

People must come first

Some comments on the document of the Italian Anarchist Federation “For a new anarchist manifesto against war”

Anarchistická federace

22 August 2022

It has to be admitted that there is still disagreement within Internationale of Anarchist Federations (IFA) about the position on the war in Ukraine. This contradiction was already addressed shortly after the start of the Russian Federation’s invasion of Ukraine by the Czech Anarchist Federation’s (AF) anarchist journal Existence. The line between the two camps was indicated on the crucial issue of supporting the defence against Putin’s intention to occupy and “deukrainize” Ukraine. One side, represented mainly by Italian Anarchist Federation (FAI), rejects support for defence. The other, perhaps most prominently represented by AF, presented its rather pro-defence position right at the beginning of the invasion.

The IFA’s Relations Committee, which met on 19–20 March, discussed, among other things, matters relating to the ongoing war in Ukraine. Although there are differing views among the member federations on some points, they agreed to continue further discussion. The debate resulted in common positions, which were summarized in a statement entitled “Against War, for Global Solidarity” (full text in Czech at the end of the article). AF subsequently (in mid-April) stressed that the statement was a compromise but did not fully reflect its positions. However, the debate within the IFA did not heat up.

In early August, the Document presented in June at the XXXI. FAI Congress in Empoli 2022 was published and ratified in the following weeks. It is titled “For a new anarchist manifesto against war” and you can read it (depending on your linguistic abilities with or without a translator) in Italian, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian or Czech.

The introduction to the document says that the criticisms of the FAI’s position have been carefully considered. However, none of the points of criticism – and that there have been many from the international anarchist movement especially from Eastern and Central Europe – appear in the lines that follow, nor is there any attempt to refute them. In effect, it is just a restatement of the FAI’s own position. The reflection of criticism is simply not there.

The beginning is telling: “Our thoughts go first to our comrades who, more than a century ago, before the tragedy of the First World War, felt the need...” Perhaps this is the summary of the whole problem – a central point of misunderstanding, a completely different starting point. While our thoughts go first to the working people in Ukraine, bloodily crushed by the imperial invasion, and to our comrades who resisted that aggression, our Italian friends and comrades turn

to the past. Perhaps it is because anarchists from Eastern and Central Europe have historical experience of the Russian occupation, they are closer to living people in danger than to the quotes of their predecessors. But even here there are those who prefer to look to the past rather than reflect that the first priority for anarchists should be the living people, the people who are in danger of losing what little freedoms they have.

Another point of misunderstanding is the FAI's insistence on generalisation. But neither the world nor life is that simple. Nor are all conflicts identical. If we try to generalize war as an immutable model, we will never be able to analyze the real events around us. In the grip of such an approach, the FAI's document states obvious things (with which one cannot but agree) that, when confronted with a context other than that created by generalized war, suddenly lack meaning and are literally beside the point. If we leave behind the idealised, uniform image of war, then a vast field of thinking, listening, comparing, analysing and creating our own strategy opens up before us.

Another false starting point is to isolate social anarchism from the real world of workers and keep it in a kind of Platonic realm of pure ideas. The FAI's document says: "We do not accept the concept of territorial integrity or territorial 'defence' of the state or any entity that aspires to be a state, because these principles, coupled with the principle of territorial sovereignty, inevitably end up promoting nationalist or micronationalist perspectives. Whatever the word 'nation' means, it implies a division to exploiter and exploited, to oppressor and oppressed." Agreed. But on such an ideologically defined playing field, it is as if real workers are forbidden to play. They are told that if they fight against a genocidal empire, it is for the state. Their fault is that they did not rise up and create a mass anti-state movement. But most workers are not familiar with idea about any non-state perspective. Those in Ukraine are not so much fighting for the state as for the preservation of political freedoms, which anarchists in Italy enjoy as much as those in the Czech Republic. And without these freedoms, they can hardly wage any social struggles for their rights as workers in the future. And anarchists will hardly build any movement in the territory occupied by the invading army.

We agree on the hypocrisy of the Western states. But is it not also hypocritical not to lend a helping hand to our comrades in the struggle and just wait to see how it all turns out? The workers in Ukraine do not deserve to suffer because the workers in Russia did not overthrow a dictator. And an attacking dictator who is razing entire communities to the ground will not be stopped by our anti-militarist manifestos.

The FAI's document says: "The first commitment of those who oppose the war is to build and spread practices of mutual aid, such as grassroots solidarity networks, to meet the immediate needs of people who suffer most from the effects of conflict, whether it be food or medical aid. There is also a need for networks of support for those who practice strikes, sabotage, desertion, as well as transnational networks for those who are hiding or fleeing from or across both sides of the front." But isn't this really just a little patch-up in the process of the occupiers coming in, leaving behind destroyed houses, raped women, dead children, shot civilians and tortured prisoners? Would it not be more appropriate to listen to the voice of the majority of anarchists in Ukraine (and also in Russia and Belarus) calling for Putin's defeat? If we listen to them, then there will be more than one of those commitments, and perhaps one of the most difficult will be the post-war support of the anarchist movement and the workers in Ukraine and Russia in their social struggles (no one seems to doubt that capital and the state will want to bite off as much as possible at the expense of the workers, as is the case in "our" countries).

“For any struggle to be effective — with or without weapons — it must be led and organized from below, outside the apparatuses of states, governments and especially outside the armed forces.” Again, a statement with which one can only agree. However, it is only valid in the context of an existing organised movement from below that is capable of such a struggle. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this statement is just a slap in the face. We wish it worked that way too, but the reality here and now is different and we need to be aware of that, otherwise we as anarchists are completely irrelevant to the whole class of the unprivileged (not just in Ukraine).

The document concludes, “The ability of the anarchist movement to be united in the struggle against war is the way to activate libertarian practices, organizations and ideals among the exploited and oppressed classes who are the first to suffer the effects of war.” Perhaps there is no point in trying to achieve unity at any cost. The historical experience of occupation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe is clearly not transferable and is difficult to understand in regions that have not been occupied or even have their own imperial past. I am convinced that if there is to be “an activation of libertarian practices, organisations and ideals” in Ukraine (and in other countries affected in the past and present by “Russian power interests”, including Russia itself), this will not be possible without anarchists joining the struggle against empire. Otherwise, no one will listen to them.

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