

Letters to Anarchy on Platformism

Anarcho

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First Letter to Anarchy

Dear *Anarchy*

I was deeply disappointed by the last issue of *Anarchy*. The reason is simple. While denouncing what it considers the “repeated pronouncements of contempt for many (often even most) anarchists” and those who present “no hint ... that the people denounced might have genuinely radical and intelligent reasons for thinking and acting as they do,” we were subjected to exactly this as regards “Platformism.”

In the various articles bashing the Platform, at no time was there any attempt to explain why some anarchists have felt an affinity to that document and the tradition is created (and, yes, it does have a tradition and influence even if some contributors to *Anarchy* may want to deny it). This seems strange, considering the claim that *Anarchy* thinks **other** anarchists should be doing that. What are we to conclude from this? That “workerist, organisationalist” anarchists have to apply one set of standards while the contributors of *Anarchy* another? I get that impression. Even the review of **NorthEastern Anarchist** magazine failed to meet the exacting standards *Anarchy* set for others. I re-read both Aileen O’Carroll’s article on the Russian Revolution and Brian Sheppard’s one on the labour movement and I have to say that *Anarchy*’s “review” of both was simply a distortion of what they argued.

I am not going to reply to every point raised in the numerous articles produced. That would be impossible. Likewise, as I am not a Platformist I will not defend it. I will say this, Malatesta’s critique of the Platform was substantially correct and, moreover, exactly the kind of critique *Anarchy* promised but failed to deliver. Malatesta understood the motivations of the original Platformists and had a dialogue with Makhno without questioning his anarchism. Unlike *Anarchy*’s contributors, he did not slander Makhno as being a crypto-Leninist but rather an anarchist whose position should be constructively discussed. But, then again, Malatesta was an “organisationalist” anarchist (maybe even a “workerist” one as well) and so, presumably, “one step” from Platformism and so two steps from Leninism.

I will, however, make a few comments.

Firstly, I need correct one of Bob Black’s inaccuracies. He states that the WSM “without so indicating, omits several interesting passages from the **Platform**.” Presumably this is part of some plan to hide the Leninist aims of that document and so, presumably, the WSM itself. Sadly for Black, his comments are simply not true. These “interesting passages” are not, in fact, from the **Platform**. They are from a later document (which is reprinted as “document no. 3” in Skirda’s **Facing the Enemy**). Skirda’s translation of one passage simply states that “decisions, though, will have to be binding upon all who vote for and endorse them.” No mention of “sanctions.” Ignoring the question of which translation is correct, is Black suggesting that abiding by collective decisions you took part in making equates to “the state”? If so, then any organisation becomes “the state” and so anarchy becomes an impossible dream. If not, then surely abiding, in general, by group decisions you help make is an example of the “responsible individualism” he contrasts to the Platform?

Secondly, I find it ironic that while Black accuses the Platform of Leninism, his critique of it rests, in part, on the basic idea of Leninism, namely the false notion that working class people cannot develop socialist ideas by their own effort. He is at pains to mock the Platform for arguing that anarchism was born in the class struggle. “This is of course untrue,” he asserts. It appears to be a case of “class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only

outside of the economic struggle, outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers”? Black again? No, Lenin (from **What is to be Done?**). Or, in other words, “socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other” (to quote, as Lenin did, Social Democratic leader Karl Kautsky).

It seems strange that Black seemingly subscribes to Lenin’s maxim that “*there can be no talk of an independent ideology being developed by the masses of the workers in the process of their movement.*” Where does that leave working class spontaneity and autonomy? Lenin was clear, “*there is a lot of talk about spontaneity, but the spontaneous development of the labour movement leads to its becoming subordinated to bourgeois ideology.*” Which, from his perspective, makes perfect sense. But where does it leave Black?

Not only can Black’s argument be faulted logically, it can be faulted factually. Echoing Lenin and Kautsky, Black argues that anarchism comes from Proudhon. Yet was Proudhon somehow separate from the experiences of the class he was part of? He was not, of course. Proudhon got many of his ideas (and the term Mutualism itself) from the artisans in Lyon who had developed their ideas independently of bourgeois intellectuals and had practised class struggle for some time (rising the black flag in insurrection in the 1830s). In 1848, Proudhon stressed that his ideas were not abstract concepts divorced from working class life. As he put it, “*the proof*” of his mutualist ideas lay in the “*current practice, revolutionary practice*” of “*those labour associations ... which have spontaneously ... been formed in Paris and Lyon.*” But, then again, the likes of Proudhon, according to Lenin, contribute to socialist ideas “*not as workers, but as socialist theoreticians.*” Black seems to share that perspective.

Similarly, Bakunin’s anarchism seems, for Black, to have popped into his head from some unspecified place. However, the facts are that the ideas championed by Bakunin had been developed independently within the First International by workers before he joined. This, in part, explains his success in the International. He was a focus for ideas that had already been developed by workers as part of their struggles and experiences, ideas he of course add to and deepen. Bakunin contributed to anarchism, but working class people and their ideas contributed to the development of his ideas.

Then there is Kropotkin. While Black uses him to discredit the Platform on this issue, the fact is that Kropotkin expressed the same ideas as that document. In “**Modern Science and Anarchism**”, for example, he notes that “*Anarchism originated among the people*” and, indeed, that it “*originated in everyday struggles.*” In his “**Great French Revolution**” he argues that “*the principles of anarchism ... already dated from 1789, and that they had their origin, not in theoretical speculations, but in the **deeds** of the Great French Revolution.*” The Platform, clearly, follows Kropotkin in this. Personally, I’ll side with Kropotkin (and the Platform) against Black (and Lenin) on this issue.

All this is not surprising, given a basic knowledge of anarchist theory and history. What is surprising is that someone like Black should make such an argument. I expected better from him, but I’m unfortunately getting used to being disappointed by his (often sloppy) assertions against “*workerist*” and “*organisationalist*” anarchists.

Thirdly, I have to question why Black feels the necessity of mentioning Makhno’s drinking in his account of the Platform. Given that Makhno had seen non-stop combat for four years, I’m not surprised that he turned to drink to dull the pain (both mental and physical). And, incidentally, why mention Arshinov’s return to Russia when discussing the Platform? I suppose it is to suggest that Platformists were (and are) just hidden Leninists. But, then, how can we explain the fact

that Makhno and Mett remained anarchists to the end? Mentioning Arshinov's return seems as petty as mentioning Makhno's drinking. Equally, to compare the Platform's arguments for a revolutionary army with "*the counter-revolutionary People's Army*" in Spain is incredible. Looking at its suggestions on this matter surely shows that the CNT's "*revolutionary militias*" were a close approximation to what was desired. Given the similarities between the CNT militias and the Makhnovist movement, I am surprised that anyone could claim otherwise.

Fourthly, the whole "dual power" article seems flawed. After all, Lenin and Trotsky were simply **describing** situations that arose in the process of class struggle. As such, it is not about "*how to create a set of institutions that can pull the allegiance of the governed away from the existing state*" (as Lawrence Jarach states) but rather institutions which the governed create themselves to counter the power of the existing state. That the Bolsheviks used the soviets to seize power should not blind us to their origins and initial function as a strike committee created in 1905 to coordinate struggle against the Tsarist state. Significantly, anarchist support for the soviets as both a means of fighting the state/capital and as the framework of a socialist society predates Bolshevik lip-service to this idea by twelve years (and can be traced back to Bakunin, even Proudhon).

As such, the idea of "*anarchist dual power*" (if you want to use that term) simply means the idea that the embryo of the new world must be created while fighting the current one. Rather than signify a desire for "*loyalty*" to "*a state-in-formation*" it means encouraging organs of self-management by which the oppressed exercise their autonomy and restrict the power of boss and government until such time as they can abolish both. Kropotkin expressed this idea as follows in 1909: "*To make a revolution it is not ... enough that there should be ... [popular] risings ... It is necessary that after the risings there should be something new in the institutions [that make up society], which would permit new forms of life to be elaborated and established.*"

That the Bolsheviks used such organs to take power does not mean we should eschew support for them. Quite the reverse, as such bodies are the only means by which working class people can manage their own affairs directly. The task of anarchists is, in part, to stop vanguards turning these bodies into hierarchical institutions, into the structures of a new state. So the idea of building "societies of resistance" within capitalism is an old one within anarchism, one which predates the birth of Lenin and Trotsky (never mind their descriptive expression "dual power").

Fifthly, it seems to me that the only people who take the Platform as a bible are the anti-Platformists. All the Platformists I have met argue that they see the Platform as a flawed guide, not a blueprint. No "Platformist" I know subscribes to the organisational schema outlined in it. The principles of federalism, tactical and theoretical unity, and so on are generally supported, of course, but the system of secretariats is not applied. Even "tactical and theoretical unity" is generally used to signify co-operation and sticking by collective decisions once they have been made. As such, to attack the Platform without considering how it is applied seems a pointless task. It smacks more of an ideological approach than a theoretical one. Perhaps, as argued in reply to a letter, it would make more sense for the Platformists to call themselves neo-Platformists to avoid confusion on this matter but, then again, perhaps the "post-left" anarchists could take this as read and move onto concrete critiques of current Platformist ideas and practice?

Finally, on a totally different subject, I would like to make a few comments on (I)An-ok Ta Chai's letter calling for unity between anarchists and "right anarchists." As there is no such thing as "right anarchists" it would be impossible to work with them. By "right anarchists" I assume it is meant right-wing libertarian capitalists who falsely call themselves anarchists. Given that these people are in favour of private police, property (and so theft), obedience (to private power

by wage slaves), private rulers and have blind faith in both private property and the capitalist market, it seems that they and anarchists do not, in fact, share much in common in terms of what we are against. In terms of what we are for, they are against free association, free speech, autonomy, and independent thought if the property owner so decrees. They may be against state power, but they are in total favour of private power and the means of defending it (e.g. by means of private police). I think its obvious that little in common and we should resist their attempts to appropriate the anarchist name for their authoritarian ideology.

Ultimately, I feel that the whole “post-left” argument is flawed simply because anarchism already rejects everything which is labelled “leftist” by *Anarchy* contributors. It seems to me a case of semantics, over which much pointless arguing past each other will result. I also find it strange to see anarchists influenced by Platformism arguing for diversity of tactics and organisation while “post-left” anarchists denounce all those who organise and act in non-approved ways as “workerists,” “organisationalists” and “leftists.” But in these times I’ve come to expect such strangeness.

Hopefully comrades in North America will realise that the mistakes made by a real revolutionary movement will always be more important than a thousand articles. After all, only practice will see who is right. Sadly *Anarchy’s* contributors singularly failed to appreciate that many anarchists are influenced by the Platform precisely because of their negative experiences of current forms of anarchist organising and activity. If some anarchists are organising into a specific organisation (and I think it is good that they are) then, surely, this is due the failure of the “anti-organisationalism” which seems to dominate North American anarchism. I hope that anarchists everywhere will avoid the problems of both “anti-organisationalism” and Platformism and embrace a truly anarchist approach to organising together to spread our ideas within the struggle **against** hierarchy in order to turn it into a struggle **for** freedom. Reading Malatesta’s critique of the Platform would be a good first step.

Yours in solidarity
Iain

Second Letter to Anarchy

Dear *Anarchy*,

I do think it’s significant that Black starts off by insulting me, saying I have “earned the nickname Dolly II as the cloned Scottish sheep of Stewart Home, who claims that all anarchists are Nazis.” As Black is well aware, I am nothing of the kind.

And what of the issues I raised in my letter? Black takes exception to the parallels I drew between Lenin’s vanguardist ideas and his claim that anarchism was not the product of working class people in struggle but rather the product of “Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin.” He claims that these are “well known facts” which “should not be controversial.” They are only “not controversial” if you are a vanguardist. They should be controversial if you are an anarchist. I even quoted Proudhon and Kropotkin to show how they considered anarchist ideas to be the product of working people’s self-activity. Black, significantly, fails to mention this.

Instead, he claims that I have “obviously never read Lenin.” Except, I have and critiqued him at length. Lenin, Black informs us, “was discussing socialism, not anarchism.” No shit, Sherlock! (although that did not stop Lenin bringing Proudhon into it to defend his position). I was drawing

the parallel between that aspect of Black's attack on the Platform with Lenin's argument. Replace "socialism" with "anarchism" in Black's essay and we have the core of Lenin's argument.

The strange thing is, while Black huffs and puffs, he continues to agree with Lenin! He states that he ("unlike Lenin [!] and McKay") knows "anarchism did not originate in the Group Mind of a social class." Except, of course, I made no such claim about a "Group Mind." Rather I argued anarchist ideas have spontaneously developed from the self-activity of working class people. Anarchist thinkers have taken up those ideas and generalised them into a theory. This was what Kropotkin argued and the Platform repeated this. Black mocked this idea and, in the process, repeated Lenin's argument. He still does and happily admits it. Why is he wasting my time?

Black states incredulously that he is "accused of falsification of the Platform for repeating passages quoted in Voline." Yet that is not what I claimed. I pointed out that Black had accused the WSM of falsifying the Platform by editing it (the WSM "*without so indicating, omits several interesting passages from the Platform.*"). This, it goes without saying, is a radically different accusation.

He meekly states that it "turns out that these quotations were taken (unknown to me) not from the Platform itself but from" another document. It is nice to see that Black does admit this. Sadly, he does not bother to thank me for doing his work for him by finding that out. If you are going to accuse other anarchists of secretly editing a text you could at least check to see if the claim was true. I found the relevant facts out in ten minutes, obviously far too much effort for Black. And rather than apologise to the members of the WSM for smearing them, Black accuses Alexandre Skirda of exactly the same thing! Rest assured, though, rather than actually investigate the matter he glibly states that he "suspect[s]" Skirda of doing so! Given Black's track record on such matters, I won't share his (unsupported) assertions until I see the kind of evidence Black tends to eschew.

This does not stop Black saying the "quotations were true, not false. McKay's contrary statement is false, not true"! Except, of course, Black has just admitted that my statement was true. The Platform, as he admits, does not contain the passages he claimed it did. The WSM did not edit the pamphlet, as he asserted. And he then turns round and says my statement "is false"! And he writes that I have "either forgotten what I originally wrote or hopes that everyone else has"!

As part of this surreal experience, Black also quotes the original Platformists on "coercion" and freedom of the press. As for the former, he quotes them saying that decisions will be implemented "not through violence or decrees." Coercion without violence? He quotes that decisions "will have to be binding upon all who vote for and endorse then." So making decisions is now considered "coercion"? As for freedom of the press, he quotes the Platformists saying that "there may be specific circumstances when the press ... may be restricted." Black, unlike the Platformists, does not say what these circumstances were, namely in a "civil war context" and the "role that enemy mouthpieces will be undertaking in relation to the ongoing military struggle." Outside these "extraordinary cases (such as civil war)" free speech and freedom of press, the Platformists stress, would be "the pride and joy of the free toilers' society."

Clearly Black is quoting out of context. Perhaps he is arguing that it is "leftist" not to grant freedom of press to people actively trying to kill you. If so, then fine. He should say so. And if it is non-anarchist to do so, then Emma Goldman will also have to be excommunicated from anarchism. She though it was "childish to expect the CNT-FAI to include Fascists and other forces engaged in their destruction in the extension of complete political freedom." (Vision on Fire, p. 228).

Black repeats his nonsense on how the Platform's call for a revolutionary army was "exactly" the same as the Spanish Republic's call for a People's Army. The Platform called for an army similar to the "detachments of insurgent partisans ... during the Russian revolution." Yes, that was "exactly" the same kind of thing introduced by the Stalinists and Republicans. He states that the Platformists argued for "an authoritarian formal army" while, of course, they argued for a volunteer, class army based on self-discipline and explicitly *denied* that they wanted "a standing, centralised army." They did argue for a "common revolutionary strategy," but so did the CNT militias (and Voline, whose call for co-ordinated defence they dismissed as "aping" their ideas). I can only assume that Black is against the idea that the defence of a revolution should be co-ordinated. If he is, then he should say so and explain why.

Black says I invoke, "as holy all the great names of anarchism . =2E . in defence of Platformism without *even once* citing any evidence that any of them, except Makhno, advocated anything like the vanguard organisation espoused by the Platform." That is unsurprising, as I was not defending Platformism. I made that clear in my first letter: "as I am not a Platformist I will not defend it." What part of that did Black not understand?

He then moves on to assert that when I listed all these anarchists into the "defence" of a Platform I do not support I "did so in the face of the fact that Voline, Malatesta, Goldman, Berkman, Nettelau, Fabbri, Berneri – all the notable anarchists when the Platform was promulgated – denounced it." Except, of course, I actually wrote the following: "I will say this, Malatesta's critique of the Platform was substantially correct." I even ended my letter by saying "I hope that anarchists everywhere will avoid the problems of both "anti-organisationalism" and Platformism ... Reading Malatesta's critique of the Platform would be a good first step." What part of that is denying that notable anarchists did not criticise the Platform?

And based on this he claims that I am "not even close" to being an anarchist!

Black then gets even more surreal (if that is possible). He states incredulously that Bookchin's "Listen, Marxist!" does "not espouse revolutionary organisation or, for that matter, anarchism" and so finds it amusing I "should claim" it "for organisationalist/workerist anarchism." Sorry, what planet is he on? Bookchin in that essay, as I noted, argued for "an organisation of affinity groups." He even stated there was "a need for a revolutionary organisation"! What part of that does Black have difficulty understanding? As for that essay not espousing anarchism that comes as a surprise given its explicitly anarcho-communist critique of Leninism.

Black ends by stating that I have "already renounced the substance of anarchism." In what way? It cannot be because I am a Platformist, because I am not. It cannot be because I failed to note that anarchists like Malatesta opposed the Platform, because I did. Can it be because I think a revolution will need organisation and co-ordinated defence? Is it because I think anarchists should organise together to spread their ideas? Or that I think workers like myself should organise together to fight for a better world? If so, then he excommunicates Malatesta, Bakunin, Goldman, Berkman, et al, along with myself. So that cannot be it.

I think its more personal than that. I think he excommunicates me from anarchism because I have pointed out Black's own mistakes. I think the real source of his bile is simply that I fact-checked him and shown him to be lacking. Perhaps it is also because I disagree with him? That may be it. After all, he calls me a "cloned Scottish sheep." True free thinkers obviously don't question Black's assertions nor check his sources and references to see if they support his claims.

But I am not alone in being excommunicated, so is NEFAC (and presumably all other neo-Platformists). As far as the latter goes, he does so apparently because "*What Neo-Platformists*

most value in the Platform must be the model of a vanguard revolutionary organisation – the only novelty in the Platform, the Leninist import.” Fine, bar one thing. Black does not indicate that any modern day Platform-influenced group actually implements the organisational model advocated in the 1926 document. From what I can tell, none does. If he bothered to talk to neo-Platformists, he would quickly find this out as well as what they really “most value” in that document. But I feel that actually listening to what others say is the last thing Black wants to do. It may force him to think rather than insult.

So Black excommunicates people from the movement based on what they do not support (in my case) and what a 79 year old draft document says rather than what anarchists today actually do (for neo-Platformists). Says it all, really.

Yours,

Iain McKay

Third Letter to Anarchy

Dear *Anarchy*

Jason McQuinn states he cannot make sense of some of my “extensive rant.” Sadly his reply proved my point by its descent into insults and attempts at ridicule. Yes, indeed, the “horror of it all” if you cannot respond to a letter without lowering the tone. “Don’t make [you] laugh”? Please. Does labelling another comrade’s letter a “rant” suggest a good environment to discuss issues? Hardly. Obviously some kinds of “personal attacks, irrational labelling, irrelevant mudslinging” are more horrendous than others.

Similarly, to suggest that my letter indicates being “afraid of criticism” seems incredulous. If so, I would not bother writing. I did so, partly, to highlight the hypocritical tone of the “anti-Platform” issue with its petty attacks on Platformists (which detracted from any positive points being made) along aside the plea for rational debate between anarchists. Debate and critique is essential, it is how it is done which matters. The issue promised one thing and (sadly) delivered another. My other concern was to correct some inaccuracies and to highlight some issues with two of the articles. But, clearly, to do this equates with producing a “rant” and being afraid of criticism. Silly me. I had failed to realise that critique was a one-way street.

Jason defends labelling other anarchists with “post-left” approved descriptions. Apparently “workerist” simply applies to “would-be radicals who focus almost exclusively on work, workplaces and workers.” Assuming that this is all that is meant by this term (which I doubt), Jason fails to indicate why this is a bad thing. Given that the vast majority of the population is working class, it seems strange that a desire to reach these people with libertarian ideas should be worthy of a label?. Particularly as being subject to hierarchy for 8 hours plus a day they have a real interest in ending it. So please explain why radicals should fail to “focus almost exclusively” on the vast majority of the population? Particularly as these “would-be” radicals are, in the main, working class. Should they not focus on what directly oppresses them and seek to end it? And if a concern to discuss our ideas with fellow working class people equates to “workerism” then anarchism has always been so.

I would also suggest that saying so-called “workerist” anarchists focus almost exclusively on “work” or the “workplace” is not an accurate reflection of reality. I know few, if any, anarchists who do so. I do know plenty who include workplace struggle in a wider approach which includes

community struggle, opposing sexism, racism and homophobia, a concern for cultural issues and a whole lot more. As such, it feels like a straw man argument. Even assuming that they do concentrate on “work” as much as suggested, why is this a bad thing? What happens in work impacts in all aspects of our lives. And most people spend most of their lives in work. It would make sense, therefore, to address the issue and help any struggles which combat hierarchy in it – particularly as capitalism is rooted in the exploitation of labour.

Apparently “organisationalist” refers to those “who so steadfastly fetishize organisation-building.” As opposed to those who so steadfastly fetishise the rejection of organisation-building? And what, exactly, does this mean? It sounds impressive, but beyond an insult I’m not sure it means anything. So organisation-building is a bad thing. Why? Shouldn’t anarchists work together? If they do, then an organisation has been built. But, I guess, only building informal, temporary, organisations is appropriate (not that this fetishises a specific form of organisation, of course, only “left” anarchists do that!). But temporary organisations means having to rebuild everything from scratch time and time again. And how long is temporary? Anarchy Magazine has been going for decades. When does it stop being temporary? Or is permanent organisation okay when it is a small group? If so, then why does this change if these permanent (small) groups seek to federate with like-minded other groups and share resources and co-ordinate their activities? As for the informal/formal difference, well, I’m not sure why having known, agreed policies and procedures is a bad thing. After all, Anarchy magazine has an agreed policy on responding to critical letters. Or am I missing something? Does formal simply mean being a member of a group? If so, then why is that bad?

But, of course, organisations can take on a life of their own and become more than the sum of their parts. Very true. However, I fail to see why this means rejecting organising together any more than the fact that camp fires can cause forest fires means rejecting being warm when in the woods. It simply means being aware of the dangers and taking suitable precautions. In the case of anarchist federations, ensuring local autonomy, self-management, federalism and decision-making from the bottom up. I cannot help feeling that for “post-left” anarchists there is only one way of organising, namely *their* way. If you reject it then you are a “left” anarchist (and not really an anarchist anyway perhaps?).

Then there is “left”, that word which is apparently producing such “obvious, genuine differences between real existing anarchists.” As far as I can see, the differences are related to the question of whether we should reject “workerist” and “organisationalist” attitudes. If you don’t then you are a “left” anarchist. Given Jason’s definitions of these terms in his reply, then “post-left” means rejecting addressing the vast majority of the population and what they do the vast majority of their lives and reject working and co-operating with your fellow anarchists in anything but a strictly limited and ad hoc basis (if at all). Surely there is something wrong here? Are “real existing anarchists” really rejecting such basic anarchist ideas as these? I hope not.

I will turn to the one important point in his reply. This is my criticism of his review of **North-Eastern Anarchist**. He “stands by [his] very, very brief comments” and criticises me for making “completely unsupported” comments. I failed to do so before because I did not want to make my “extensive rant” longer than it was and, moreover, because anyone familiar with the articles in question would see I was correct. I will provide my summary with some evidence for those who have not read the articles.

Jason states that Brian Sheppard’s article implies “if only there were some anarchist leaders in the AFL-CIO and Teamsters they’d be revolutionary.” Only if you quote out of context. Brian

argued that the “problem with ‘organized’ labor ...is precisely **how** it is organized,” namely “in a very undemocratic and disempowering way.” As such, to suggest Brian considered the sole problem as “its leadership” is a distortion. Particularly as he says “what is needed, then, is this: the classical ideas and spirit of anarchism infused into the labor movement.” It is clear from this that Brian is arguing for a radical transformation of how unions operate and **not** about changing who makes up the leadership.

Jason claims that Aileen O’Carroll’s article “ignore[d] the effects of authoritarian ideology and organisation” of the Bolsheviks. This seems incredulous as the whole article discussed that. By quoting her out of context, Jason turns an article on the limitations of Bolshevik ideology into its opposite. When Aileen notes that “the Bolsheviks could have followed a more democratic route, but they chose not to” she was specifically discussing modern-day Leninist rationales for the Bolsheviks’ authoritarian practice. The rest of the essay shows why these rationales are wrong as Bolshevik ideology played its part. For example, she states that “the Leninist idea of socialism has more to do with the nationalisation of industry or State Capitalism than the creation of a society in which workers have control over their own labour power.” She argues that “Leninists believe it is the job of the party to exercise control of society on behalf of the ruling class and like a parent, the party interprets what the best interests of the working class are.” She clearly notes that “with or without the civil war their strategic decisions would have been the same, because they arise out of the Leninist conception of what socialism is and what workers control means. Their understanding of what socialism means is very different from the anarchist definition.” Moreover, “our argument is that no matter what the objective factors were or will be, the Bolshevik route always and inevitably leads to the death of the revolution.”

I could go on, but I have made my point. Is Jason’s summary of Aileen’s article reflective of what she actually argued? I can only assume a (irrational?) dislike for “leftist” anarchism made him fail to see the bloody obvious.

Moving on from Jason’s somewhat pointless reply, I turn to the “reader response.” I had to laugh at my anonymous critic when she/he defended Bob Black’s appropriation of Lenin’s arguments from “**What is to be done?**” Apparently Black was merely “emphasising the original contributions of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, ... and that anarchist theory did not simply arise spontaneously from the class struggle.” And there I was thinking that Black was attacking the Platform for arguing exactly this when, in fact, he was agreeing with it! Silly me. And what of Black’s “post-leftism” embracing a key concept from leftism in one of its most authoritarian forms? Not a word. Perhaps that explains the attempt to put words in Black’s typewriter?

But, then again, Black does get off easy from our critic, who fails to mention Black’s errors in his article. The best that they can come up with is that Black is addressing the “compulsory” nature of the Platform – by quoting something not actually in the Platform! I corrected this inaccurate assertion about the Platform and provided the real source as well as an alternative translation. I also corrected the suggestion that the WSM editing their version of the Platform to exclude the quote in question. It appears that casting false assertions on the honesty of your comrades is fair game in “rational” debate and not worthy of comment.

I also find it significant that our anonymous comrade considers it unworthy of mention to ponder the relevance of Black’s review in the first place. After all, I know of no anarchist group which applies the Platform as it was written. Black is, therefore, simply repeating criticisms which were relevant in the 1920s (criticisms made at the time, much of which I agree with). It reminds me of when Leninists (real “leftists”) talk about Bakunin’s secret organisations when arguing

against modern anarchism. They fail to note that no-one has actually organised in that way since the 1870s, yet consider it essential that they highlight its limitations! Black's review of the Platform is simply a similar exercise in ideology passing as theory. Yes, many anarchist groups call themselves Platformist but by that they mean they are inspired by aspects of the Platform while rejecting other parts of it. Just as anarchists are inspired by some aspects of Bakunin's ideas while rejecting other parts. Why concentrate on the parts that are rejected?

Then there is the question of the Platform's call for a "common command" for a revolutionary army. Apparently Black was merely channelling the spirits of long dead anarchists when he talked about the counter-revolutionary "People's Army" and the CNT militias and can take no responsibility for his words. Shame, then, that these "Russian anarchists" could not have used the Spanish example as they were writing ten years before the outbreak of the Spanish revolution. I should also note that the CNT militias also argued for a co-ordination of all fronts, seeing it as essential to defeat Franco. They wanted this co-ordination to come from below, via elected war committees. As practised by the Makhnovists, who were used as an example of what was meant in the Platform incidentally.

Our comrade states that Black's mention of Makhno's drinking and Arshinov's return to the USSR was "insignificant" in terms of his "overall critique." Then why mention them at all then? Why should Makhno's drinking be even considered worthy of note unless you seek to trivialise the ideas you are attempting to refute. Similarly, our comrade (like Black) does not explain how Arshinov's return to Russia signifies more about the Platform than Makhno's and Mett's continued opposition to the regime. As such, it is simply a case of guilt by association and unworthy of rational debate. I do, however, find this ironic, as "post-left" anarchists denounced Bookchin for doing exactly the same thing as regards individualist anarchists and fascism (and, even more ironically, a book review in this *Anarchy* makes the same point). Apparently individualist anarchists becoming fascists says nothing, but one of the five authors of the Platform returning to Russia is deeply significant!

Moving onto the "dual power" question (an expression I don't particularly like, incidentally, as I thought I had indicated in my letter). Apparently forming such "armed revolutionary organisations" as "soviets, factory committees, and peasant committees" and other organs popular self-management cannot be "viewed as anything other than a proto-State." So when I talk about people managing their own affairs directly, I (in fact) meant "management by elected delegates and specialists, operating within whatever bureaucratic structure was put in place." But where does that leave anarchism? My arguments are simply repeating the ideas of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, Berkman, Malatesta and a host of other anarchist thinkers. Ideas I think are still relevant. So my "ideological agenda" appears to be simply promoting anarchist ideas.

So where does this rejection of key ideas of revolutionary anarchism led us? Well, apparently no factory committees to organise production. That means any workers' militias fighting to defend the revolution will not get weapons and ammunition. Not that such militias would exist. Organising self-managed militias and federating them into war committees would mean creating a "centralised, regular army" and so that's out too. Far better to have the militia groups not co-ordinating their defence of the revolution! As for soviets, well, obviously Kropotkin (and Malatesta, Goldman, Makhno, et al) were simply wrong to see anything positive in them. Bloody leftists, not knowing what anarchism really stands for!

So I do find his/her dismissal of self-managed struggle and organisation as a "proto-state" incredible. As such, when he/she concludes by stating that they hoped anarchists will "embrace

a truly anarchist approach to confronting all forms of power” I really have to wonder what this “truly anarchist approach” is. Reading Murray Bookchin’s “Listen, Marxist!” is recommended as “a good start.” Having read it numerous times, I have to wonder why it is recommended as it follows my basic argument, not his/hers. As well as arguing for “an organisation of affinity groups” it states that anarchists “seek to persuade the factory committees, assemblies or soviets to make themselves into *genuine organs of popular self-management*.” But all this, we are assured by our anonymous comrade, is a “proto-State” and the “organisationalist agenda” is, in fact, “the most pernicious Leftist influence in the contemporary anarchist movement”!

So, yes, I would wholeheartedly recommend reading “Listen, Marxist!” It shows how much far some “post-left” anarchists are from a “truly anarchist approach” to the problems of revolutionary change.

What is significant is that a “post-left” anarchist should recommend a book which attacked Marxist attitudes prevalent 35 years as being relevant to the current debate within anarchist circles today. Does that mean today’s “organisationalist” and “workerist” anarchists simply parrot the ideas of Marxist-Leninists in the 1960s? Of course not. But it seems sad that “post-left” anarchists think they do. And it does point to the ideological nature of much of the “post-leftist” critique of anarchism. Rather than critique what anarchists are doing now, we just subjected to reviews of a 80 year-old document (which is not being even being applied in its pure form) and recommendations to read an excellent (“organisationalist”?) anarchist essay directed to non-anarchists in the 1960s. Hardly convincing.

Ultimately, the replies to my letter just confirm my worse fears about “post-left” anarchism. At its best, it simply repeats basic libertarian ideas and is so redundant. At its worse, it simply allows some comrades to feel smug and insult others while systematically attacking the core ideas of anarchism. Ideas other anarchists still see as valid simply because the “post-left” anarchists suggest nothing to replace them with.

Tell you what. Someone please explain how “post-left” anarchists see a revolution developing without federations of factory committees, neighbourhood assemblies and militia columns as well as all the other popular organisations anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin advocated and are dismissed by some as a “proto-state.” Does “post-left” anarchism have any concrete suggestions, however vague, on how to solve the problems every revolution has faced? Enlighten me about how a revolution will defend and organise itself without embracing the ideas advocated by these anarchist thinkers? It should make interesting reading to see how “post-leftists” avoid the “false ideas and sloppy thinking” derived from such anarchists as Bakunin, Kropotkin and Malatesta on this and other important issues!

Obviously I have not addressed every issue raised in the two replies. This letter is already long enough (I would not want to be accused of producing another “extensive rant”) so I will leave it there. I look forward to the “scathing” replies which will, as seems all too common, ignore the important issues raised while spreading the insults liberally.

yours,
Iain McKay

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Anarcho
Letters to Anarchy on Platformism
March 3, 2009

Retrieved on 29th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com
Three letters to the US-based **Anarchy** magazine in response to an issue it did on “Platformism” pointing out the mistakes made — as well as the irony of Bob Black attacking the Platformists as vanguardists while repeating some of Lenin’s arguments from **What is to Be Done?**

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