

Spezzano Albanese

Community Organising in Southern Italy

Black Flag

1996

Spezzano Albanese is a small town of 6000 situated in the Sila, in Calabria. The albanese community where one speaks again of the old albanais and orthodox religion.

The interview was carried out by 2 comrades of the group who went to southern Italy this summer. The remarks are from Domenico Liquore, one of the oldest actors in this experience.

Drapeau Noir: How did the Municipal Federation of the Base become constituted?

A: The FMB is the result of an intervention for the past 20 years by the local anarchist group which began to agitate at the end of 72 beginning 73. The FMB was born during 92. All the activity which we have deployed was always characterised by a particular attention given to local and territorial problems, without ever ignoring national and international issues. For example, the death of Franco, the reconstruction of the CNT in Spain, which brought about a debate at the national level in Italy, was resumed across different interventions in Spezzano. In the region of Cosance, where there are different groups, there was talk of creating a Calabrian federation. Those were the years of the strong social movements in Italy. We were at the beginning of the 70s, after the Massacre of the Piazza Fontana. Here, this was expressed in a strong student and unemployed movement. There were 2 textile factories which were threatened with closure, so there was a movement of workers of Inteca, etc. Our group quickly understood that it couldn't limit itself to an ideological intervention and it was thought that our principles must be matched with the practice of the struggle which was self experimenting in these times. The group was made up of students, unemployed, some building workers and dailies (?). The only group not represented was perhaps women. Our eternal problem while there were more and more women in the collectives coming out of these struggles. From these struggles were organised the first Committees of the Unemployed, of Workers, which formed the first mass structures which wanted a national extent/ size. In these structures there weren't only anarchists. They were completely autonomous from the specific work of the anarchist group. A dual vision of the organisation - on one side, the specific groups, on the other, the mass organisations. This work was carried out until 1977, the years in which the anarchists of this place served as a rallying point for the whole Castovillari region. The other Marxist movements, such as Lutta Continua, which were very strong in this region have completely disappeared. At a national level in those years we started to talk of the reconstruction of the USI (Unione Sindacale Italiana - AIT section). There were 2 ÒcongressesÓ, one in Rome the other in genes, from where emerged 2 tendencies. Here, we have fought much

for anarcho-syndicalism because the intervention which we make brought about our feeling the need of a union structure already before the debate took place nationally. We participated in the national debate and it was reported that the Italian situation didn't correspond to our manner of reading reality. Which we brought about with the positions more in accord with our view. One saw in the national debate a mainly ideological discourse, of almost personal polemics and one perceived that the USI wasn't born from the world of work but from the wishes of certain anarchists who simply changed their name. During this time, in Spezzano, the anarcho-syndicalist discourse was building itself in the committees of struggle which engulfed a vast territory and were composed not only of anarchists, but also of comrades from extra-parliamentary groups, some from Proletarian Democracy or Marxist formations and the majority were workers, unemployed, etc. While the birth of a true mass structure was proposed, at a national level, there was little anarchist presence in the struggles which were raging in this period (hospital workers, airport workers, etc) And the USI was born inside the specific movements incapable of regrouping dissidents from the official unions. This situation brought about, at the Congress of Genes, the 2 different positions. On 1 side certain comrades wanted the renaissance of the USI, on the other were those who prioritised work within the base structures (e.g. temporary school workers). We did not see ourselves in either of these motions and on returning to Spezzano it was decided to unify all the different structures of the territory in one Union Sindacale de Zone (USZ). The USZ formed in 78, did not adhere to the CAD (Committee of Direct Action) formed in Bologna after the Genes Congress, nor to the USI constituted in the Parma Congress in 1979. With the USZ, work was done for more than 5 years on the problems of the world of work, unemployment & became interested in the theme of territorial opposition to the town hall. From this communalist and municipalist current came, in 1992, the FMB. . I would like it to be understood - the diversified mass structures, which were doing a specific job, with the USZ, found unity which translated onto larger territory. It passed from a classical syndicalist vision to a complex intervention which put together not only workplace issues but also the other realities present in the communal territory. It was begun to look at the administrative choices which were denounced in public interventions for their clientist character and blackmail, for the choices discriminatory and repressive, surely this must concern us. There were struggles over health, education & the question of fraud in the commune. This drove to create a rapport of struggle with the communal administration which tried to stop our meetings. Sympathy was growing towards us. There were 200 in the organisation of which 30 were very active

DN: Which were the left groups working in the same terrain at the same time?

A: In 76, Luta Continua disappeared. In 77, the Marxist left came back into parliamentary institutions as Proletarian Democracy. There were some M-Ls and Workers Autonomy who never had much weight with us. There weren't any groups organised and already in 77 our group was the only reference in the whole district.

DN: Which party controlled the Town Hall?

A: The mayor was Communist Party, but was worse than a Christian democrat. Our work consisted also to make understood that political membership didn't change things deeply. . Power corrupts. There the libertarian ideology of the USZ could be seen and it was agreed to propagate this idea, even if it meant hard struggles with the base of the PC whose leaders worked up against us. There were moments where the confrontation tended towards being physical. In 92 the magistrate charged the mayor and a group of councillors . People began to understand that everything we had been denouncing since the end of the 70s wasn't just affabulations. This made

people more interested in our activities. Before 83, in full conflict with the communal admin, the mayor often defied us to denounce to the magistrate his dealings knowing this was against our logic and our praxis. In 83, some of the workers in the USZ, after a big debate at the personal level, decided to take the matter before the magistrate. A year later, following the enquiry, a split occurred in the PC. In 84, to keep his place, the mayor was obliged to buy a councillor of the MSI (fascists). In 85, during the electoral period, we realised the opportunity to create an alternative to this situation. There were strong pressures to present a list (of candidates) however over the years we developed an abstentionist practice. . The message got across at the national level but in the locality the illusion of being able to change things by elections was tenacious. And in one effect, a civic list was presented in which we refused to participate. This list, in an indirect manner, had libertarian aspirations and took back many of the methods which we had used effectively in the previous years. With time, it changed practice and objectives in defending the same interests as the previous lists. While the civic list was being constituted we recognised that a libertarian response, to explain again the reasons for our abstentionism at national and local level, a Federation Municipal of Base which wanted to be an alternative to the power of the town hall. And while the others made their electoral campaign, we set up a Committee for the FMB in an attempt to gather together everyone who saw themselves in the discourse of self-organisation and direct action in opposition to the choice of abdication of power in favour of the municipal council. . The FMB was as such an anarchist proposal and quickly heard from a large part of the population. IN the full electoral campaign, a constitutive assembly of the FMB was held. The Town Hall was made up of the civic list, socialists, CDs and the PC in opposition. The mayor was from the civic list.

DN: What were the relations between the FMB and the communal administration?

A: The FMB posed an alternative. It was set up on that basis. It has always wanted to be something other than the power of the Town Hall and that's why we defined ourselves as an alternative. Relations with the Town Hall were conflictual. In what concerned the organisation the FMB took into account all past experience and volunteered a complex structure. A mass organisation which didn't want to be only about the bread and butter issues of the workplace, unemployment and the school, but also political. It had to be the bearer of a project which makes a glance at what could be a future libertarian society, that is to say a complex organisation of the society which prefigured the libertarians. In the FMB were workplace union structures but they gathered the different social categories in the civic union.

DN: What's the civic union?

A: The workers were not only those who fought for their rights but also citizens enrolled in a common territorial theme. All the particular structures had the right to sit in the civic union. This structure organises in the district services, education and health in opposition to the choice of the administration and offer a different way of managing and deciding. When we began to talk about the FMB, we were afraid of being misunderstood by the libertarian movement, of being accused of being "interclassists", of constituting the UIL Committee of Citizens (UIL is a right wing union) proposed by Benfento. (?Who he) That was what made us afraid but it was the logical follow-on from our intervention over the years. It must be stated that our conception of municipalism is different from that of Bookchin. Communalism is very varied. In Italy, there have been, historically, proposals in the communalist tradition. Berneri is one of the greatest agitators in this tradition and I believe he would have much to say to Bookchin, as he would to Malatesta,

in his later years when he began to talk of gradualism. It is certain he would not have agreed with Bookchin.

DN: What does Bookchin propose?

A: He proposes that anarchists should become like the other parties, present themselves for election, to manage power in the town halls. Since one is anarchist, one could give an impulse to a democracy of the base and direct. We believe that to enter into the electoral game is to lose to anarchism its specificity and its values. Anarchists refuse the delegation of power. They can never create a party. To accept power and to say that the others are in bad faith and that we would be better, is to act as if a party of the society, whether you like it or not, which would be obliged to force non-anarchists towards direct democracy. We have refused this logic and affirm that all organisations must come from the base.

DN: How do you define communalism?

A: It is the interest borne at the district. The commune understands about the world of work, civil life, etc. In intervening at a municipal level, we become involved in not only the world of work but also the life of the community. Every time the Spezzano council make a choice, the Civic Union of the FMB make counter proposals, which aren't presented to the Council but proposed for discussion in the country to raise the people's level of consciousness. Whether they like it or not the Town Hall is obliged to take account of these proposals. For example, it was proposed that the rates and the land use plans and its variants should be discussed in a general assembly. It is clear that the administrators have made choices which we have fought and continue to fight, but this has served to make understood that it is possible, by positioning oneself as an alternative, to make alternative proposals & manage it properly.

DN: We read in Umanita Nova that there was one assembly where 4 mayors were invited. How did you arrive at that decision and what was brought to the FMB?

A: We have made a square (?) over 4 communes because we felt that our experience should go beyond Spezzano. In effect, the FMB is already known since Spezzano is the main place in the canton and because our activity and public intervention was not only heard in the country around but by many passing through. We think that we must make a qualitative leap to promote the formation of identical structures in the neighbouring areas where there already exists sympathy for the FMB. IN areas such as Terranova, Tarsai, etc, research on services and administrative choices was done. We have been to 4 communes where they have been given provisional rates and studied them and looked at the choices involved. It must be said that in this work we have some facilities because after 20 years of existence not one commune dares refuse what we ask out of fear of public denunciation. In this study, a document was produced where we laid out the choices and put counter proposals at a departmental level. Those proposals which touched services, health, education and town planning were addressed not just to Spezzano, but also to Terranova, Tarsia and San Lorenzo. AT the end of this work we made the assembly where we invited the mayors for them to see the functioning and critiques of the assembly. The assembly was positive because it created the condition for this type of intervention to grow to the whole district. After the summer holidays, it's the type of intervention we are going to develop. Today, nationally, this type of intervention is much discussed. The fairs of self-organisation area mirror of all which in Italy turns to the question of Communalism versus municipalism or self government (the 2 terms used in Italy - municipalism a la Bookchin or communalism which we prefer)

DN: Do other experiences of this type exist in Italy? Or others who work from the same perspective?

A: When we were thinking about the Civic Union we were afraid that many comrades would misunderstand our step. This led us to little publicise the FMB. The editors of Umanita Nova we made only a report of the initiatives leading to the FMB without explaining what they truly were made up of. We immediately received a quantity of letters which asked for further explanations. In effect we got the contrary reactions which we thought we would. This got us to broadcast our step. It was discovered that other realities agitated on the municipalist problem. We made contact with a network of small entities which were co-ordinated from Bologna. From it was born a first congress. At the same time the Liga Nord were making a discussion of federalism in this manner. On one side, in Italy, there is a reactionary federalism, racist and conservative, borne by The Liga, and on the other, in opposition, libertarian federalism was revalued with its historic ideological roots. Comrades of Milan, Turin and others had the idea of a fair of self-organisation to confront all the realities which are active in the domaine of municipalism, communalism or simply self-organisation, as an alternative to the logic of domination. At Alessandria, the first fair of self-organisation happened and many different currents were present. This fair linked all ages and it became more important as much on a quantitative level as a qualitative. There were also some publications (the book of Sandro Vaccaro and mine). I would like to reaffirm that municipalism wasn't invented by Bookchin. Municipalism is part of the historic ideological patrimony of the anarchists. Bookchin has taken a type of this theme and put his things inside it, things which are not shared by all, including us. We refuse the logic which poses to the anarchists a candidature which obliges them to manage power and which could lose them their identity. This type of logic can arise from real base movements but the anarchists must have to capacity to defend an alternative project. Otherwise, they risk becoming no better than the other parties. Those comrades who follow the logic of Bookchin and present themselves for municipal elections are few and are not taken to be in the general anarchist movement.

DN: In your book, you speak about the attitudes and language that the anarchists have taken to the Marxist movement. You consider it embarrassing and negative, why?

A: I think that the anarchists, historically, have an inferiority complex towards Marxism (also in the Spanish revolution I believe many errors were due to this complex). If one takes as an example the concept of class and class struggle, we still retain the Marxist conception of the proletariat. In the anarchist movement, the class is not only the proletariat but all the exploited, dominated, those submitting to power. One goes on to speak of the exploited, of the dominated, inside of which we have the proletariat, but not only. When we begin to speak only of the proletariat, our logic is Marxist. Even our syndicalism, which is complex and not only supportive (anarcho-syndicalism), has submitted to the same logic. The Spanish CNT has at its core a strong conception of the proletariat even though it realised communalism and self organisation. It's as if the anarchists want to use the same Marxist logic, logic in which they will be lost. If the Marxists have, as perspectives, the question of power, the anarchists must take account of all the exploited, of all the dominated and create the social structures which presage that which must be the future libertarian society. Apart from the Spanish revolution we have not succeeded in that. I think that just as the Spanish revolution must be discussed in a critical manner to separate the positive aspects and their limits.

DN: Does the FMB limit itself only to this work of counter-propositions to the Town Hall or does it seek to create alternatives on the ground?

A: We have created a co-operative, "Arcobaleno" (Rainbow) of house painters. We have also tried to organise agricultural workers and services. We want to be capable of creating

self-organised work. The big merit and the goal of self- organisation is to regroup the comrades not only for political discussions on municipalism but to confront the practical experiences like the co-operatives. Beyond intervention in opposition to the institution, one wants to create alternative structures of production capable of making a glimpse of the reality of a future society.

DN: Let's be devil's advocate. Are you not afraid that your co-operative will become like the co-operatives in the north of Italy? These co-operatives, in their confrontation with the capitalist economy succeeded in achieving self exploitation, that is to say their insertion in the logic of the market which has made them lose all alternative potential.

A: The end of the co-operatives in Italy is as you say but the origin is a libertarian idea of self -organisation. They must be taken back to their origins. One could have the same fears concerning federalism: the US is federalist, Bossi (leader of the Liga Nord) is federalist, Switzerland is federalist. They have taken many of our words, such as federalism, self -organisation, etc, but should that stop us using these words? As for the co-operatives, it is sure there are some dangers especially when there isn't a strong libertarian presence. We have had many difficulties when we created the co-operative because it lacks a mentality and conception of production and working in an alternative way, in opposition to the capitalist model. Again today, there is this type of problem and contradictions. One can certainly be mistaken but if one is profoundly convinced and if the anarchist movement begins to be interested, in a practical manner, in these things and to be on the inside, there will be less of a danger of an authoritarian drift. When we are not present and only allow others the initiative, it is clear that the co-operatives shall be like Emilia and Romagna.

DN: The co-operative is an economic structure and must be accountable to the market. It is for this that I spoke to you of self-exploitation. To survive, where you create an alternative market, an alternative manner of living capable of blocking the race to consumption, which ends by denaturing it.

A: It's sure that if the co-operatives are born in an isolated manner, if they aren't inserted in a global debate which includes different realities (that is the aim of the self- organisation fair), the danger of which you speak is very real. We always have it in mind. That's why we seek to bring together all the realities, all the problems and contradictions, to seek solutions. You spoke of self- exploitation. It is certain that it is possible that in a co-operative one wins less and works more. But all that can change if there are more comrades who have input and a network of different realities. The important thing is that you do something without a boss. Decisions are taken altogether. One can make some concessions seen that which the capitalist system puts forward, because we are beginning to model an alternative society. In the anarchist movement there is a division. Certain comrades are for the supportive struggle, political, conflictual towards power. They think that the co-operatives, the self-organised groups, must be refused because they are not manageable within the capitalist system. The others think that it's necessary only to work in function to creation of co-operatives or the self-organising moments. For me, both lack something. They must be brought together, one cannot live in an antagonist manner. In a system of domination, one must be in conflict with the power and at the same time one can put forward alternative structures; these 2 attitudes are part of the same struggle against domination. On the contrary, many among us live either 100% class struggle, or a life of retirement in the fortunate isles. In both cases there is a danger of reintegration.

DN: After a long absence one is struck by the uniformity that the south has submitted to and by the push to the race of consumption. For 12 years there has existed here a

quantity of different cultures and poverty could easily be distinguished from the rich. Today it seems that the social fabric might disintegrate.. People live in front of the tv where the programmes are identical to those of France. In one of the poorest regions of Italy there is an appearance of impressionable riches. One would like to know what you evaluate this process and what is your position towards these new facts.

A: The same situation can be seen which everywhere else is perhaps amplified by the fact that people identify with the tv models to have the impression that they can leave their under development. I don't believe that this should be something positive because this hides the contradictions that we live in. For example, in Spezzano, with time, many albanese words are replaced by Italian words. It is submitted to the tyranny of an italianising culture. The anarchists must be sensible and in this changing situation, not making it a priority of their fight but to insert it in a wider cultural reflection , to make understood that a different way of life to that proposed by consumerism and capitalism does exist. A communalist intervention could take account of this question, not to retreat but to project towards the future in a federalist discourse of respect for minority cultures. Our struggle must be global and culture forms a part of it.

DN: What do you think of Bossi's proposition of secession from Italy?

A: I can say that in the south, this type of debate doesn't exist. In Sicily, in the last regional elections, there was a tentative independentist list but it failed. There isn't a strong independentist movement here and secessionism is badly viewed. There is, on the contrary, a strong demand for administrative decentralisation. In the FMB there are also people who see federalism as a means of decentralisation. For example we are often asked why our taxes must pass through Rome, and why we can't decide ourselves on their use? Ourselves, often say that it is the community which ought to decide and not twenty people and that the logic of paying taxes to Rome which after they are returned to us in financial form. This discourse elicits much interest. If there doesn't exist an independentist sentiment, the Liga Nord is rather rejected than viewed as a project to which to adhere, it exists when even that demand to be against the state. the State with us is seen in a contradictory way. It is hated and liked at the same time, liked for the facilities it gives.

DN: What are your links today with USI?

A: We adhered to USI because we believed that , inside USI, it doesn't matter any longer what syndicate, one could have a discourse of social organisation a real project of society. Today, with the split of the USI, it was decided to stay outside. We think that it's lacking and that it will be indispensable at the moment, a great debate on anarcho-syndicalism: its ends and means. For the moment this debate does not exist. And without it we can't see what will come out of it.

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