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Interview with Autonome Antifa (M)

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1995

[This interview was conducted by Love and Rage in Sept., 1994. Autonome Antifa (M) is an anti-fascist group based in Goettingen, Germany.]

What differences exist in the German anti-fascist movement?

The differences are in terms of what people do: whether their focus is anti-nazi work, which means either fighting fascism in the street to doing some direct action, to focusing just on the organized fascist groups. And then there are other groups, who do broader politics that make connections between organized fascists and the state, and who focus on the state and on tendencies within the German state. And then there's also an anti-imperialist struggle that could be anti-fascist in terms of being anti -nazi. That's something that the radical anti-fascist movement is working out: how to be a political movement that doesn't just focus on anti-fascist or reactive movements, but rather is revolutionary.

One of the main points of debate in the movement is in terms of different tendencies around the question of

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organization—what kind of organization. There are people like us, and the Anti-Fascist National Organization (AA/BO), who are interested in forming a nationwide organization as part of building up the left, to share resources as a federation of groups who work together on things like the Campaign Against Fascist Structures. Then there are people who are more interested in organization as a process of talking about ideas, exchanging information, and having contacts. As opposed to the AA/BO, which wants to become a federation that has a statement of principles, which may take years, but which also, since the beginning, has engaged in common campaigns together. We decided that we wanted to be in this network and we also wanted to start organizing and acting, even though there are ideological differences within the organization and differences in terms of where people want to go. In order to become an effective group, it was decided that we needed to start acting.

Can you give us a brief history of Antifa (M) and also the AA/BO, how that came about?

The first people came together in '88 after a counter-demonstration at a local fascist demonstration and out of organizing in schools, but the group didn't form until 1990. The first time the name Antifa (M) was used was in 1990, so next year will be our fifth anniversary. Since then it's continued to get bigger, and the structure has changed into semi-autonomous work groups. M is definitely one group—the work groups are a way of dividing work so that M can be more effective and avoid informal hierarchies and the concentration of power into a few hands. The work groups also have study groups, such as the anti-patriarchy group, which has been meeting regularly since 1992. In the anti-nazi work group there's a strong emphasis on historical work. There have been projects going on within the group on anti-fascism in the area. There are also work groups that organize around a specific action, like a demo. There's a rotating basis of who takes care

It depends a lot on where you are. You can see a left presence even in fashion. It's pretty cool for little kids to wear an anti-nazi patch on their backpacks, for example. People look progressive. Groups like the Youth Front try to organize a number of people. It's different in different cities.

Anti-fascists make a point of trying to politicize young people. Most young people don't get politicized by squats or ecological movements, but by anti-fascist politics, and by fascism on the streets and in schools. This is why, if young people turn to politics, they come into anti-fascist youth movements. Also, for older people, I think anti-fascism is the biggest issue on the radical left.

In the US one of the most important issues that the fascists organize around is abortion. Another is countering the queer liberation movement. What are the most important issues that the fascists organize around in Germany and what roles do queer liberation and abortion access play?

The issues are different in Germany. For one thing, abortion was criminalized last year. That's not a hot topic. It's already been pushed through by the government. Queer issues also aren't big in terms of what the fascists organize around. In terms of ideology, they organize around historical revisionism. It's also interesting to see where the crossovers are between immediately recognizable fascists and the more mainstream conservative right.

Do you think you can estimate how large the general anti-fascist scene is in Germany?

The biggest demonstrations had three hundred thousand people. But I think the organized radical left is about four thousand. I can't give a number in terms of cities, because they are all so different. It is not possible to count them.

of the posters, who does the money, fundraising, and mailing. The groups all meet together so that everybody has a sense of what the other groups are doing; not every single small decision is made in the large group, but everyone has a sense of everything that is going on.

The AA/BO grew out of conversations in meetings that were started by a discussion paper published by the Antifa (M) in 1991 critiquing the anti-nazi movement of the 1980s. The paper appeared at a time when there were several other papers floating around, but this paper was different in that it proposed a new way of organizing.

The conversations started out in a really wide spectrum of anti-fascist groups. Out of these conversations came harder issues, like how to organize, under what ideological banner, whether to do purely anti-nazi work or to also have a critique of the imperialist system. As people started to lean toward that, others left the organization, so that, finally, after one and a half years, there was a real sense of organization. In the beginning there were twelve groups in the AA/BO. This is an organization that is more than just a contact group, this is a group that has politics broader than anti-fascism.

What is the M's strategy on a local level; do you have some worked-out strategy? Do you rely both on propaganda and action equally, or more on one than the other?

There are two parts to this: one is that the M tries to engage in a wide spectrum of politics to bring in new people and organize new people into the group, and also to organize groups left over from the '80s. Also, at the same time, we try to create a larger and more meaningful left culture and get ideas presented in the press and push conversations. It is impossible to say that there is one strategy, there are lots of things that we do. We do lots of leaflets for the press and general public, brochures, posters, presentations, exhibitions, coalitions, demonstrations; that's part of an attempt to radicalize the anti-fascist movement. And the third part is organization.

What have you done differently than other groups?

When the M started out, things were a lot different. Since then, through conversations within the AA/BO, other groups have also started this kind of work. It's not so much that the Antifa (M) is different from all the other Antifa groups, although that was partly true at the beginning, it's just that this tendency in the movement is really growing. The reasons that we decided to do this kind of politics were not just random. Rather, it was a recognition both of what was happening in the left and also in the larger political situation. The Autonomen had practically disappeared from the public eye, due in large part to internal problems and isolation. That's what we were acting against. It was also a reaction against the spontaneity and unaccountability of other anti-fascist groups; it turned into a longer-term politics. Another important thing is that the AA/BO works on a delegation principle, and when we do coalition work it's also on that principle. Before that happened there were big communities where anyone could come who wanted to, and there was a lot of fluctuation in terms of who was there. It was very difficult to do politics in that way.

How is the unification of Europe going to change your struggle in Germany?

Because of the internationalization of capitalism, customs and tariffs become necessary for capitalists to carry out their interests in Europe. At the same time, there's another tendency that moves against that, which is the rise of nationalism, and the borders are tightened. There's a whole host of ethnic groups, especially in the East, that are crying for independence. That's a tendency that goes against the internationalization of capitalism. The fascists are, of course, on the side of people who are interested in strengthening the individual nation-states. At the same time there's also a movement within the fascist countries in Europe to create a "fortress Europe" against the rest of the world, a Europe of the Fatherland. That's true not just of the fascists but of the governments as well.

How would you describe the current situation in Germany regarding the extreme right in the past six months?

The situation after the Wall has been worse. The fascists came from all over, and people were on the streets, and there were big demonstrations. All the young people of East Germany went to the skinhead movement and cut off their hair. I think the situation is now a little more quiet than just after the Berlin Wall came down and the years after. The fascists on the street are not important enough for the government to use them. They used the fascists on the street to pass the new anti-asylum law, the new anti-abortion law, the new social-welfare laws; and now the government no longer has a need for fascists on the street, they no longer have a need for big demonstrations. The international publicity is a bit better now than it was when the fascists burned down all the big houses and held big demonstrations, but the fascists still exist. We have a special name for the relationship between the state and the fascists on the street, it comes from soccer when you give the ball to the...

A doubletest?

Doubletest. Something like a doubletest. They use each other to make a new society to build up a new Germany. It was always clear that the state wanted to control the nazis on the street, but never give them power, as in past, because it's no problem for the state to introduce new laws, because there's no left movement. It's not necessary for the state to give the nazis too much power. They only want to control them and use them, but the state doesn't want to become the nazis on the street.

When I was there in the summer of '93 there were a lot of youth who were attracted to anti-fascist groups. I saw lots of kids, 13 or 14 years old, handing out flyers in the metro station. It seemed like there were all sorts of little groups sprouting up, like Edelweiss Pirates. Is that still happening?