

The Manifesto of The Makhnovists

Nestor Makhno

1918

Victory or death. This is what confronts the peasants of the Ukraine at the present moment in history. But we shall not all perish. There are too many of us. We are humanity. So we must win – win not so that we may follow the example of past years and hand over our fate to some new master, but to take it in our own hands and conduct our lives according to our own will and our own conception of truth.

The months of February and March [1918] were a time for distributing livestock and equipment seized from the landowners in the autumn of 1917 and for dividing up the landed estates among the volunteers, the peasants and workers organised in agricultural communes. That this was a decisive moment, both in the construction of a new life and in the defence construction, was apparent to all the toilers of the district. Former line soldiers, under the leadership of the Revolutionary Committee occupied with the transfer into a communal fund of all the equipment and livestock from the landlords' estates and from the wealthy smallholders, leaving their owners two pairs of horses, one or two cows (depending on the size of the family), a plough, a seeder, a mower and a pitchfork, while the peasants went into the fields to finish the job of redistributing the land begun the previous autumn. At the same time, some of the peasants and workers, having already organised themselves into rural communes in the autumn, left their villages with their families and occupied the former, landlords' estates, ignoring the fact that the Red Guard detachments of the Bolshevik-Left SR bloc had, in accordance with their treaty with the Austrian and German emperors, already evacuated the Ukraine, leaving it to fight with its small revolutionary-military formations an unequal battle against regular Austrian and German units assisted by detachments of the Ukrainian Central Rada. They settled there, nevertheless, losing no time in preparing their forces: part to carry on the spring work in the communes, and part to form battle detachments to defend the revolution and its gains, which the revolutionary toilers, if not everywhere, then in many districts, had won by themselves step by step, thereby setting an example for the whole country.

The agricultural communes were in most cases organised by peasants, though sometimes their composition was a mixture of peasants and workmen. Their organisation was based on the equality and solidarity of the members. All members of these communes – both men and women applied themselves willingly to their tasks, whether in the field or the household. The kitchens and dining rooms were communal. But any members of the commune who wanted to cook separately

for themselves and their children, or to take food from the communal kitchen and eat it in their own quarters, met with no objection from the other members of the commune.

Every member of the commune, or even a whole group of members, might arrange matters of food as they thought best, as long as they informed the commune in advance, so that all the members would know about it and could make the necessary preparations in the communal kitchen and storehouse. From experience it was necessary for the members of the commune to rise in good time in the morning to tend the oxen, horses, and other animals, and to perform other kinds of work. A member could at any time absent himself from the commune as long as he gave advance notice of this to the comrades with whom he worked most closely on communal tasks, so that the latter could cope with the work during his absence. This was the case during working periods. But during periods of rest (Sunday was considered a day of rest) all members of the commune took it in turns to go off on trips.

The management of each commune was conducted by a general meeting of all its members. After these meetings, each member, having his appointed task, knew what changes to make in it and so on. Only the matter of schooling in the commune was not precisely defined, because the communes did not want to resurrect the old type of school. As a new method they settled on the anarchist school of F. Ferrer¹ (about which reports were frequently read and brochures distributed by the Group of Anarchist-Communists), but not having properly trained people for this they sought through the Group of Anarchist-Communists to obtain better educated comrades from the towns and only as a last resort to invite to their communal schools teachers who knew only the traditional methods of instruction.

There were four such agricultural communes within a three- or four-mile radius of Gulyai-Polye. In the whole district, however, there were many. But I shall dwell on these four communes because I myself played a direct part in organising them. In all of them the first fruitful beginnings took place under my supervision, or, in a few cases, in consultation with me. To one of them, perhaps the largest, I gave my physical labour two days a week, during the spring sowing in the fields behind a plough or seeder, and before and after sowing in domestic work on the plantations or in the machine shop and so on. The remaining four days of the week I worked in Gulyai-Polye in the Group of Anarchist-Communists and in the district Revolutionary Committee. This was demanded of me by members of the group and by all the communes. It was demanded too by the very fact of revolution, which required the grouping and drawing together of revolutionary forces against the counter-revolution advancing from the west in the form of German and Austro-Hungarian monarchist armies and the Ukrainian Central Rada.

In all of the communes there were some peasant anarchists, but the majority of the members were not anarchists. Nevertheless, in their communal life they felt an anarchist solidarity such as manifests itself only in the practical life of ordinary toilers who have not yet tasted the political poison of the cities, with their atmosphere of deception and betrayal that smothers even many who call themselves anarchists. Each commune consisted of ten families of peasants and workers, totalling a hundred, two hundred or three hundred members. These communes took as much land as they were able to work with their own labour. Livestock and farm equipment were allotted by decision of the district congresses of land committees.

¹ Francisco Ferrer (1859–1909), founder of the Modern School, which fostered a spirit of independence and spontaneity among the pupils. Ferrer, a respected libertarian, was court-martialled and executed in 1909 on charges of plotting against the Spanish king and fomenting rebellion in Barcelona.

And so the free toilers of the communes set to work, to the tune of free and joyous songs which reflected the spirit of the revolution and of those fighters who prophesied it and died for it or who lived and remained steadfast in the struggle for its 'higher justice', which must triumph over injustice, grow strong, and become the beacon of human life. They sowed their fields and cultivated their gardens, confident in themselves and in their firm resolve not to allow the return of those who had never laboured on the land but who had owned it by the laws of the state and were seeking to own it again.

The inhabitants of the villages and hamlets bordering on these communes, who were less politically conscious and not yet liberated from their servility to the kulaks, envied the communards and repeatedly expressed the desire to take away all the livestock and equipment that they had obtained from the former landlords and distribute it among themselves. 'Let the free communards buy it back from us,' they would say. But this impulse was severely condemned by an absolute majority of the toilers at their village assemblies and at all the congresses. For the majority of the toiling population saw in the organisation of rural communes the healthy germ of a new social life which, as the revolution triumphed and approached its creative climax, would grow and provide a model of a free and communal form of life, if not for the whole country, then at least for the hamlets and villages of our district.

The free communal order was accepted by the inhabitants of our district as the highest form of social justice. For the time being, however, the mass of people did not go over to it, citing as their reasons the advance of the German and Austrian armies, their own lack of organisation, and their inability to defend this order against the new 'revolutionary' and counter-revolutionary authorities. For this reason the toiling population of the district limited their real revolutionary activity to supporting in every way those bold spirits among them who had settled on the old estates and organised their personal and economic life on free communal lines.

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