

Building a Revolutionary Movement

Why Anarcho-Communist Organisation

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2004

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Over the past few years Anarchist-Communist organizations have been budding across the globe from South Africa to South America to North America. Yet few people, even within anarchist and revolutionary circles, have a good grasp of the beliefs, motivations and purposes behind this movement. Often times with an emerging movement it is not until the egg hatches, producing concrete and visible results, that people begin to give it its name and tell its story.

This article aims to give a brief outline the lessons to be learned from our revolutionary histories and show the roots from which the current movement of Anarchist-Communists in North America and worldwide stems from and further argue the case for this movements vision of a coherent Anarchist-Communist organization based on a strategic orientation towards social movements of the working class and oppressed.

While hard to believe now, the ideas of Anarchism once held center stage in the mass revolutionary movements during the turn of the century on every continent. Through labor unions, cultural centers, women's groups and popular newspapers, the libertarian ideal of a free, horizontal socialism created by the people inspired millions across the globe. Anarchism, expressed through revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalism, was the dominant revolutionary ideology of mass movements in most countries, while the vast majority of the Marxist current was organized into reformist social democratic parties that were oriented towards electoral change, or, "socialism at the ballot box." Marxist writer Eric Hobsbawm notes that:

*"It became hard to recall that in 1905-14, the Marxist left (sic) had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a de facto non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism. Marxism was henceforth after the Russian Revolution identified with actively revolutionary movements... Anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism entered upon a dramatic and uninterrupted decline."*¹

But as history has shown in numerous countries, despite the popularity of anarchist ideas and the high level of involvement and even leadership of anarchists in the popular struggles of their day, anarchists were not able to effectively organize themselves during important revolutionary moments. The loosely knit anarchist movement was not able to develop the strategic and tactical unity necessary to deal with massive state repression, moves toward state accommodationism of social movements (such as advent of the welfare state or government mediation of workplace struggles) or the rise of Bolshevism. Together these forces sounded the decline of anarchism and the role of anarchists in mass movements, along with a number of anarchist militants who were swayed into the forming Communist Parties of the early 20's.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 profoundly swayed the orientation of the global revolutionary movements towards the statist politics of Marxist-Leninism. Many began to see Russia, under Lenin, Trotsky and later Stalin's leadership, as the leading hope of revolution. The new soviet state opened up training institutes, offered advisors and contributed financial resources to emerging Communist Parties throughout the global south, vastly expanding the once small role that Marxism held throughout the world.² This factor of Marxism's growth has unfortunately yet

¹ As quoted by Arif Dirlik, *Anarchism and the Chinese Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 2

² Citing just a few examples of China, Vietnam and Cuba: John King Fairbank, *The Great Chinese Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper Perennial, 1987), 208, 212 William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh, A Life* (NY, Hyperion: 2000), 89 Frank Fernandez Cuban Anarchism (Tuscon, AZ: See Sharp Press, 2001), 55

to be sufficiently examined and taken into consideration in looking at the origins of Marxism globally.

By the early 1930's the majority of the revolutionary movements, with the great exception of Spain, were strongly influenced if not in the hands of the Communist Parties. The Communist Parties affiliated with the Third International, or Comintern, with Stalin at the helm, directed or created strong poles in the ideology of the oppressed and working class movements in numerous countries through the popular front strategy which led to their historic defeat. Where the CP's were "successful" in erecting Marx's idea and Lenin's model of dictatorship of the proletariat, the result was dictatorial state capitalist regimes that oppressed workers, ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples.

Now that the dust has settled on the great struggles of the 20th century, the weight of Marxist and reformist narratives of history have buried most of the spectacular history and struggles of anarchists worldwide. But now as a new epoch of 21st century struggle is beginning, signs of resurgence are surfacing in response to new crises and popular movements are again bursting forth with new examples of popular rebellion and organization. In this climate a few dedicated individuals have begun to brush off the dust and bring these stories of Anarchism and popular movements to light again.

The New World in our Hearts

We are standing at a moment of historic juncture, a moment that promises to bring ever more frightening realities. Yet, with this frightening reality comes the opportunity for new movements to resist imposed social crises and reshape society in a new image. Following the Cold War and the collapse of the communist 'alternative', the US was left as the sole world superpower. It has now begun to enact, through treaty or tank, the globalization of hyper-exploitative capitalism and US hegemony into every corner of the world. Globally the economy is in shambles. Following Asia's economic crises, a typhoon has carried across the pacific, hitting South America. Now reaching America, millions are jobless or being squeezed into the low wage service and retail sector, while the economy is floated by massive military spending and an accompanying national debt. Further, the extremist leadership of President Bush has expanded America's agenda to one of empire building through neocolonial militarism abroad and US protectionism at home, putting the US into potential conflict with other emerging powers such as the EU and China. Important reforms of previous struggles such as welfare, social security, accessible public education and affirmative action are being slashed or nearly eliminated.

The years ahead will likely see a growth in massive social movements challenging these crises of unemployment, war, public services, economic restructuring and concurrent repression and serious anarchists will be challenged to put their beliefs into practice and turn these coming rebellions into international social revolution. Already we can see some of this in new Anarchist-Communist organizations that have formed and in the syndicalist unions in Europe and the US that are reviving out of dormancy.

This requires not only a new analysis of our current world and the realities of the oppressed and working classes, but a strategy of how the revolutionary forces will act as catalysts towards social revolution, which inevitably leads to the question of how these forces will organize themselves as a vehicle to implement and undertake this strategy.

Traditionally the movement of Anarchist-Communism within anarchism has defined itself by fighting for a positive vision of social revolution. They have avoided the pitfalls of moving into reformist mutualism and while involved in the social movements, rejected “pure” anarcho-syndicalism that denied any necessity for separate anarchist organization. Within the FAI of Spain, the Makhnovistas of the Ukraine, the PLM of Mexico and the anarchist federations of South America, Anarchist-Communism represents the leading ideological force of these social revolutionaries.

While classic Anarchist-Communist beliefs were built on the simple theorem of, “From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs,” the new emerging movement of Anarchist-Communists is expanding their framework of analysis. While Anarchism offers timeless principles, much of its political, social and organizational theory is outdated and thus serious anarchists have begun the process of historical revision and reexamining concepts of race, gender, social oppression, nationalism and imperialism.

The Basis of Organization

Based on these historical conclusions and assessment of the current situation emerges the rising Anarchist-Communist movement within anarchism based around two central themes: 1) the organization of militants into a coherent federation and 2) the interaction and active participation of anarchists within the social movements. While these ideas have only recently come into North American Anarchism, they are historically rooted in the anarchist movement and have formed independently in different countries. For example the same concept was called “organizational dualism” in the Italian anarchist movement of the 20’s and a similar concept has emerged in the South American anarchist movement they call “especificismo.”³

Today’s current borrows loosely from the Platformist current in the belief of rejecting an anarchist catch-all federation combining different tendencies within Anarchism, called a “synthesis federation,” and instead advocating an organization based on common ideological belief. This type of federation interacts in ideas with the broader anarchist movement and may work with similar minded anarchists, but does not seek to speak for, represent or recruit the whole anarchist movement.

In the ‘Organizational Platform of the Libertarian Communists,’ document written by Nestor Makhno and the Dielo Trouda (Workers Cause) group after the Russian Revolution, the term coined to describe their proposal for anarchist federation is one based on “theoretical and tactical unity.” This does not mean having a rigid, all encompassing ideological hegemony within the organization (as many Marxist-Leninist and especially Maoist parties do), but rather the organization brings its members together to develop a common strategy towards building a revolutionary movement. This important strategizing work can only occur in an organization with a high degree of trust, commitment and political unity. Theoretical and tactical unity is not something imposed, but is an ideal that is always strived towards and developed out of a process of critical thinking, strategizing, action and evaluation. It is a concept born out of necessity as revolutionaries realize that a successful revolution requires a strategy along with dedicated work. Of course

³ *The Global Influence of Platformism Today* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Zabalaza Books, 2003), pg. 24 (Interview with Italian Federazione dei Comunisti Anarchici for Organizational Dualism),

the way particular groups implement a strategy may be different because of local circumstances and different approaches.

This process of developing a revolutionary strategy and ideological discussion within the organization allows the members and groups who make up the federation to constantly be engaging themselves in the process of revolutionary theory and practice. Then, by taking their discussions, reflections and conclusions into media forms, such as the federation publication, it creates more discussion and influence within the larger revolutionary and social movements. Further, the federation can act as a historical well of experience for new militants brought into the movement and allow the members to hold themselves accountable to the mistakes they make.

Based on the analysis and strategy of the organization, day-to-day work is focused around working within broader social movements. While social movements are broadly defined as movements of affected groups of people brought together for social change, the social movements that Anarchist-Communists specifically refer to are movements of oppressed people that seek not only social change, but a breaking down of existing structures and oppression. They must have the potential to counter pose oppressed people's own collective power and vision (also called dual power). The movements should be horizontal, participant led and democratic in structure as much as possible. They should be oriented towards direct action and more importantly create the type of conditions that transform the participants into self-conscious thinkers and organizers amongst their peers. The classic example of social movements is radical labor organizing, but contemporary examples could also be working class student and community organizing.

The Brazilian FAG (Federação Anarquista Gaúcha or Gaucha Anarchist Federation) describes their view on anarchists involvement in social movements:

“On the political-ideological level (political groups, including the FAG) should enhance the social and popular movements, but without trying to make it “anarchist”, more militant. The social movements should not have a political ideology, the role should be to unite and not belong to a political party. In social movements it is possible to unite militants and build a unified base, which is not possible in an ideological level.”⁴

This is radically different from the work that most of the US left is engaged in, of cyclical activist work which lacks strategy and is divorced from everyday experience and relevance to oppressed and working class people. Most of this work amounts to issue based advocacy by small groups of political activists that orient themselves to other political activists. The Anarchist-Communist vision of social movements is also different to those movements that while seemingly popular and seemingly based on struggles of oppressed and working class people, are leadership orchestrated, top-down movements where participants are passive actors of their own fate or where a movements true function is acting as a conveyor belt of electoral or party politics. Unfortunately too many anarchists find themselves plowing every garden but their own and doing this very type of work.

The role of the Anarchist-Communists is not to wrestle the leadership of movements into their hands, which assumes a presumptuous leadership of the masses or vanguardist role, but to work as a catalyst of ideas and action within. Like baking soda to vinegar, a catalyst works to create a reaction when it interacts with something else. Anarchist-Communists would play key roles as active participants, helping push the social movements forward in organization, strength and

⁴ *ibid*, pg. 50 (Interview with Brazilian Federação Anarquista Gaúcha for especificismo)

militancy. They would also work to maintain the popular character by arguing against electoral politics, their accompanying party organizations and vanguardist elements.

In Conclusion

Just as history is putting everyday people into the line of fire, it is forcing them to step up to the plate to resist the attacks of capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy. But these attacks and the growing resistance are neither isolated events, but are all elements of historical forces at work. These forces are also calling forth the ideals inspired by anarchism and Anarchist-Communism: that of a society reshaped in the image of a popular, horizontal socialism created by the people. As revolutionaries our moment is now and we cannot afford, nor can all of our people and communities, to abdicate our responsibility and ignore the lessons of our histories. We must accept this challenge by coherently organizing ourselves and putting our ideal into practice of mass, popular and militant social movements that will have the power to bring about the social revolution.

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Retrieved on 14th October 2021 from anarchistplatform.wordpress.com
Published in *The Northeastern Anarchist* Issue #9, Summer/Fall 2004.

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