sought to make such a criticism of ourselves in these pages, and hope that our efforts in this direction will serve an example to others.

Afterword

Today's movements and future endeavors to build revolutionary organizations have much to learn from the experiences of organizations and revolutionary projects that have come before us. That is why we are publishing this pamphlet.

Today, many "cadre" or voluntary organizations, as opposed to non-profits, seem to have very limited life spans. If we are to make revolutionary change, this phenomenon pushes the question of organization to the forefront. But by summing up our experience and our critique of anarchism, we hope to have a bigger impact and to use our demise to contribute to organization-building and organizational theory.

Every former member will have slightly different assessments of what happened and why, however there are a number of things that we collectively agreed were fundamental contradictions. From those contradictions we find lessons to draw from our modest attempt at building a new revolutionary, non-sectarian, multi-tendency organization. First and possibly foremost was the tension between our political position on white supremacy, our beginnings as a small all-white organization, our position (not simply a desire) on becoming a multiracial organization, and white opportunist errors that we made. Related to that, although an obstacle that many organizations have overcome through hard work, is the problem of being a small organization with very large ambitions. Lastly is the relationship between "cadre" organizations and other left and community based organizations. Fire by Night, as a membership-only organization that demanded a high level of commitment and discipline of its members, existed at a time when cadre organizations were few and far between. This situation led to some members of FbN questioning their role in a cadre organization and its relationship with other organizations.

Fire by Night began in 1998 following the dissolution of Love and Rage. The founders of FbN determined that the organization would be a "provisional", or temporary organization, until it was clear that there was the impetus and energy to truly embark on an organization-building project of greater caliber – one with a multi-racial/multi-national origin.

The first six months were spent primarily in discussions and studies to determine our organizing orientations (a clear point of unity from the beginning was that FbN would be an organization of organizers), structure and points of unity. It was a time of immense political development for the members, who were engaged in training, intensive studies and leadership development. Later came our organizing, which differed on each coast. In the San Francisco Bay Area, members worked with the Eviction Defense Network and the North Beach Public Housing Tenants Union. These two organizations were involved in a fight to stop the displacement of public housing tenants from North Beach, a neighborhood in San Francisco which was of great value to the tenants and, unfortunately, also of enormous financial value to developers and city officials. FbNers in New York continued their work from their time in Love & Rage, working in the student movement and specifically around campaigns to preserve open admissions with the Student Liberation Action Movement (SLAM) at Hunter College.

In August of 1999 FbN met in the Bay Area to develop a more formal structure, discuss and agree on an analysis of the current period, strategic tasks for the left and FbN, and determine three-year goals related to organizing, recruitment and internal development. We also completed the Fire by Night Points of Unity, the first public document of the organization. We came out of our week of discussions with a very specific and ambitious plan for moving forward as an organization.

And move forward we did. Slowly but surely we began implementing our plans around organizational development, and organizing, primarily in student movements on the east and west coasts. We began to put into action our plan of initiating a national student organizer training institute. This project later came to be known as Study & Struggle: Student Organizer Training Institute.

In January of 2000 the newly formed Organizing Committee of Study & Struggle came together to discuss the project and a timeline for implementing the project. The Organizing Committee was made up of students as well as former student organizers, with more than half of the committee made up of people not in Fire by Night. FbN felt strongly that the project should have a truly independent character, with no particular organization controlling the project. However, by initiating and having heavy involvement in its organizing, the project was in effect a FbN project. That could have changed over time, as the committee and its members' commitments to the project developed, but at that early stage, it was an FbN-conceived and -organized project.

The people that were approached to be on the Organizing Committee were contacts that we had through our previous organizing experiences. They were also in organizations, although we approached them primarily as individuals and not as representatives of organizations. That initially was due to wanting to keep Study & Struggle an independent project, but upon reflection was also motivated by our specific FbN organizational goals and desires. We wanted the project to be a success and we wanted FbN, as a major player in the project, to gain a reputation as a tight, together organization that could pull off something like this.

FbN made some very real errors in the formation of the Study & Struggle Organizing Committee. The primary error was in relationship to SLAM, one of the foremost people of color led, multi-racial student organizations in the country. Although SLAM should have been a major player in a project like Study & Struggle, FbN chose to approach individual members of SLAM, rather than the organization, seemingly to preserve the independence of Study & Struggle, but also to advance the goals of FbN. Many folks in SLAM were not aware of the project until the Organizing Committee meeting at Hunter College. This method of wanting to involve SLAM, but not respecting SLAM's organizational integrity and internal process, rightly upset many members of SLAM. They felt not only politically disrespected, but also hurt by FbN-people who were considered friends and comrades by many people in SLAM. The experience was also difficult for FbN, particularly the East Coast members. We were forced to painfully confront our own white opportunism and chauvinism. The experience set into motion a whole host of internal doubts about FbN, and the way in which we had gone about building revolutionary organization and the way in which we engaged in our organizing practice. Many of those doubts existed in one form or another prior to the crisis, however they were not brought forward and dealt with. The Study & Struggle crisis surfaced many important and hard questions about our direction and future as an organization.

In February of that year, the New York branch of Fire by Night decided to dissolve. The branch communicated this to the Bay Area members. They told us that the West Coast was free to do what

we wanted with the organization and the name. We were very unhappy with New York's decision, but unclear about how to move forward as the only remaining "branch" of FbN. We eventually determined that we could not carry out a plan for a "national" organization, and decided to fold Fire by Night. However, for months following the dissolution, we remained as a small collective, continuing to organize and study together.

In a statement written shortly before the New York branch of FbN dissolved, they state, "Any time that a cadre-type organization like Fire By Night participates in mass struggles it must confront the contradictions that inevitably arise between the needs of the mass struggle and its own organizational goals." Fire by Night engaged in a lot of principled work that played a small role in the overall movement for social justice. We felt that we were very conscious of past and present mistakes of organizations who put their own needs and goals ahead of the needs and goals of the movement. However, in the situation with Study & Struggle, we made the mistake of thinking too much of ourselves, and not enough of SLAM or larger questions of the multi-racial student movement.

Months after the dissolution of FbN, former West Coast members were approached by Freedom Road Socialist Organization (FRSO) to discuss joining FRSO. In May of 2000 we joined Freedom Road. Many folks may be asking how a group of people who came from such an anarchist background could have ended up in an organization like Freedom Road Socialist Organization. Much of that shift occurred in an analysis that developed while in FbN. As the New York branch statement notes, "Our turn away from anarchism and towards revolutionary socialism was in part the consequence of our participation in the CUNY movement and the realization of the crying need for a more serious and disciplined kind of revolutionary organization than was consistent with our previous anarchist outlook."

Although we recognize the mistakes and contradictions of 20th century socialism, we also don't think the baby should be thrown out with the bath water. The revolutionary socialist tradition provides a framework from which to analyze and fight for a just future society. Although we continue to hold some tenets of anarchism (open democratic processes and community building) as important, we do not believe that anarchism as a whole can provide the tools necessary to build a renewed revolutionary movement today. We hope that some of our conclusions are useful and relevant for future endeavors to build revolutionary organization, and we invite any thoughts about the content of this pamphlet. People learn through struggle and we learned a lot about organization building and practice from our experience in Love and Rage and Fire by Night.

Yours in Struggle,
Former Members of Fire by Night Organizing Committee

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A Self-Critical Analysis of the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation
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