

MASA interviewed by IASR

Anarcho-Syndicalist Initiative from Romania

September 23, 2012

IASR: What is MASA?

MASA is a network of propaganda and militant/activist groups (con)federated across Croatia which politically most strongly identifies with the anarcho-syndicalist tendency in the anarchist movement and with the principles of revolutionary syndicalism of the IWA. This means that members of MASA consider class struggle anarchism their starting point and specifically advocate the creation of 'syndicates' or 'class organizations' as the nuclei of struggle wherever class conflicts occur — especially in workplaces, but not always reduced to them. Thus, MASA members have also participated in student struggles, protests against social cuts, imperialism, nationalism, parliamentary democracy etc. Despite wanting to and struggling in the long term for the abolishment of the capital-labor relation and other forms of social oppression and advocating their replacement with 'libertarian communism', it is clear that no organization could sustain its everyday activity and relevance only through such aims. Therefore, according to its statute, the more grounded aims of MASA are "building an anarcho-syndicalist movement in Croatia, establishing strong connections with other non-hierarchical organizations based on class struggle, informing the public about anarcho-syndicalist (or anarchist and libertarian communist) alternatives regarding the management of the processes of production and distribution and also about the direct democratic management of society and community life". Also, one of our aims is the "creation of a syndicalist confederation based on anarchist principles."

However, MASA, as has already been mentioned, is also an organization of militants/activists coming from a working class background, mainly young people, who are, like the rest of the world, faced with unemployment and live in precarious conditions, forming the 'reserve army' of the working class. As a part of the working class and through our organization, we engage in class and social struggles occurring in our communities; where there are none, we try to initiate them. In both cases we advocate and apply direct democratic methods of organizing, always striving to turn the defensive struggles of the working class into victories, victories into new demands for redistribution and expropriation, thus bringing the struggles closer towards the desired social relationships and society.

Because we are convinced that social change can come only through the class struggle of the working class and its organizations, it is very important for us to be present among them and to struggle together even if we do not necessarily agree with the immediate aims of their (often reformist and defensive) demands. We believe that many anarchists today are mistaken when and

if they immediately reject such reformist struggles. To paraphrase Errico Malatesta, we believe that we should always be on the side of the people. When they demand nothing, we should try to make them demand something and by doing so, by being with the people, spread the influence of anarchist ideas among them and try to radicalize them and their demands. If we do not do so, we risk isolation from them, thus making anarchist ideas marginal and creating an opportunity for authoritarian organizations to spread their influence and assume control of the struggles.

IASR: How and when was MASA founded?

MASA was founded in February 2008 in Zadar. Its foundation came about rather spontaneously at the “First national meeting of anarcho-syndicalists”, which was initiated by local anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian communists. The meeting was initially intended to be a forum for interested people to exchange their ideas and experiences and also discuss the possibility of coordinated action among them. The initiators of this meeting did not want to set any strict agenda for the gathering, but asked the participants to create the program commonly. Despite their own wishes and basing their decision on past experiences, the initiators did not want to put forward the idea that an organization should be formed. Since the last few attempts proved to be unsuccessful, they concluded that if the circumstances do not allow for such a project, it cannot be brought about forcefully. Comrades from the General Secretariat of the IWA (based in Belgrade at the time) were also invited to participate and present the activities of the IWA.

However, when all the interested people gathered there, a strong wish for the formation of a national anarcho-syndicalist organization was expressed and the participants voted on the formation of MASA. In short, this was the beginning of MASA. However, until April 2008, MASA existed only informally. It was then that the First National Congress of MASA was held in Zagreb, where we chose the Coordination and the delegates for the writing of our Statute. Thus, MASA was formally formed in April 2008. Today, MASA members are spread out across Croatia and MASA’s network is based on three local groups (Zagreb, Rijeka, Split) and nine local contacts (cities and towns where we have less than three members, the number we take as a base for the formation of local groups).

IASR: What is the situation of the anarchists and especially the anarcho-syndicalists in Croatia?

As you can probably imagine, the anarchist, and anarcho-syndicalist, movement in Croatia is lacking in certain aspects. On one hand, there is no tradition or continuity of anarchist organizing in this region. According to available data, some anarchist tendencies (namely anarchist communism) appeared in this region at a time when anarchism was a more relevant political movement on the global level. This happened mainly through the influence of Italian anarchism (especially the Germinal group in Trieste). However, there was also a decline in its presence following the rise of fascism in Italy and the repression towards revolutionaries in general, anarchists especially. We do not doubt that anarchists were still active in this region afterwards, but the available data on their activities is very limited and remains to be discovered and reconstructed. There is also some evidence that anarchists were involved in the anti-fascist resistance, which was particularly strong in these regions in the Second World War. However, the anti-fascist movement was largely dominated by the Stalinist-inspired Communist party of Yugoslavia and there is now more and more evidence that they used their influence and victory for the elimination of their revolutionary rivals in the period following the end of the war, both anarchist and those from other communist tendencies.

Naturally, in the context of Titoist Yugoslavia, it was dangerous and hard to maintain anarchist activities and struggles, despite the fact that this system actually took a lot of anarchist/libertarian communist vocabulary and models for managing society (such as the concept of self-management and workers' councils) and changed them into their opposites. Such vocabulary was especially used following Tito's break with Stalin, when he had to prove the "originality" of his own type of socialism. However, talking to but a few workers who lived in Yugoslavia at the time is enough to make one realize that self-management and workers' control existed only on paper and not in practice, where workers' councils were under the control of the Communist Party and its bureaucracy, which also controlled the rest of society. This was symbolically made obvious in the short period of the student uprisings in 1968, when the students protesting rising unemployment and demanding genuine self-management and socialism were met by heavy state repression. In some cases, the very notion of self-management was used by the State apparatus in order to introduce more market-oriented concepts, private companies and private property.

The contemporary anarchist movement began to manifestly emerge following the fall of Yugoslavia through groups such as the Zagreb Anarchist-Pacifist Movement – ZAPO (later the Zagreb Anarchist Movement). At that time, individuals attracted to anarchist ideas were active in the Antiwar Campaign of Croatia, which was more focused on establishing civil society rather than building up a revolutionary, class struggle movement. Thus, during the 1990's, the anarchist movement was characterized by its subcultural context, its significant connection with the NGO scene, opposition to the new authoritarian regime of first Croatian president Franjo Tudjman etc. In short, we could say that lifestyle anarchism was a predominant tendency in anarchism of that period.

Things began to change at the beginning of the 2000's (also a period of anti-globalist protests around the world), which were marked by the emergence of new anarchist groups across Croatia. In this context, the class-struggle anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist tendencies of the movement also emerged, namely around the Zadar Anarchist Front (ZAF). This group was one of the first to translate anarcho-syndicalist texts, which were then published in their magazine (Solidarity and Freedom) or in the form of brochures. The group also maintained contacts with comrades from the Anarcho-syndicalist Initiative (ASI) in Serbia and were influenced by them through the exchange of experiences and ideas. However, this anarcho-syndicalist tendency remained very small, localized and primarily focused on theoretical development. It was only when the "First national anarcho-syndicalist meeting" was held in 2008 that a new generation of class-struggle anarchists and anarcho-syndicalist became visible. This gathering was, in a certain sense, a meeting point between the older and younger generation of anarcho-syndicalist, with both of them influencing each other; young people showed that they had been following the work of the older ones and had been influenced by it, and the older generation was inspired and motivated by the youngsters.

Today, anarcho-syndicalism, and this can be said without any exaggeration, represents one of the most important tendencies in the anarchist movement in Croatia. It provides the movement with an example of organized anarchism. It offers examples of organized class struggle to the working class. During the past few years, we managed to establish anarcho-syndicalism as a recognizable alternative and strategy to the wider public and have thus done our part in moving anarchism from the margins. We did this by participating in various social and class struggles in our communities (which have intensified during the last few years) and by addressing workers

and the wider public directly and through the media. Of course, these are still baby steps, but they are great when compared to the situation a few years ago.

IASR: Is the movement there under state repression?

We could say that movement here, as in many countries, is under state repression. However, this repression is more indirect. Direct state attacks on the anarchists are rare, but we have often been the subjects of interrogation by the state's secret services and police. A couple of times, often following important events (such as the Pope's visit to Croatia), anarchists were interrogated by the police. Some of our friends (not necessarily anarchist) have also been interrogated about their connections with us, about our personal lives and activities – the secret services were obviously trying to get as much information about us as they can. Recently, comrades from the local group in Rijeka were also the subjects of police interrogation and have even received indirect threats. The police also tried to scare our sympathizers by telling them that if they continued to cooperate with us, they would have problems. These recent cases of interrogation were largely due to our increased activities and presence on the street, as well as in social and class conflicts.

IASR: Does MASA organize in workplaces?

MASA has not yet been able to reach any level of organization in the workplaces, except a few direct actions on behalf of the workers who contacted us directly. We think that there are a few explanations for this. What we have been witnessing in the last two decades is the process of de-industrialisation and the rise of the service sector all over Croatia, as well as of smaller factories and firms. This fact makes union organizing hard, which is also evidenced by the decline in membership in mainstream unions. Today, workers who work in 'traditional' industrial units are mainly older workers, the generation of our parents, and they show a low level of militancy, often acting militant only when the factories have basically already been destroyed and sold. They act defensively, as a result of desperation, rather than offensively, by demanding new rights. The level of worker resistance this process of de-industrialization and privatization has been met with is often surprisingly low.

The younger generation of workers, of which MASA primarily consists, face problems a bit different from those of their parents. As mentioned, they are either unemployed and thus have no workplace as a base for organizing or work under very precarious conditions and thus have a harder time organizing in the workplace. For us, this presents a great problem, something which we are currently trying to analyze and to which we have yet to find an answer or strategy. We would be more than happy to hear the experiences of other anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists faced with these issues.

However, what we are aware of is the fact that we cannot stay only, or primarily, focused on workplaces. By doing so today, we could risk missing the point and not addressing the problem completely, especially in relation to the younger workers. Class conflicts do not only occur in the workplaces, but are also present in our communities (for example, the privatization of public spaces, the destruction of the health or education system and so on) and lives. They have to be properly addressed and fought as well. Besides, we need to develop a model of organizing which would address growing unemployment and the impoverishment of life, as more and more people are simply becoming excluded from society. What we believe that anarcho-syndicalists could offer here is an effective model of organizing: class-based direct democratic organizations (both in and outside of workplaces) with a revolutionary strategy and aims.

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