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Anarchist rally in Chattanooga

Bob McGlynn

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Winter 1994

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Contents

Black revolutionaries under siege in the West <i>and</i> East	6
Anarchists take on white racism	7
Shooting ourselves in the face	10

Lorenzo Komboa Ervin, John Johnson, Tanya Miles, Steven Hunter, Rhonda Robinson, Clifford Eberhardt, Keith Melvin, and Charlotte Williams

Here's how you can help:

1. *Write a letter to Gary Gerbitz, State's DA Office, Hamilton County Justice Bldg., 600 Market St., Suite 310, Chattanooga, TN 37402, 615-7572170, and demand that they drop all charges against the Chattanooga 8.*
2. *Make a donation for the legal expenses of the arrested protesters to the: Chattanooga 8 Defense Campaign, do Concerned Citizens for Justice, POB 1066, Federal Courthouse & Post Office Bldg., Chattanooga, TN 37401*

For more information contact: Concerned Citizens for Justice, Lorenzo Ervin 615-622-7614, or Maxine Cousin 615-698-8940.

Ninety anarchists from a dozen cities attended a march and rally in Chattanooga, Tennessee, September 11, to confront a planned Ku Klux Klan anti-gay and pro-killer-cop demonstration, to protest the 23 known murders of blacks in police custody there over the last two decades (seven since 1990), and to demand that charges be dropped against the Chattanooga 8, a group of anti-racist protestors.

To understand Chattanooga is to understand its backdrop of Lookout Mountain, Orchard Knob, and Missionary Ridge. At those sites during the Civil War, on Nov. 23-25, 1863, the Confederates "fought to the last man" during the fierce Battle of Chattanooga. The Confederates were routed and fled Tennessee. This opened the way for General Sherman's troops to enter Georgia and burn Atlanta to the ground. Then in Sherman's March to the Sea they laid waste to everything in their path in a 60 mile swath. In April, 1864, this and other battles ended Confederate power in the deep South. Many whites never forgot, and certainly never forgave. This is a town where many of its mayors have been open KKKers, and where, like in the rest of the U.S., the Civil War has never ended.

Among its modern battles is a 1971 uprising caused by police brutality. It lasted 10 days and was only quelled with thousands of National Guard and Army troops. In 1980, one Klan faction was called "soft" by others for daring to meet with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Solution? To prove their battle readiness they drove thru a black neighborhood and shot 5 people in the back. When a jury acquitted them, blacks revolted for a week to the point of forming a militia that kept cops out of their area.

After that the KKK was driven underground.

Today though, they're itching for a revival. For how and why anarchists took up the challenge, a return to the '60s and some background is needed.

Black revolutionaries under siege in the West and East

Chattanooga's Concerned Citizens for Justice, one of the groups that called for the protest, is headed by Lorenzo Komboa Ervin. Some older anarchists will recognize his name as the author of a pamphlet written in 1979 entitled *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*. Those familiar with the U.S. anarchist scene know it to be an almost exclusively white movement, so the presence of Lorenzo was a noteworthy development.

Lorenzo's radical roots go back to his days in Chattanooga as an organizer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Black Panther Party. After the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1967, Chattanooga smoldered along with scores of other cities across the U.S. being swept by black insurrectionary riots.

Lorenzo was in Atlanta during the Chattanooga uprising. But the city establishment was out to get him. (It's been documented that during this period the government was out to destroy SNCC and the Panthers—they were decimated by frame-ups and assassinations.) In 1968 a so-called "Black Power" grand jury was convened to decide on whether to charge Lorenzo with running guns and possession of explosives for the riot he was nowhere near. It was a blatant frame-up attempt. And because Lorenzo was out of state during the grand jury, he was then charged with unlawful flight. A childhood friend of Lorenzo's in the local police department confided to him that if he were to go to jail "He wouldn't leave alive"—there was an assassination plot against him.

In that desperate atmosphere Lorenzo chose to do what a number of others at the time were doing; in 1969 he hijacked a plane to Cuba.

But commandeering the plane to Cuba only led to his being jailed by the Cuban Communists, *who unknown to this day by their*

to do hard shit and face up without naivete to the facts: no matter how "nice" a leftist is, no matter how *superficially* some of our politics might jive, the leftist party sect has only one goal—the savvy all know it; to recruit and use us for their authoritarian ends, and the RWL in particular is known to opportunistically ambulance chase around black issues.

For anarchists to collaborate with leftist parties is *unconscionable hypocrisy*. And those that justify collaboration on the grounds that anarchists can make gains out of it are engaging in an opportunistic and ultimately fatuous line of reasoning, as history has shown that left party cults retain a rigidity not worth criminally wasting time over. ("God! The RWLers are such zombies!" -A Chattanooga participant.) Worse are "anarchists" who really *do* have a kinship with the "politically correct" left authoritarian mindset.

Today's racist fascism, alongside its twin in the fusion of Communists with fascism, is a movement steadily growing and coordinating internationally. It's obvious that we'll have to coordinate internationally also. Neither East Nor West-NYC (to which I belong) has already been asked by Lorenzo if we could start making those connections, and we've begun. But Easterners will justifiably recoil if they thought that those that represent their past or current oppressors are involved. Simply think how offensive it is to us that many former Eastern dissidents collaborated with the West, how we couldn't help but sneer at the Statue of Liberty the workers and students erected in Tiananmen Square, how that sets up *unnecessary divisions*. The Easterner thinks no differently in regard to how we deal with Communists. Any anarchist who promotes working with Communists not only will promote the latter, but *will immediately create divisions among anarchists*—and will be responsible for the consequences...

The enemy of one's enemy is not always a friend.

FREE THE CHATTANOOGA 8!

Shooting ourselves in the face

"[They're]...a bunch of fools, or else opportunists...

I believe that the left...is despised by the...population and is collaborating. The...population doesn't like it...They won't forgive it..."

Ana Maria Simo, gay Cuban leftist, ex-political prisoner, in *Torch/La Antorcha* Dec. '84.

The only bringdown was the inevitable: a leftist party—two members of the Revolutionary Workers (sic) League (RWL)—showing up to leech off *our* party. They disrupted our networking meeting with pushing their party's plan to launch a national anti-racist/anti-fascist organization. (Translation: they want a controlling influence in a mass movement.) Sadder, there wasn't a consensus to boot them.

Why are we allowing "left" authoritarians in our midst, when we'd never allow "right" authoritarians? Not only are Communism and fascism/nazism in practice remarkably similar in their methods of enslaving people and in every other aspect (only fascism concentrates on murdering racial/ethnic "enemies" while Communists concentrate on murdering class [mostly workers and peasants] "enemies"), but today we also see significant amounts of Communists in the ex- countries literally joining *fascist* organizations or working in coalitions with the same.

The Chattanooga meeting was supposed to be for anarchists and other interested people to first develop our own autonomous networking. The RWL was not invited to and was not wanted by Chattanooga's organizers at the meeting. (This I wasn't sure of initially but was clarified post-meeting by John Johnson and also by Lorenzo: "Who the *fuck* invited the RWL?") That's one of the reasons many went. I know it would've been hard for some to ask the RWLers to leave, people some may have become friendly with during our day. But sometimes to stay on principled ground we have

many leftist admirers, imprisoned many of the Panthers seeking safety in Cuba. (Castro's reasoning? According to Lorenzo and Cuban anarchist exile Gustavo Rodriguez, Castro didn't want Panthers on the street possibly stirring up Cuba's second class blacks oppressed by the white Cuban Communist dictatorship.)

After 6 months in captivity, Lorenzo was released and put on a plane ostensibly headed for Guinea where the Panthers had an exile base. Instead though, the Cubans flew him to post-Soviet-invasion Czechoslovakia, refused him a visa for Guinea, and turned him over to Czech authorities. The Czechs then handed him over to a U.S. embassy official. Lorenzo punched the American out and cut and ran. He eventually ended up in East Berlin under the protection of an African students' dorm.

In late '69 though, U.S. agents captured Lorenzo, secreted him to West Berlin, and took him back to the States where he was promptly imprisoned.

In 1971 he was convicted of the hijacking and was incarcerated until 1983. While in prison he reflected on his eye opening experience with the Communists. This led him away from the Marxist-Leninist influenced politics of the Panthers to anarchism. Thus his foray into the anarchist movement via his black perspectived pamphlet.

After being released he began to solely concentrate on fighting racism, and isolated himself from the anarchist milieu.

Anarchists take on white racism

However, Lorenzo's recent experience in working with white anarchists in Chattanooga's multi-issue Justice Alliance, led him to opening back up to the anarchist movement. After writing a supportive letter to the anarchist newspaper, *Love and Rage* (April/May '93), which also expressed solidarity with the Workers Solidarity Alliance (WSA, a group of anarchist labor activists), the WSA,

Love and Rage, and Neither East Nor West-NYC (NENW-NYC, who promote networking among alternative oppositions in the East and West) began a dialogue with Lorenzo. He asked for aid for the Chattanooga 8, a group of demonstrators arrested May 13 who'd been protesting against murderous police at a "police memorial." This was held just two days after a grand jury had refused to press charges against 8 white cops involved in the Feb. 5, '93 choking to death of Larry Powell, a black trucker they stopped ostensibly for DWI. The 8 had a high bail set at \$1,000 for disturbing the peace and interfering in a public meeting.

Then came word that the Lookout Mountain Knights of the Ku Klux Klan had filed for a permit to hold a rally on September 11. Their demand was that no Chattanooga gay pride marches ever be held again—as one was in June—and to also support the cops who'd murdered Powell. So, Chattanooga's Justice Alliance and Concerned Citizens for Justice put the word out to anarchists, civil rights and gay groups to help organize a national mobilization to confront the Klan on Sept. 11.

On Sept. 10, groups or group representatives began arriving in Chattanooga including the WSA, NENW-NYC, L&R, Food Not Bombs, the Anarchist Youth Federation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Environmental Action Coalition, the Gay and Lesbian Pride Committee, and Red and Anarchist Skinheads. People came in from Atlanta, NYC, Chicago, Memphis, Minneapolis, Detroit, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Knoxville, Newark, Russellville, AL., Dalton, GA., and many Tennessee towns.

No one knew quite what to expect as word was out that the KKK had backed down and withdrew their permit application. Most demonstrators were ready to fight if necessary, but as we arrived at the Miller Park gathering point in downtown Chattanooga, it became clear the day was fully ours. Not only were no Klan in sight, but no cops either. Without a permit 100 people, mostly anarchists, marched throughout the downtown area taking the whole street, anarchist black flags leading the way, only 2 cop

cars trailing far behind, and ended up rallying at the Court Justice Building without incident. We took over the steps of the building, blocking its entrance, and were quite a sight. An open mike followed where Lorenzo announced that his group was calling for a boycott of Chattanooga until the killer cop issue was properly addressed. There was one hilarious moment when an unmarked police car slowly drove by with two people photographing and videoing, except their sight was blocked by a protestor who walked along the car blocking its view with a large red and black anarcho-syndicalist flag—we laughed and cheered! The rest of the afternoon was spent back at Miller Park where there was a Rock Against Racism concert and free lunch thanks to Food Not Bombs. Later we had a meeting to network and discuss future plans.

Being a tourist town, apparently the city didn't want any trouble, and were quite taken aback that a colorful crew of young whites were descending on their town to protest racism. There was much media pre-publicity for the action and media attention after the protest. Chattanooga hadn't seen such a large protest of whites since 1987.

In conversations with Lorenzo, James Moss from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and John Johnson, a white anarchist from the Justice Alliance, a bleak picture was painted of local blacks so intimidated that they feared attending the march, with only a handful of black leaders participating. Blacks getting "out of line" meant getting blacklisted and prevented from securing jobs and so on. Locals felt alone and isolated, in a climate where racial problems were considered "only a black thing." Therefore, the idea was that a white presence was needed to shift the terrain of debate, and show the Chattanooga authorities that people nationally were watching.

Though the turnout was small, it was a history making turning point for anarchists in that for the first time in memory, we could mobilize people nationally in coordination with blacks around an anti-racist issue.