

# **The Old and New in Anarchism**

**A reply to comrade Malatesta**

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## Translators introduction

Malatesta wrote a reply to the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists whilst under house arrest in fascist Italy. It appeared in the Swiss anarchist paper *Le Reveil* and then as a pamphlet in Paris. One of the authors of the Platform, Piotr Arshinov, replied to Malatesta's criticisms in the paper set up by him and Nestor Makhno in Paris, *Dielo Trouda*. Equally, Makhno sent a long letter to Malatesta, stating that a misunderstanding of the text by Malatesta must have led to their disagreement. Malatesta did not get this letter for over a year, and replied as soon as he could. He still expressed disagreement with the Platform, opposing moral responsibility to collective responsibility, and criticising the Executive Committee mentioned in the Platform as "a government in good and due form". Makhno replied a second time (see my translation of excerpts of this letter in correspondence in *Freedom* 18 November 1995). Malatesta appears to have conceded that it was a question of words, because if collective responsibility meant "the accord and solidarity which must exist between the members of an association... we will be close to understanding each other". Isolation due to house arrest and a problem of language may have contributed to these disagreements between Malatesta and the Platformists. Arshinov's reply to Malatesta which I have translated from the French, is its first appearance in the English language.

I have taken the liberty of translating "masses ouvrières" as "working masses". In the past this phrase has often been translated as "toiling masses", which I feel to be somewhat passé. Whatever, Russian anarchists meant by this the industrial working class and the majority of the peasantry which they felt must have unity of action and aims.

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## The Old and New in Anarchism

In the anarchist organ *Le Reveil* of Geneva, in the form of a leaflet, comrade Errico Malatesta has published a critical article on the project of the Organisational Platform edited by the Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad.

This article has provoked perplexity and regret in us. We very much expected, and we still expect, that the idea of organised anarchism would meet an obstinate resistance among the partisans of chaos, so numerous in the anarchist milieu, because that idea obliges all anarchists who participate in the movement to be responsible and poses the notions of duty and constancy. For up to now the favourite principle in which most anarchists are educated can be explained by the following axiom: "I do what I want, I take account of nothing". It is very natural that anarchists of this species, impregnated by such principles, are violently hostile to all ideas of organised anarchism and of collective responsibility.

Comrade Malatesta is foreign to this principle, and it is for this reason that his text provokes this reaction in us. Perplexity, because he is a veteran of international anarchism, and if he has not grasped the spirit of the Platform, its vital character and its topicality, which derives from the requirements of our revolutionary epoch. Regret, because, to be faithful to the dogma inherent in the cult of individuality, he has put himself against (let us hope this is only temporary) the work which appears as an indispensable stage in the extension and external development of the anarchist movement.

Right at the start of his article, Malatesta says that he shares a number of theses of the Platform or even backs them up by the ideas he expounds. He would agree in noting that the anarchists did not and do not have influence on social and political events, because of a lack of serious and active organisation.

The principles taken up by comrade Malatesta correspond to the principal positions of the Platform. One would have expected that he would have as equally examined, understood and accepted a number of other principles developed in our project, because there is a link of coherence and logic between all the theses of the Platform. However, Malatesta goes on to explain in a trenchant manner his difference of opinion with the Platform. He asks whether the General Union of Anarchists projected by the Platform can resolve the problem of the education of the working masses. He replies in the negative. He gives as reason the pretended authoritarian character of the Union, which according to him, would develop the idea of submission to directors and leaders.

On what basis can such a serious accusation repose? It is in the idea of collective responsibility, recommended by the Platform, that he sees the principal reason for formulating such an accusation. He cannot admit the principle that the entire Union would be responsible for every member, and that inversely each member would be responsible for the political line of all the Union. This signifies that Malatesta does not precisely accept the principle of organisation which appears to us to be the most essential, in order that the anarchist movement can continue to develop.

Nowhere up to here has the anarchist movement attained the stage of a popular organised movement as such. Not in the least does the cause of this reside in objective conditions, for example because the working masses do not understand anarchism or are not interested in it outside of revolutionary periods; no, the cause of the weakness of the anarchist movement resides essentially in the anarchists themselves. Not one time yet have they attempted to carry on in an organised manner either the propaganda of their ideas or their practical activity among the working masses.

If that appears strange to comrade Malatesta, we strongly affirm that the activity of the most active anarchists—which includes himself—assume, by necessity, an individualist character; even if this activity is distinguished by a high personal responsibility, it concerns only an individual and not an organisation. In the past, when our movement was just being born as a national or international movement, it could not be otherwise; the first stones of the mass anarchist movement had to be laid; an appeal had to be launched to the working masses to invite them to engage in the anarchist way of struggle. That was necessary, even if it was only the work of isolated individuals with limited means. These militants of anarchism fulfilled their mission; they attracted the most active workers towards anarchist ideas. However, that was only half of the job. At the moment where the number of anarchist elements coming from the working masses increased considerably, it became impossible to restrict oneself to carrying on an isolated propaganda and practice, individually or in scattered groups. To continue this would be like running on the spot. We have to go beyond so as not to be left behind. The general decadence of the anarchist movement is exactly explained thus: we have accomplished the first step without going further.

This second step consisted and still consists in the grouping of anarchist elements, coming from the working masses, in an active collective capable of leading the organised struggle of the workers with the aim of realising the anarchist ideas.

The question for anarchists of all countries is the following: can our movement content itself with subsisting on the base of old forms of organisation, of local groups having no organic link

between them, and each acting on their side according to its particular ideology and particular practice? Or, just fancy, must our movement have recourse to new forms of organisation which will help it develop and root it amongst the broad masses of workers?

The experience of the last 20 years, and more particularly that of the two Russian revolutions -1905 and 1917-19 — suggests to us the reply to this question better than all the “theoretical considerations”.

During the Russian Revolution, the working masses were won to anarchist ideas; nevertheless anarchism, as an organised movement suffered a complete setback whilst from the beginning of the revolution, we were at the most advanced positions of struggle, from the beginning of the constructive phase we found ourselves irremediably apart from the said constructive phase, and consequently outside the masses. This was not pure chance: such an attitude inevitably flowed from our own impotence, as much from an organisational point of view as from our ideological confusion.

This setback was caused by the fact that, throughout the revolution, the anarchists did not know how to put over their social and political programme and only approached the masses with a fragmented and contradictory propaganda; we had no stable organisation. Our movement was represented by organisations of encounter, springing up here, springing up there, not seeking what they wanted in a firm fashion, and which most often vanished at the end of a little time without leaving a trace. It would be desperately naive and stupid to believe that workers could support and participate in such “organisations”, from the moment of the social struggle and communist construction.

We have taken the habit of attributing the defeat of the anarchist movement of 1917-19 in Russia to the statist repression of the Bolshevik Party; this is a big mistake. The Bolshevik repression impeded the extension of the anarchist movement during the revolution but it wasn't the only obstacle. It's rather the internal impotence of the movement itself which was one of the principal causes of this defeat, an impotence proceeding from the vagueness and indecision which characterised different political affirmations concerning organisation and tactics.

Anarchism had no firm and concrete opinion on the essential problems of the social revolution; an opinion indispensable to satisfy the seeking after of the masses who created the revolution. The anarchists praised the communist principle of: “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs” but they never concerned themselves with applying this principle to reality, although they allowed certain suspect elements to transform this great principle into a caricature of anarchism — just remember how many con-men benefitted by seizing for their personal profit the assets of the collectivity. The anarchists talked a lot about revolutionary activity of the workers, but they could not help them, even in indicating approximately the forms that this activity should take; they did not know how to sort out the reciprocal relations between the masses and their centre of ideological inspiration. They pushed the workers to shake off the yoke of Authority, but they did not indicate the means of consolidating and defending the conquests of the Revolution. They lacked clear and precise conceptions, of a programme of action on many other problems. It was this that distanced them from the activity of the masses and condemned them to social and historical impotence. It is in this that we must seek the primordial cause of their defeat in the Russian revolution.

And we do not doubt that, if the revolution broke out in several European countries, anarchists would suffer the same defeat because they are no less-if not even more so-divided on the plan of ideas and organisation.

The present epoch, when, by millions, workers engaged on the battlefield of social struggle, demanded direct and precise responses from the anarchists concerning this struggle and the communist construction which must follow it; it demanded of the same, the , the collective responsibility of the anarchists regarding these responses and anarchist propaganda in general. If they did not assume this responsibility the anarchists like anyone else in this case, do not have the right to propagandise in an inconsequent manner among the working masses, who struggled in agreeing to heavy sacrifices and lost numberless victims.

At this level, it is not a question of a game or the object of an experiment. That is how, if we do not have a General Union of Anarchists, we cannot furnish common responses on all those vital questions.

At the start of his article, comrade Malatesta appears to salute the idea of the creation of a vast anarchist organisation, however, in categorically repudiating collective responsibility, he renders impossible the realisation of such an organisation. For that will not only not be possible if there exists no theoretical and organisational agreement, constituting a common platform where numerous militants can meet. In the measure to which they accept this platform, that must be obligatory for all. Those who do not recognise these basic principles, cannot become, and besides would themselves not want to, become a member of the organisation.

In this fashion, this organisation will be the union of those who will have a common conception of a theoretical, tactical and political line to be realised.

Consequently, the practical activity of a member of the organisation will be naturally in full harmony with the general activity, and inversely the activity of all the organisation will not know how to be in contradiction with the conscience and activity of each of its members, if they accept the programme on which the organisation is founded.

It is this that characterises collective responsibility: the entire Union is responsible for the activity of each member, knowing that they will accomplish their political and revolutionary work in the political spirit of the Union. At the same time, each member is fully responsible for the entire Union, seeing that his activity will not be contrary to that elaborated by all its members. This does not signify in the least any authoritarianism, as comrade Malatesta wrongly affirms, it is the expression of a conscientious and responsible understanding of militant work.

It is obvious that in calling on anarchists to organise on the basis of a definite programme, we are not taking away as such the right of anarchists of other tendencies to organise as they think fit. However, we are persuaded that, from the moment that anarchists create an important organisation, the hollowness and vanity of the traditional organisations will be revealed.

The principle of responsibility is understood by comrade Malatesta in the sense of a moral responsibility of individuals and of groups. This is why he only grants to conferences and their resolutions the role of a sort of conversation between friends, which in sum pronounce only platonic wishes.

This traditional manner of representing the role of conferences does not stand up to the test of life. In effect, what would be the value of a conference if it only had "opinions" and did not charge itself with realising them in life? None. In a vast movement, a uniquely moral and non-organisational responsibility loses all its value.

Let us come to the question concerning majority and minority. We think that all discussion on this subject is superfluous. In practice, it has been resolved a long time ago. Always and everywhere among us, practical problems have been resolved by a majority of votes. It is completely

understandable, because there is no other way of resolving these problems inside an organisation that wants to act.

In all the objections raised against the Platform, there is lacking up to the moment the understanding of the most important thesis that it contains; the understanding of our approach to the organisational problem and to the method of its resolution. In effect, an understanding of these is extremely important and possesses a decisive significance with the idea of a precise appreciation of the Platform and all the organisational activity of the Dielo Trouda group.

The only way to move away from chaos and revive the anarchist movement is a theoretical and organisational clarification of our milieu, leading to a differentiation and to the selection of an active core of militants, on the basis of a homogeneous theoretical and practical programme. It is in this that resides one of the principle objectives of our text.

What does our clarification represent and what must it lead to ? The absence of a homogeneous general programme has always been a very noticeable failing in the anarchist movement, and has contributed to making it very often very vulnerable, its propaganda not ever having been coherent and consistent in relation to the ideas professed and the practical principles defended. Very much to the contrary, it often happens that what is propagated by one group is elsewhere denigrated by another group. And that not solely in tactical applications, but also in fundamental theses.

Certain people defend such a state of play in saying that in such a way is explained the variety of anarchist ideas. Well, let us admit it, but what interest can this variety represent to the workers?

They struggle and suffer today and now and immediately need a precise conception of the revolution, which can lead them to their emancipation right away; they don't need an abstract conception, but a living conception, real, elaborated and responding to their demands. Whilst the anarchists often proposed, in practice, numerous contradictory ideas, systems and programmes, where the most important was neighbour to the insignificant, or just as much again, contradicted each other. In such conditions, it is easily understandable that anarchism cannot and will not ever in the future, impregnate the masses and be one with them, so as to inspire its emancipatory movement.

For the masses sense the futility of contradictory notions and avoid them instinctively; in spite of this, in a revolutionary period, they act and live in a libertarian fashion.

To conclude, comrade Malatesta thinks that the success of the Bolsheviks in their country stops Russian anarchists who have edited the Platform from getting a good night's sleep. The error of Malatesta is that he does not take account of the extremely important circumstances of which the Organisational Platform is the product, not solely of the Russian revolution but equally of the anarchist movement in this revolution. Now, it is impossible not to take account of this circumstance so that one can resolve the problem of anarchist organisation, of its form and its theoretical basis. It is indispensable to look at the place occupied by anarchism in the great social upheaval in 1917. What was the attitude of the insurgent masses with regard to anarchism and the anarchists? What did they appreciate in them? Why, despite this, did anarchism receive a setback in this revolution? What lessons are to be drawn? All these questions, and many others still, must inevitably put themselves to those who tackle the questions raised by the Platform. Comrade Malatesta has not done this. He has taken up the current problem of organisation in dogmatic abstraction. It is pretty incomprehensible for us, who have got used to seeing in him, not an ideologue but a practician of real and active anarchism. He is content to examine in what measure this or that thesis of the Platform is or is not in agreement with traditional points of view

of anarchism, then he refutes them, in finding them opposed to those old conceptions. He cannot bring himself to thinking that this might be the opposite, that it is precisely these that could be erroneous, and that this has necessitated the appearance of the Platform. It is thus that can be explained all the series of errors and contradictions raised above.

Let us note in him a grave neglect; he does not deal at all with the theoretical basis, nor with the constructive section of the Platform, but uniquely with the project of organisation. Our text has not solely refuted the idea of the Synthesis, as well as that of anarcho-syndicalism as inapplicable and bankrupt, it has also advanced the project of a grouping of active militants of anarchism on the basis of a more or less homogeneous programme. Comrade Malatesta should have dwelt with precision on this method; however, he has passed over it in silence, as well as the constructive section, although his conclusions apparently apply to the entirety of the Platform. This gives his article a contradictory and unstable character.

Libertarian communism cannot linger in the impasse of the past, it must go beyond it, in combatting and surmounting its faults. The original aspect of the Platform and of the Dielo Trouda group consists precisely in that they are strangers to out of date dogmas, to ready made ideas, and that, quite the contrary, they endeavour to carry on their activity starting from real and present facts. This approach constitutes the first attempt to fuse anarchism with real life and to create an anarchist activity on this basis. It is only thus that libertarian communism can tear itself free of a superannuated dogma and boost the living movement of the masses.



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