

The Political Pre-History of Love & Rage

Anarchist Struggle in the 1980s and 1990s

Anarchist History Nerd Brigade

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INTRODUCTION

This zine presents one version of the history of the anarchist context out of which the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation emerged in the early 1990s. There is no doubt much that could be said about the period and many different conclusions could be drawn. One route some anarchists took – very controversial at the time – was to form a federation to increase the level of organization amongst anarchists in the U.S.

Love and Rage broke apart in 1998 following wide-ranging internal debates over politics and goals (for example, some folks became Marxists). AK Press published a short book titled *A New World In Our Hearts: Eight Years of Writings from the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation* on the federation, but folks would do well to dig up the various critiques of Love & Rage’s politics (and practice) that circulated within the anarchist space.

This zine presents Love & Rage’s interpretation of anarchist struggle in the 1980s and 1990s (the history originally appeared in the “1997 Member Handbook” published by the New York Local, it’s been trimmed here for relevance). To be sure, its bias is towards making the case for a federation style of organization. Setting that aside (as hard as that may be), it presents a history that has been largely lost. We present it not to advocate for federations (which have a rather long history of not working out so well), but rather out of interest in the accomplishments and missteps of previous generations of anarchists.

Before presenting that history, it’s worth providing an overview of Love & Rage. However, doing so is difficult because many of the different histories of the group were written by different factions to advance their political analysis. That said, here’s a brief overview of the group from the article “After Winter Must Come Spring: A Self-Critical Analysis of the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation.” The article’s authors went on to develop Marxist politics, but this portion is worth reading:

Love and Rage was founded as a “continental revolutionary anarchist newsmagazine” 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.

THE POLITICAL PRE-HISTORY OF LOVE AND RAGE

While a number of people involved in Love and Rage have histories that go back farther it is generally fair to say that Love and Rage has its roots in the social movements of the 1980s. Unlike the 1960s and 70s the social movements of the 1980s were relatively weak. While millions of people participated in the various movements (against nuclear weapons, against U.S. intervention in Central America, for divestment from South Africa, and so on), and these movements won some important victories, they did not succeed in reversing the general political turn to the right in the United States. While many people were radicalized to varying degrees, they did not establish a broad radical movement, and the struggles of the 1980s generally retained a single issue character.

Love and Rage is one of the very few revolutionary groups around today that did not come mainly out of the movements of the 1960s. It is a formation with an explicit commitment to revolutionary politics that is largely the creation of activists who became politically active in the 1980s and 90s. This has been both a strength and weakness. We have benefitted from not being defined by events and struggles that seem to many young activists to be ancient history. On the other hand that lack of historical connection has compelled us to reinvent the wheel sometimes. Many of the most elementary features of a functioning organization we had to discover by trial and error. Anarchism has a strong anti-organizational current within it that even influences the thinking of anarchists who have a general appreciation of the need for some sort of organization. Consequently there has been considerable resistance to each step Love and Rage has taken to become a more effective organization. An important part of Love and Rage's history is the painstaking process by which we developed into a functioning organization. Obviously this process is an ongoing one. So as we struggle to improve the organization it is useful to know where its been.

THE EARLY 80S

"The formally loose and unauthoritarian structure of the affinity groups and the organization as a whole is compensated by procedures of ideological and social preselection based on the consensus process... The process is formally democratic like minority/majority systems, delegation systems, and decision by lot. But on the level of class reality, it excludes the less qualified labor force or people who are forced into full-time jobs or are exhausted by work. Consensus, therefore, favors people with psychological and sociological education since physical power is not allowed to enter group decision making."

from *Strange Victories, The Anti-Nuclear Movement in the U.S. and Europe* by Midnight Notes, 1979

The largest social movement of the early 1980s was the movement for nuclear disarmament that rose up in response to the escalation of the nuclear arms race that began under Jimmy Carter

and was dramatically accelerated under Ronald Reagan. This movement had its roots in the anti-nuclear power movement of the late 1970s but succeeded in mobilizing a much broader coalition of forces. In general this movement was liberal and reformist, demanding a freeze in the production, testing and deployment of nuclear weapons. The direct action wing of the movement was overwhelmingly dominated by the pacifist ideology that had driven the anti-nuclear power movement. In West Germany the movement developed a much more militant wing around the Autonomen, the anti authoritarian youth movement based mainly in the flourishing squatters scene of Berlin and other cities. During the “Hot Autumn” of 1983 the Autonomen were able to carry out massive, militant and illegal demonstrations that dramatically challenged the deployment of U.S. missiles in Germany. The Autonomen were an important inspiration for the young activists in the U.S. and Canada who would be attracted to and who would reinvigorate the anarchist movement.

The anarchist movement of the 1970s was part of a larger radical/ militant scene that was in many respects still propelled by the social explosions of the late 1960s and early 70s. That radical/ militant scene was able to compose itself as a presence within the anti-nuclear power movement, but was effectively eclipsed by the reformism of the Nuclear Weapons Freeze campaign. Pacifism was a strong current among the anarchists within the anti-nuke movement and it heavily influenced the thinking of younger people attracted to the the direct action orientation of that sector of the anti-nuke movement. It was several years before a new generation of radical activists, not tied to the 60s, was able to assert itself.

This new generation was more culturally rooted in the punk scene of the 80s than in the hippie scene of the 60s that still heavily influenced the ethos of radical politics. One of the earliest indications that there was a new generation of radical youth was outside the 1984 Democratic Party convention in San Francisco and the Republican Party convention in Dallas. At both conventions “Warchest Tours” moved through the downtown areas carrying out spirited and theatrical attacks on the buildings of the various corporate sponsors of the conventions. On several occasions the Warchest Tours turned into running battles with the cops. The Warchest Tour became a model for actions that would shape the anarchist movement for the next several years.

NO BUSINESS AS USUAL

*“They Won’t Listen to reason
They Won’t Be Bound By Votes
World War Three Must Be Stopped
No Matter What it Takes”*

From the No Business As Usual Call for Actions on April 29, 1985

The Democratic and Republican Conventions attracted hundreds of young, mainly anarchist youth from across the U.S. who came away with the feeling that they were on the cutting edge of a resistance movement and that similar actions should be organized everywhere. The form this took was No Business As Usual, an unholy alliance of anarchists, independent radicals and the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). No Business As Usual (NBAU) started as a call for a day of militant direct action, April 29, 1985, against the nuclear arms race. NBAU was conceived of, at least by its anarchist participants, as an ad hoc and amorphous collection of groups committed

to carrying out this day of actions. There was very little conception of NBAU as an ongoing formation.

That's not how things went. NBAU quickly fell under the domination of the RCP. In the larger cities where NBAU was something of a coalition there was a constant struggle with the authoritarian and anti-democratic methods of the RCP. But just as important as their methods was the fact that the RCP, unlike anybody else in NBAU, was a national organization. That meant they had the resources to set up offices for NBAU, that they could send travelling organizers to various cities, and that they could use their newspaper, the *Revolutionary Worker*, to promote and report on NBAU actions everywhere. The effect of this was that while the anarchists were increasingly frustrated by the authoritarianism of the RCP, NBAU was dependent on them for its success as a nation wide action.

And NBAU was a success. Actions took place on April 29 in dozens of cities and towns. After April 29 the RCP was able to quickly consolidate its control of NBAU. The anarchists who had the skills to resist the RCP's antics abandoned NBAU in droves. At the same time the RCP was able to take advantage of the predictable questions of "what next" among all the young radicals who had been brought into NBAU, and NBAU became an ongoing organization. Lots of young anti-authoritarian radicals would pass through NBAU. Some would go on to become effective anarchist activists, but many were burnt out by the experience and were alienated from politics forever. The anarchist movement got burnt by NBAU. There were two main ways of looking at this experience. The first analysis focused on the authoritarianism of the RCP as the main problem. The main conclusion drawn from this analysis was to not work with the RCP. A secondary outcome of this analysis was to give up on nationally coordinated actions. Some people sought to justify this retreat by arguing that local work was more important than coordinated national actions. But in general the shift was not a conscious one. The second analysis focused on the failure of the anarchist movement to organize itself. This analysis said that complaining about the RCP being authoritarian was like complaining about gravity. The anarchist movement should not expect to be taken seriously if it could be thwarted so easily. Nationally coordinated action was important in order to broaden the movement and bring in people who were isolated in smaller cities and towns. To retreat from it would be a mistake. Nationally coordinated actions should not be posed against local organizing. NBAU had already shown how a nationally coordinated action could provide crucial support for local activity, particularly in the most isolated communities. What we needed to do was to develop our own organizational capacities so that we would never be dependent on groups like the RCP again.

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT FOR DIVESTMENT FROM SOUTH AFRICA

In the spring of 1985 major demonstrations broke out on campuses across the U.S. demanding that the various colleges and universities sell off, or divest, their stocks in corporations doing business in South Africa.

There were several important elements to this struggle. First, it actively involved large numbers of African American and other *UC-Berkeley divestment shantytown attacked, early 1980s* students of color as well as white students. Consequently it forced many young white radical students to confront their own racist socialization and to grapple with the issues of racism in the U.S. Second, the struggle was from the outset fairly militant. The campus movement began when students at Columbia University occupied a campus administration building. Similar ac-

tions took place on campuses across the country in the following weeks. On many campuses “shantytowns” of tents and makeshift shelters were erected and students lived in them, often in defiance of the campus administrations. Anarchists played significant roles in the divestment struggles on many campuses. In Berkeley, where some of the most militant demonstrations took place, the anarchists were among the most militant students.

The third significant element of the divestment struggle was that it exposed the direct complicity of local institutions (like colleges) in the oppression and exploitation of Third World peoples in a way that was much more immediate than the nuclear disarmament movement. The divestment struggle forced the largely white anarchist movement to try to think through how it would relate to the Black community and to communities of color in general, and their political organizations in particular. There were many heated disputes on many campuses as militant white students were accused of endangering students of color with reckless, and politically ineffective actions that brought down repression harder on the students of color than on the white students. A certain number of “anarchists” lumped together all the Black groups they didn’t agree with as “authoritarian” instead of confronting the ways that racism operated within the divestment movement. Since anarchists participated in the divestment movement largely as individuals and not as members of a particular anarchist organization many found themselves lumped together with people they themselves viewed as at least unconsciously racist.

Out of this experience a number of young anarchists came to see the importance of distinguishing themselves by explicitly supporting the Black communities’ right to set its own political agenda and by taking up the fight against racism in the white community.

THE CHICAGO ANARCHIST GATHERING

“Planning got underway with a May Day 1984 planning meeting called by Impossible Books (and endorsed by several groups around the country), held at Chicago’s Autonomy Center, and drawing maybe 2 dozen anarchists from throughout the midwest. It was a disjointed meeting that suffered badly from its lack of organization — a problem that was to continue, albeit not in quite so extreme a fashion — and structure.”

from Mob Action Against the State: Haymarket Remembered ... an Anarchist Convention

Five hundred anarchists gathered in Chicago over May Day weekend in 1986 to commemorate the anarchists involved in the Haymarket incident 100 years earlier, which had been the beginning of May Day as an international working class holiday. The organizers of the Gathering, Chicago Anarchists United, were largely motivated by the desire to challenge the leftists and liberals who were attempting to gloss over the anarchist character of the Haymarket incident. But most of the anarchists who came were younger and the question of setting the historical record straight was a secondary concern next to the opportunity to meet other anarchists.

The four day Gathering consisted of workshops, meals, entertainment and two demonstrations. The first demonstration was the official May Day march in which we were the single largest contingent but which we broke off from just as it was about to end. The breakaway lasted until we got in a confrontation with the cops. The second demonstration was a Warchest Tour through downtown Chicago. This demonstration was a spirited and theatrical action that ended when a

section of people started trashing a ritzy hotel and a department store. 37 people were arrested and a lot of energies of the Gathering were diverted into getting them released.

There were workshops on every imaginable subject. One workshop on a continental anarchist newspaper attracted people from several of the major anarchist papers of that time (Fifth Estate, Open Road, and Bayou La Rose) and required several sessions. There was a strong sense that the movement was growing and needed a voice and a forum for communications that was not being met by the sporadic publication of any of the existing newspapers. The younger anarchists who were the most eager, were also the least experienced in publishing a newspaper and had the least resources to throw behind it. In the end none of the major papers, with the possible exception of Open Road, was prepared to sacrifice their local autonomy in order to make a continental paper accountable to the larger movement. The Chicago Gathering was an important first step in developing lines of communication within the anarchist movement. A list of many of the people who attended was compiled and eventually copies were sent out to everybody on it. A collection of individual experiences of the Gathering, *Mob Action Against The State*, was published. But in terms of any coordinated activity for the next year or any kind of structure to facilitate coordinated activity, there was nothing. And so after the initial enthusiasm generated by the Gathering the anarchist movement returned to where it had been, on the margins of movements controlled by other people.

CENTRAL AMERICAN SOLIDARITY

“Sandino was not an original political thinker. Most of his political these may be found in Flores Magon’s letters, political manifestos, and communiques.”

from *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, p. 28 by Donald C. Hodges

“Although Sandino repudiated Christianity in all its forms, the new theology of liberation encouraged by the FSLN represents the single most important carrier of his anarcho-communism.”

ibid. p. 294

Once the missiles were deployed in Western Europe the nuclear disarmament movement went into a general retreat. Many of the activists who had been originally politicized in the nuclear disarmament movement began to work against U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The divestment movement on campuses continued through 1986 and won significant victories. Many campuses divested and so did many city and state governments (which owned stocks through their retirement funds). Many of the corporations doing business in South Africa pulled out rather than face the loss of capital from divestment.

Many of the students who were initially radicalized in the divestment movement went into the Central American solidarity movements. Central American solidarity work in the U.S. had its roots in the support for the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979, but took on a particularly urgent character in the mid-late 1980s as the Reagan administration sought to destabilize the Sandinista regime through support for the Contras. When Congress denied funding for the Contras it was provided covertly. Direct U.S. military intervention became increasingly aggressive and Honduras, which borders both Nicaragua and El Salvador, was transformed into a military outpost of the U.S..

On campuses, Central America activism focused on CIA recruitment. The anti-CIA recruitment campaign retained much of the militant spirit of the divestment struggle. CIA recruiters were driven off of a number of campuses by spirited demonstrations that occasionally turned into skirmishes with the police. But the anti CIA campaign was the more militant wing of a larger and more moderate off-campus Central America movement. Tensions between the militant students and the more moderate liberal and religious forces in the Central America movement came to a head in the spring of 1987 with a student initiated attempt to blockade CIA Headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

The blockade was called by a group of students returning from Nicaragua and taken up by the Progressive Student Network, a largely midwestern left wing student organization. It was scheduled for the day after a national March on Washington against U.S. involvement in Central America and South Africa.

At the March on Washington two spontaneous anarchist contingents were organized. Symbolic of the general disorganization of the anarchist movement, efforts to unite the contingents failed as the two contingents weaved in and out of the march. Leaflets were passed out by Neither East Nor West from New York calling for "A March Without Marshalls for a World Without Bosses" and anarchists from Minneapolis were busy promoting the upcoming continental anarchist Gathering in Minneapolis. Neither East Nor West was a coalition of anti-authoritarian groups from New York who had initially formed as an anarchist alternative to No Business As Usual but which had become a group mainly dedicated to solidarity with East Bloc social movements.

The only Neither East Nor West members who could make it to the March were also members of the Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL). The RSL had once been a Trotskyist organization but over the 80s had broken with the thinking of Trotsky and Lenin and defined itself as libertarian socialist. Many members of the RSL already considered themselves anarchists and the organization had made a decision to attempt to participate in the anarchist movement. It was in the contingents that many anarchists heard for the first time about the Langley action scheduled for the next day.

The students intended to carry over the militancy that had been used on campus to shut down the entrances to the CIA Headquarters. But the more mainstream anti-war groups sought to repress the militancy of the students by organizing a highly choreographed "civil disobedience" that wouldn't interfere with anybody getting to work at the CIA. The resulting scene outside the main entrance to CIA Headquarters was a zoo. The War Resisters League sought to coordinate a symbolic blockade of the road while Workers World Party attempted to bore everybody to sleep with an endless series of speeches on the sound system they controlled. Simultaneously an assortment of students, anarchists and members of NBAU attempted to really block the street without offering their bodies up to the police. In the aftermath of the Langley action, anarchists from a number of cities began to talk informally about the need for some sort of structure to coordinate our participation in future actions of this sort. Langley provided only further evidence of what we had learned from NBAU, that as long as authoritarian and reformist groups had a monopoly on organization and the resources organization gave them access to, we would be pushed to the margins of radical opposition and would be at their mercy in any kind of mass movement.

THE MINNEAPOLIS ANARCHIST GATHERING

The organizers of the Chicago Gathering had made no provisions to initiate the organizing of another Gathering. After contacting groups in several cities that had indicated interest in holding a gathering and finding out that nobody actually was going to do it, Back Room Anarchist Books in Minneapolis offered to host a Gathering in 1987. The Minneapolis Gathering was three days of workshops, meals and music, followed by a day of action, a Warchest Tour through downtown Minneapolis. The Warchest Tour was deliberately scheduled on the last day to ensure that any arrests would not disrupt the rest of the Gathering.

The workshops were consciously scheduled to lead up to a final session of workshops that would be devoted to making concrete plans for the coming year. One workshop worked out a plan to publish an internal newsletter for the anarchist movement, *Mayday*. A second workshop affirmed and discussed the plans of the Toronto anarchist community to host a Gathering in 1988. A third workshop decided to hold a network meeting in Atlanta in the winter that would be aimed at increasing communications and coordination within the anarchist movement.

The Minneapolis Gathering represented a significant step forward for the self-organization of the anarchist movement. It also showed the first signs of a basic division within the movement between those who saw the need for structures beyond the local level and those who saw such structures as only compromising their cherished local autonomy. Several members of the RSL attended the Gathering. The RSL members were attacked by members of the Fifth Estate collective and accused of attempting to take over the anarchist movement. While many people were not surprisingly suspicious of the RSL given the long history of Leninist intrigues against the anarchist movement, the Fifth Estate attacks were very personal and based largely on unsubstantiated speculation. The RSL members, for their part, participated constructively throughout the Gathering and won the respect of many people in that process. The final sessions of workshops were not the most controversial, but because they had to make decisions involving people from lots of places and of lots of political leanings they were difficult. The RSL members were particularly helpful during these meetings in drawing out the full range of peoples concerns and in finding a basis for consensus.

THE INVASION OF HONDURAS

On March 17, 1988 the U.S. sent 3,200 troops to Honduras in apparent preparation for an invasion of Nicaragua. The response to this action was massive. In every major city and in hundreds of towns people took to the streets. The actions were militant. In countless cities government buildings or offices were occupied in sit ins. In those cities with strong Central America movements like San Francisco, Minneapolis, Toronto, and Boston demonstrations attacked government buildings, breaking windows and fighting with the police. The demonstrations went on day after day for a week until Reagan announced that the troops would be brought home. In all of the most militant actions, anarchists played significant roles. The widespread resistance to the invasion established a very real limit on what the Pentagon could get away with in Central America if it didn't want to risk a serious challenge to domestic stability.

A couple months later a leak from the Pentagon indicated that plans to invade Panama were put on the back burner in the wake of the resistance to the invasion of Honduras.

In Minneapolis, the Honduras actions announced the existence of the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League (RABL). RABL was an action collective that had grown out of Back Room Anarchist Books seven months earlier. Its newspaper, RABL Rouser, was inspired by the English newspaper, Class War, and as a group they pushed for mass militant direct action in the streets as opposed to the non-violent civil disobedience employed by the mainstream of the Central America movement and the late night lock gluing and window breaking that constituted the direct action of much of the anarchist movement. The Honduras actions gave many anarchists the sense that a mass resistance movement was possible, that many of the people we had previously written off as apathetic were capable of very bold direct action. There was also a sense that the anarchist movement could play a significant role in bringing that resistance movement into being. But in order to do that we would have to get ourselves considerably better organized than we were. As it was to turn out the Honduras actions were probably the high point of the militant direct action movement of the 1980s. Only the Gulf War would succeed in bringing out as many people into the streets. But where the Honduras actions resulted in a clear victory for the movement, the Gulf War left the movement defeated and demoralized. But at the time it seemed as if we were on the verge of a decisive break with the rightward political drift of the 80s and at the beginnings of a new upsurge in radical politics. The indications of this potential were not limited to the Honduras actions. ACT UP was making the leap from a New York based direct action group to an international movement. Earth First! was growing rapidly as well and obtaining the attention of the mass media. And in dozens of cities anarchists were involved in an incredible range of militant local struggles.

THE TORONTO ANARCHIST GATHERING

Several months after the Honduras actions about 1,000 anarchists came to Toronto for what was becoming an annual event. The increase in size over the previous two Gatherings indicated a general growth in the anarchist movement. The workshops were of a generally higher quality and broader in scope than at the previous Gatherings. But the numerical growth of the movement did not mean that there was an improvement in the level of coordination within the movement.

A proposal to establish a decision-making structure for the network of anarchist activists that had come together around Mayday met a largely hostile response (no doubt the fact that there were only a dozen hard to read copies of the proposal did not maximize the chances that it would get a positive reception). The Continental Newspaper Project initiated at the Atlanta meeting attracted only about 20 people who felt that launching a monthly paper at that point was premature and instead decided to produce a pilot called RAGE! to be distributed at the upcoming Pentagon Blockade.

While it was apparent that it would not be possible to build an organizational structure that would unite the whole anarchist movement, it was equally apparent that there had emerged a group of anarchist activists with some common political commitments scattered across North America who had a strong desire to establish some sort of structure to coordinate future actions. It would be about a year before this group coalesced around the proposal to launch a continental anarchist newspaper. What had emerged by this time was an understanding that the best way to bring together serious and committed anarchist activists was around common projects. This didn't mean that we didn't think that it was important to establish what our basis of political unity was. Rather we wanted to unite people who were actually committed to working together

and believed that political agreement could be built on a foundation of working together better than the other way around.

On the third day of the Gathering the U.S. military shot down an Iranian commercial airliner, killing 256 people. The Day of Action, scheduled for the next day, which was intended to be a Warchest Tour was turned into a response to the downing of the airliner. The demonstration began with a march of several hundred people on the U.S. Consulate. Blocking traffic and burning U.S. flags in front of the Consulate the demonstration quickly turned into a running fight with the cops through downtown Toronto. When we learned that the action was the largest response to the downing of the airliner in all of North America the idea of the anarchist movement as the fighting wing of the larger movement sank deeper roots.

At this point, engaged in the concrete projects of organizing for the Pentagon blockade and publishing RAGE!, the history of Love and Rage becomes distinct from that of the larger anarchist movement from which it emerged. We were no longer being bounced around by forces beyond our control, we had become conscious of ourselves first as anarchists within the larger social movements, and then as activists within the anarchist movement who saw the need for political coherence and organization beyond the local level. While we would continue to be shaped by developments in the larger anarchist movement, at this point we began to be propelled just as much by our conscious identity as a group committed to revolutionary anarchist organization.

IN THE BEGINNING...

Before there was Love and Rage there was a thing called the Continental Newspaper Project. The Newspaper Project was a loose grouping of people who were committed to launching a monthly continental anarchist newspaper. The idea of a continental newspaper had been bouncing around in the anarchist movement for a while, particularly since the collapse of the Anarchist Communist Federation which published The North American Anarchist (known as STRIKE! after the ACF's collapse) and the increasing irregularity of publication by Open Road. The initial call for the Newspaper Project came from Back Room Anarchist Books in Minneapolis in December 1987. It was at an anarchist networking meeting in Atlanta in between the Minneapolis and Toronto Gatherings that a group of 5 people from different cities decided to initiate the project.

At the Toronto Gathering a group of about 20 people decided to publish a pilot issue of the newspaper to be entitled RAGE! for distribution at the October 17, 1988 Blockade of the Pentagon. A second pilot issue, Writing on the Wall, was produced for the 1989 San Francisco Anarchist Gathering where two meetings of about 40 people decided to call a conference to launch the monthly newspaper. Up until the founding conference the Newspaper Project had no formal structure. The few decisions that were made were made informally among the people who were most involved at the time.

MAYDAY

Most of the people involved in this process had met each other at the annual Anarchist Gatherings and had worked together on Mayday. Because of its broad mission it was difficult to establish exactly who Mayday was accountable to. One consequence of this absence of a clear structure was that a lot of energy was spent on fighting over Mayday: who decided what went in, who was on the mailing list, who had access to the mailing list, who paid for it, and so on. Most of

the people involved in the Newspaper Project wanted to avoid repeating the experience with Mayday by establishing a clear process for making decisions concerning the newspaper.

THE PENTAGON BLOCKADE

Organizing for the Pentagon blockade and preparing RAGE! (edited by RABL and produced using the RSL's equipment), occupied much of our energies after the Toronto Gathering. In New York City an attempt to impose a curfew on Tompkins Square Park that summer met massive resistance and ignited a police riot involving huge sections of the community. The anarchist movement on the Lower East Side played a significant role in the resistance to the curfew and the militancy of the movement helped overturn the curfew. The Tompkins Square riots inspired many anarchist across the US and their spirit influenced the character of the Pentagon blockade. Also during the summer there were anarchist actions at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions where the Pentagon blockade was discussed.

The Pentagon blockade was originally called by the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) and the Pledge of Resistance as an action against the US support for the right wing Salvadoran government. As at Langley there were two distinct conceptions of the blockade. The New York and Washington DC leaderships of CISPES and the Pledge basically wanted a symbolic civil disobedience and therefore planned a legal rally and a civil disobedience at a single entrance of the Pentagon. The anarchists (taking for this single action the name Mayday Network of Anarchists), the Progressive Student Network, and a number of local CISPES and Pledge groups influenced by the militancy of the Honduras actions wanted to engage in "mobile tactics" blocking access to the Pentagon parking lot and avoiding arrest as long as possible to prolong the actual disruption of work at the Pentagon.

A compromise was worked out designating the parking lot as a mobile tactics zone. The result was a very interesting action. As the first people showed up to work before the sun came up the main entrance to the parking lot was lit with burning tires. Concrete barriers had been dragged in front of other entrances and Pentagon employees trying to walk across the parking lot had their paths blocked by angry masked demonstrators. The surrounding walls were covered with graffiti. This went on for several hours much to the dismay of the East Coast Pledge and CISPES leaders whose civil disobedience seemed entirely symbolic by comparison. Feeling silly blocking only one entrance the civil disobedience was expanded to several entrances. Some people who came for the civil disobedience just stood up and joined the militants in the parking lot.

The Pentagon blockade generated a broad debate on the left about the tactics of "the anarchists." This debate was carried out mostly in the pages of the Guardian and was tilted towards the moderate leftism of the East Coast CISPES and Pledge leaders. RAGE! had announced who we were to the larger demonstration, but lacking a regular newspaper we were dependent on the Guardian to carry our side of this debate. The need for a regular anarchist newspaper that could speak to the broader social movements became more apparent.

THE NEW ERA

A couple weeks after the Pentagon blockade George Bush defeated Michael Dukakis, promising four more years of Republican rule. At the beginning of the election campaign Bush was very unpopular and Dukakis was presumed to be headed for the White House. The anarchist

movement of course largely ignored the elections. But Bush's election had a significant impact on the anarchist movement as well as the broader social movements. The last two years of the Reagan administration had seen a rising tide of social insurgency. The Iran Contra scandal had undermined the legitimacy of the Reagan administration. As a barometer of the social mood the elections were an important indicator of how deep the discontent went. Voter turnout was low, but the Bush victory indicated that the radicalization of the movement did not reflect a dramatic shift in popular feelings.

Bush continued the Reagan policy of incrementally increasing direct US military involvement overseas. But unlike Reagan who was fixated on "the Communist threat" in Central America, Bush chose targets that were difficult for U.S. radicals to rally support for as they had for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and the Salvadoran FMLN. The invasion of Panama that came in December 1989 failed to generate the massive resistance that a similar action against Nicaragua or El Salvador would have. Manuel Noriega was a despot and everybody knew it. The invasion had nothing to do with "restoring democracy," but the Central America movement wasn't prepared to do much to oppose the invasion. The Gulf War was to have a similar character. Saddam Hussein's regime had very little political capital among U.S. radicals. But both these military actions had devastating effects of the broad social movements in the US. They helped create a patriotic public atmosphere that was utterly hostile to any kind of radicalism. They very effectively cut off the increasing insurgency of the late 80s.

1989 saw the rebirth of a militant reproductive rights movement as the Supreme Court's Webster decision undermined Roe v. Wade. Rowdy demonstrations broke out in cities across the country after the decision and created momentum for a November Pro Choice March on Washington. The Webster decision also provoked a resurgent interest in breaking the monopoly of the medical establishment through women's self health.

Perhaps most significantly 1989 brought the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the general defeat of Communism. The Tien An Men Square massacre displayed the moral bankruptcy of the Chinese Communist regime. The rapid disintegration of the Soviet satellite regimes in Eastern Europe left Leninism completely discredited as a revolutionary ideology. For the anarchist movement these events offered an opening, an opportunity to put forward an anti-authoritarian alternative to the ideologies of the authoritarian left. The San Francisco Gathering, coming on the heels of the events in China and the rage at the Webster decision could have been a place to pull together a broad anti authoritarian movement.

About 2,000 people attended the San Francisco Anarchist Gathering, but it would be absurd to suggest that more than a fraction of those attending were serious activists. Many were more into their own "personal liberation" than any kind of political engagement. Many others were merely curiosity seekers. The Rainbow Gathering was taking place that summer in Nevada and so the Anarchist Gathering picked up some of the acid casualties from the Rainbow Gathering who hadn't found their way home yet. The politics were all over the map: every screwball conspiracy theorist seemed to have a workshop. The Gathering was held in a school building in a predominantly Spanish speaking neighborhood, yet none of the Gathering materials were available in Spanish.

The Day of Action in Berkeley at the end of the Gathering turned into a fiasco when the abandoned Berkeley Inn that we had planned to take over and open up as a squat was barricaded in advance by the police and the demonstration turned into a militant but largely undirected expression of anarchist frustration. Great fun was had breaking windows, beating up a racist

skinhead, and attacking a Coca Cola truck (until the fleeing Black driver told TV cameras that the crowd was shouting racist comments). In the midst of this several dozen people gathered for a couple meetings to plan a conference to launch a monthly continental anarchist newspaper.

THE FOUNDING OF LOVE AND RAGE

The founding conference of Love and Rage took place over Thanksgiving weekend in Chicago in 1989. About 65 people attended the conference from about 12 cities. There were six main groups represented at this conference: the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League from Minneapolis, the Hayday Anarchist Collective from Chicago, former members of the Revolutionary Socialist League (from New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles), Bay Area Anti Racist Action, The Alternative from Knoxville, and the Circle A Collective from Atlanta. In addition to these groups there were individual activists from a number of cities and there was a larger body of people who supported the project but who were unable to attend the conference.

The structure established at the conference was designed to enable us to publish a newspaper until our next conference. It was made up of a paid facilitator and a volunteer Production Group in New York and an Editorial Council of 12 people elected at the conference that was empowered to add new members in order to make it more representative of what we rightly expected would be a growing body of supporters. The Editorial Council was to be the highest decision making body between conferences. The decision to make the Editorial Council a body elected at the conference instead of a body of delegates from local groups was a conscious decision based on a particular assessment of the state of the anarchist movement. There were three main points to that assessment. First, while there were a number of collectives that had decided to support the project, a significant amount of support came from individuals who either were not members of local groups or whose local groups had not yet decided to support the newspaper. Second, the structure needed to be simple and understandable if we were to encourage the fullest participation in decision making. Third, we understood that local groups tend to come and go. While we took considerable pains to ensure that the Editorial Council included members of all the major local groups we didn't want their participation contingent on the health of those groups.

THE LOVE AND RAGE STRUCTURE IN PRACTICE

The Editorial Council was set up, as the name suggests, to make editorial decisions for the newspaper that seemed beyond the scope of the Production Group. But almost immediately the Editorial Council was asked to make political decisions outside the sphere of producing the newspaper. We were asked to rent desk space to and to endorse the Earth Day Wall Street Action organized primarily by the Youth Greens and the Left Green Network. We decided to rent the desk space and to hold off on the endorsement until we could discuss whether or not we wanted to make endorsements of actions at all. An Editorial Council meeting in New York in the summer of 1990 confronted the question of the relationship of the newspaper to local groups by establishing the category of Supporting Groups that would be listed with contact addresses in each issue of the newspaper to encourage communications between groups and to help put individuals in contact with groups.

In August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and the U.S. started to prepare for the Gulf War. This crisis forced the question of whether or not Love and Rage should endorse actions. At the November

1990 Editorial Council meeting it was decided that we would call for an anarchist contingent to what we expected would be a spring March on Washington. It was felt that a contingent was necessary, that Love and Rage had more credibility to call for one than any single local group, and that the importance of building resistance to the war meant that it would be irresponsible for Love and Rage not to call for a contingent. It was also felt that since there were two national anti-war coalitions we might have to choose between more than one action and that we didn't want to find ourselves working at cross purposes. Also Love and Rage had the resources to print up a lot of posters and mail them out on relatively short notice to all the groups and individuals that distributed the paper (as well as lots of folks that didn't). Using the collective resources of the newspaper required the approval of somebody. The only appropriate body to make such a decision seemed to be the Editorial Council.

To make a long story short the Editorial Council decided to call for a Black Bloc at the January 26 March on Washington and not at the January 19 one. While the Black Bloc had its problems there was little doubt that it should have been called and little doubt that choosing a single date enabled anarchists to have a larger impact than if our energies had been divided between the two demonstrations.

The decision to call the Black Bloc meant acknowledging that Love and Rage was "more than just a newspaper." This of course was not a big surprise to the people who had founded the newspaper. From the beginning we saw the newspaper as a vehicle for raising the level of coordinated activity within the anarchist movement. The problem was that the structure we had in place was designed for "just a newspaper." We expected that we would have to change the structure we had started with eventually. Most of us had ideas about what a new structure might look like. We didn't know when the need for one would occur. It was our view that the newspaper would attract a lot of new people and that those people should be allowed to participate as fully as possible in changing the structure. There is an important principle here: No structure is perfect for every purpose. The structure we decided on was designed to enable the people who originally came together to carry out certain tasks (publishing a monthly newspaper) and to accommodate some expected growth in the circle of support for this project. But we consciously decided against trying to anticipate all of the new kinds of activity we fully expected we would eventually be involved in. The original structure was not the best possible one for organizing a Black Bloc, but it worked well enough to get us through until we could change our structure.

THE GULF WAR

It wasn't immediately apparent, but the Gulf War radically changed the conditions under which Love and Rage existed. Prior to the Gulf War, Love and Rage aimed to be the expression of the militant anti authoritarian wing of the various social movements. The Gulf War brought about the general collapse of these movements. Millions of people who had poured into the streets when the U.S. began bombing Baghdad were deeply demoralized and it became increasingly difficult to turn people out for any sort of action. If the kind of massive opposition that was built up in such a short period of time couldn't stop the slaughter of 100,000 Iraqis, any other expression of opposition to the system seemed futile. The movement against the Gulf War largely evaporated before the two month war was over.

Every new movement politicizes and radicalizes a new group of activists whose experiences inform the next period. The nuclear disarmament movement energized a group of young anarchists.

The divestment struggle built on that energy and made a generation of students much more conscious of racism. The Central America solidarity movement built on those earlier struggles and gave the growing body of young radical activists the sense that they could build a massive popular resistance movement.

The Gulf War had the reverse effect on the thousands of new activists it mobilized. Defeated and demoralized, the activists politicized by the Gulf War who continued on with political work were perhaps more cautious and conservative than any generation of activists since the 1950s. That is not to say that they hated the system any less than any other activists, rather that their experiences had burned into their consciousness a profound skepticism about the potential of mass insurgency.

This was just as true for the anarchist movement which took a beating with everybody else. The conservatism and cautiousness expressed itself as a retreat into the most narrowly defined concepts of “community.” One’s household, or food co op, or zine became the focus of political work. The rest of the world seemed impossible to tackle and so it was ignored. Anarchist groups fell apart all over the place.

In spite of this general retreat Love and Rage grew. But it was not growth based on an optimism about the vision of a mass resistance movement that had brought Love and Rage together. It was more like the population growth of a life boat picking up exhausted waterlogged survivors of a shipwreck. So while the tasks of organizing against the Gulf War compelled Love and Rage to raise its level of organization, the defeat of the anti-war movement meant that Love and Rage was flooded with new people who did not necessarily share the understanding of the need for organization that had originally brought us together to found Love and Rage. This meant that each step towards a tighter more effective organization involved considerable hesitations and qualifications. No sooner would a decision be made than it would have to be made again because its original implications were not fully understood the first time.

THE LOVE AND RAGE NETWORK

The first opportunity to change the structure of Love and Rage was the Minneapolis Love and Rage Anarchist Organizing Conference in the summer of 1991. Several key changes in the structure of Love and Rage took place at this conference. First, we acknowledged that we were more than a newspaper and called ourselves the Love and Rage Network. Second, the Editorial Council was replaced with a 10 member Coordinating Group popularly elected by the conference. Third, we set up a brand new decision making body, the Network Council that would be made up of two delegates from each local Supporting Group plus the members of the Coordinating Group.

The Network Council was supposed to be the highest decision making body between conferences, but it was understood that putting in place such a delegate structure would take time and that in the mean time the Coordinating Group was needed to make decisions quickly. The Network Council never really got off the ground. There was a Network Council meeting in Hamilton, Ontario in the spring of 1992. But it wasn’t really clear who were the two delegates from each group and in the spirit of encouraging participation by everyone no effort was made to more sharply define who was and who wasn’t on the Network Council. The result of this was that the Coordinating Group continued to make the decisions that we hoped would be taken up by the Network Council which didn’t really exist. The effect of this was organizational paralysis: no serious decisions could be made without the approval of the Network Council, but the Network

Council didn't really exist. This was the situation going into the Atlanta Conference in November 1992.

THE LOS ANGELES REBELLION

Shortly after the Hamilton Network Council meeting Los Angeles exploded in response to the acquittal of the four cops charged with the beating of Rodney King. The rebellion spread to several other cities and massive protests took place across the US and around the world. The Los Angeles rebellion was the single largest rebellion in US history since the Civil War. At a moment when the organized left was in a state of almost complete disarray the Los Angeles rebellion revealed the depth of unorganized popular discontent in the US particularly among Black and Latino poor folk.

The Los Angeles rebellion pointed to the crying need for effective revolutionary organizations that could turn the spontaneous outrage of the rebellion into a sustained and revolutionary challenge to the existing order. Obviously Love and Rage was in no position to effectively take on that task yet. But the Los Angeles rebellion underlined the importance of a project we were involved in: the Anti-Racist summer Project (ARSP).

The ARSP was a project of concentrating young anti-racist activists in an area where the racist right was organizing to attempt to build an anti-racist movement that could combat them. The neighborhood of East St. Paul, Minnesota was chosen for a pilot project that we hoped would be a model for similar projects the next summer. By almost every measure the ARSP was a failure. About a dozen folks from across the US and Canada were packed into a single house for most of the summer of 1992 to organize the neighborhood against the activities of a group of racist skinheads. While a few events and demonstrations were organized, considerable amounts of energy were expended on internal fights. The project was organized with the Twin Cities Anti-Racist Action group. But rather than build the group, the ARSP exacerbated existing divisions within the group leading to its (ultimately temporary) collapse. The nazis for their part kept their heads low for the summer making it particularly difficult to convince their neighbors of the urgency of stopping them.

It was hoped that the ARSP would train a core of organizers who would work on similar projects in other cities. Most of the participants continued their activism after the summer, but the bad feelings generated meant that the ARSP would not continue.

What the ARSP did teach us was that there was no shortcut to building an organization of serious and trained activists. Without much more careful advance planning with the local groups affected a national or continental project like the ARSP could have very bad effects for a local group. The development of an effective organizational strategy would be a long and painstaking one based on a slow process of trial and error with few people and fewer resources.

CRISIS IN THE ORGANIZATION

The failure of the ARSP was shortly followed by a more general crisis within Love and Rage. While this crisis found its sharpest expression in an effective split within the New York group, it reflected a basic contradiction within the organization as a whole. The crisis first became apparent at the November 1992 Love and Rage Network conference in Atlanta. A proposal from the outgoing facilitator, Matt Black, that put the existing structure into the form of a set of written

by-laws seemed to come from out of the blue. (Publication of the Network Discussion Bulletin scheduled to appear before the conference had been delayed until immediately before.) With a few relatively minor changes Matt's proposal was simply an attempt to put into a coherent written form the structure and decision making process we already had in place. But to many of the people in attendance the proposal seemed overly centralized.

The negative response to the proposal in some ways illustrated how important it was to have a set of written by-laws because so many people were unaware of the actual working structure of the Network that it was interpreted as an attempt to impose something new on the Network. But more importantly, the response indicated that the Network had reached a point where a lot more people cared about the structure and wanted to participate more fully in the discussions and decisions around whatever structure we were to have. The failure to make the Network Council work had meant that a lot of people who felt like they were part of the Network were not part of the informal discussions of structure that took place before the conference. The Atlanta Conference did make some structural changes in the Network, but the ratification of any formal set of by-laws was put off by the crisis in the organization for almost two years.

One very significant decision was made at Atlanta however, to launch a Spanish language edition of the newspaper out of Mexico City.

TWO VISIONS

The negative response to the by-laws proposal precipitated the emergence of two opposed conceptions of the Love and Rage Network. The first conception was of a very loose network of local groups that would maintain a structure primarily for purposes of communications and mutual aid. The second conception was of a tighter organization, with a clearly defined membership and politics that would strategically carry out coordinated activity across North America. These two conceptions emerged when several members of the newspaper Production Group in New York authored a proposal to "decentralize" Love and Rage. The proposal called for, amongst other things, turning the newspaper into an autonomous project of the New York group that would be on an equal standing with the various other autonomous projects of different local groups.

In opposition to this position several members of the New York group posed an alternative position in a brief statement of five points. The key points were that Love and Rage should become an organization with clearly defined membership, a statement of our common politics, and an expectation that members work on the projects of the organization. Furthermore we argued for decentralizing specific functions then concentrated in the New York office by delegating them to functioning local groups. This was in contrast to a notion of decentralization that we thought would mean dismantling the few organizational advances we had made since Love and Rage had been founded. The advocates of the five points argued that the call for decentralization was ultimately, if perhaps unintentionally, anti-organizational. It was a proposal to return to the organizational level of Mayday. We argued that without clearly defining membership in Love and Rage policies would be set, not by those most committed to the organization, but by whoever felt like and was able to show up for a conference.

We had already seen the consequences of this arrangement. Conferences consistently endorsed and took on a dizzying number of projects that the Network was in no position to carry out instead of setting priorities and strategically focusing our limited resources on things we actually could do. We also felt that without a statement of our common politics it would continue

to be impossible to develop any sort of working strategy that would inform these decisions. The conflict between the two positions came to a head at the summer 1993 Love and Rage Network Conference in San Diego. The conference itself illustrated the significance of the divergence of the two positions. Over half of the participants in the conference were new to Love and Rage. Most of these people were not deeply committed to Love and Rage. They were there to check it out. But their numbers meant that they would play a decisive role in any decisions about the future of the organization even if they had little intention of working within it in the future.

As it turned out the critical decisions to base membership on agreement with a (so far unfinished) political statement, passed by the narrowest majorities. While we felt that we had not yet reached the point where we could call ourselves a functioning federation we decided to change the name of the organization from the Love and Rage Network to the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation as a gesture of conciliation to those now outside the organization who thought that the word "Network" was inconsistent with our turn towards a tighter organization. Some of the folks who opposed the decisions made at the San Diego conference have gone on to do valuable work building the Anarchist Black Cross and the looser Network of Anarchist Collectives.

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The Political Pre-History of Love & Rage
Anarchist Struggle in the 1980s and 1990s
June 7, 2014

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This zine presents one version of the history of the anarchist context out of which the Love & Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation emerged in the early 1990s. This zine was first made available online by the Anarchist History Nerd Brigade.

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