

War in Ukraine and desertion

Interview with the anarchist group “Assembly” of Kharkiv

Federazione Anarchica Italiana

4 September 2022

With this interview, we wish to present to Italian-speaking (and international) publics the Assembly group that is active in the city of Kharkiv where it produces an online counter-information newspaper, to which several links are provided in the text of the interview, and operates in local solidarity networks in a city that is currently being bombed every day. Being our first contact with this reality, it is an important opportunity to know the opinions of this group on the controversial international debates on which our Federation has recently expressed its positions, and on the concrete needs of those who find themselves doing social, solidarity and humanitarian work not far from the front line.

CRINT-FAI: Given the lack of information with Italian publics on the situation in Kharkiv, can you tell something on the history of your group and your insertion in local political dynamics?

Assembly: In general, we have really been active since March 30, 2020 – as soon as there was a feeling in the air that this habitual status quo had finally cracked. The start of a global pandemic took us by surprise! It was unusual to stay at home all the time. At some of our comrade’s workplaces, the salary was cut by 20% and there was a fear of staff layoffs. But a couple of weeks after the start of quarantine, she started development of our website and so began to talk about acute social problems and help people unite to directly help each other in the face of a crisis.

Our reasoning went something like this: if at least 10% of the population of our city understands, for example, the public transport system better than the mayor and the city council do, then why do we need their administration? Something like that... The journal soon became a place where the peaceful segment of social struggle and self-organization could meet with the radical underground, and began to really live up to its name. We covered street events, workplace struggles, and urban development issues in our metropolis. We have also tried to restore historical memory on the revolutionary workers’ traditions.

Since the outbreak of hostilities, our magazine has become a platform for presenting and coordinating self-organized humanitarian activities, as well as for highlighting how the local ruling class is benefiting from this massacre. And if in the last year we had 20–30 thousand visits per month, then since the beginning of spring it’s jumped to between 80 to 120 thousand!

CRINT-FAI: You managed to keep activity alive during the conflict. How is it deployed in daily work?

Assembly: Fortunately or unfortunately, we are the only anarchist collective in Ukraine whose fame has grown significantly during these 6 terrible months. Probably, because we give useful information for workers in their daily confrontation with bosses or officials, and our position with the condemnation of both warring states – the aggressor commits open genocide against everything Ukrainian, the «small suffering democratic victim» keeps most of the population as hostages to show more bloody pictures abroad demanding more money, also robbing its serfs by all available means, while not a single Russian missile has yet flown into the government quarter – is quite close to those who have nothing to defend in this bleak hole with no clear future. The main problem that is such support does not transform into a desire to study anarchism and spread its ideas – even grassroots volunteers and other active parts of society are maximally de-ideologized here...

CRINT-FAI: What about Zelensky's government? We read about the new labour legislation. What are the implications of the state of emergency on daily life?

Assembly: If for Russia defeat in the war means some political changes (at least a palace coup, and possible disintegration into parts or partial loss of sovereignty), the future of Ukraine seem to be very sad in any case. Long before the war, Zelensky was often compared to young Putin not without reason, and as a result of victory, we can get a regime no less dictatorial than the Russian one. A very telling example came this month when he stated that the borders for men would not be open until the end of martial law, don't caring that it's the most popular petition topic on his website.

With regard to labour legislation, it is very indicative that we see only Europeans concerned about this. Because at least half of those employed in Ukraine work in the informal sector, and even officially employed ones rarely hear anything about the compliance with labour rights and guarantees – it all depends on individual agreements.

Most of all, the working class is now worried about other things: the already mentioned street raids for the issuing of subpoenas (the most active in the eastern and western borderland regions) and the need to open departure from the country for those who are liable for military service. Yes, petitions make only information sense, however it is the first attempts of Ukrainian workers on our memory to express their own agenda at the nationwide level. Since street actions are now impossible, they resort to the only remaining mean of communication with the authorities.

We can only imagine how many Ukrainians would be happy if the state loosened its grip as the result of the international anarchist movement's campaign. If this movement had taken its anti-war statements as more than just words, we would have seen its massive rallies for opening the borders near Ukrainian embassies many months ago. What to talk about, if even on the May Day you found more important affairs? It seems that there is nowhere to wait for help, and one can only guess how many more Ukrainian families will die, because they don't want to part with each other. How do you differ from politicians if you declare things that you are not going to fulfill?

The only mass libertarian structure whose words did not differ from deeds is the EZLN. Shortly after the invasion, they filled the streets of their municipalities, unconditionally condemning this aggression, calling for the immediate withdrawal of the Russian military, at the same time not considering the Ukrainian bourgeois state as something principally better. This protest was symbolic, hardly anyone in the Kremlin even saw it at all, but it seems they did the maximum that is possible in their mountain jungle...

CRINT-FAI: Are there any other activist or solidarity realities/networks with which you are in connection that emerged during the conflict making social work?

Assembly: Of course, there is, and not even one. Firstly, our large information partner is Telegram channel «Subpoenas giving. Kharkov» with almost 75,000 of subscribers, appeared at the end

of May, where people promptly warn each other about raids on conscripts and other arbitrariness of law enforcement structures. We also cooperate with a volunteer organization Build Help for the prompt repair of houses damaged by shelling in poor areas. To discuss broader issues of the post-war development, we participate in the Alternative Kharkiv (founded exactly two years ago) and Kharkiv Loadstone (born about a month ago). It is an informal, horizontal coalition of urban planners, environmentalists, architects and local historians committed to making our city more decentralized and less commercially oriented. The general concept of our joint vision was presented at the end of May.

Obviously, we will be able to seriously start implementing these ideas only when the invaders stop destroying the city with ballistic missiles every night and 220-mm cluster rockets when people go to work – if by that time it does not get completely empty – but there are already some successes. Kharkov authorities and developers associated with them plan to demolish historical buildings damaged by bombing for the construction of commercial facilities instead of their restoration. And their attempt to finish off in this way one of the oldest houses in our city, almost 200 years old, has already been stopped by the intervention of us and our readers. Monitoring of the situation must be continued daily, because they are hoping precisely for weakening our vigilance.

As for solidarity at the international level, this is a completely different matter. Last year, the international anarchist movement raised 5,000 euros for Afghan anarchists in about a month – we received from foreign comrades 1,500 euros in half a year. This is despite the fact that our work is in the public domain, while in that case nothing is known about their activities either before emigration or after (although we donated them too). What can be said here?

CRINT-FAI: How can we help you through concrete international solidarity in humanitarian help to victims of war?

Assembly: Since the occupiers have regularly bombed critical civilian infrastructure throughout the siege, the upcoming heating season may be the biggest problem for our places. We are now preparing a community heating point in the house of our participant on the marginal industrial outskirts of Kharkiv. You can support both this and the purchase of humanitarian goods from local farmers (though we have suspended it in August as funds are limited and how long the war will last is unknown). The lowest fee should be if you donate directly to our fundraiser's bank card in dollars or in euros, but we don't know if it is available from Italy. For such cases please join our main fundraising: www.globalgiving.org

CRINT-FAI: What is your position on matters of desertion and conscious objection as for both the Ukrainian and Russian armies?

Assembly: Oh, comprehensive coverage of anti-war boycott, sabotage and other direct action is the main topic of our English international rubric since the first days of the full-scale invasion! Along with this, we should understand that the national unity of Ukrainians around Zelensky's power rests only on fear of an external threat. Therefore, anti-war subversive acts in Russia are indirectly a threat to the Ukrainian ruling class as well, and that is why we consider its informational support to be an internationalist act.

It should be also taken into account that despite the absence of a qualitative difference among the warring states, they differ quantitatively: if all Russian soldiers stop fighting, the war will end, if Ukrainian soldiers do this, Ukraine will end. The zone of occupation begins 20 km from the ring road of our city, and we know what this means: the «disappearance» of all at least a bit of active and the Stone Age for the rest of population. At the same time, after the Russian troops mostly lost their offensive potential, a wave of social discontent began to show up in Ukraine as well – we have already talked about this.

CRINT-FAI: What effects did the war on Ukrainian anarchist and radical movements?

Assembly: Some groups just disappeared, the rest – except for us – continue to operate as state units, but as a political entity (even if far from anarchism) are actually dead, and no prospects for their revival in this capacity are now visible. It should be noted that different Ukrainian anarchists joined the army for different reasons. Black Flag rather tried to promote the anarchist agenda in the ranks of the military and broader defense movement. We consider their experience valuable, although unsuccessful, and assumptions about this were expressed by us in an interview from the first days of the war. Others, on the contrary, rather protect the Ukrainian state from attacks by anarchists – therefore, we treat them as negatively as we treat the state as such.

In words all of them are not for the state, but only for the Ukrainian people, however even such Jesuit rhetoric they cannot use in a revolutionary way. If you want help the Armed Forces, many of whose soldiers don't even have body armor, not to mention other ammunition – okay, help them, make useful contacts for the post-war time, as Malatesta supported the Cuban rebels against Spain and the Libyan ones against Italy... But why even Zelensky's right-wing opponents are not shy to use every case of such injustice to undermine trust in the Ukrainian authorities, while they, on the contrary, only advocate Ukrainian state interests in the libertarian circles? Those who don't want to obey any government have no reasons to see such groups as a real alternative to it, and those who love the state don't need such schizophrenic exoticism – there are ordinary nationalist parties and movements for them.

We do not think that this would radically change the situation: the example of the same Black Flag shows that any revolutionary agitation in the Ukrainian troops is now meaningless, as soldiers are generally satisfied with their salaries, quite solid even by European standards (100,000 hryvnias or about 2700 euros at the front line). Nevertheless, the majority of those who identify themselves as anarchists in Ukraine were not even going to do this, but immediately merged with the ruling class in a single nationalist impulse.

Meanwhile, the number of the Ukrainian army is approaching a million people, and a few dozen fighters under black flags are a drop in the ocean, unable to demonstrate anything but their own futility and helplessness. However, the relative success of our media in comparison with pre-war times also should not give us the illusion that anarchist views have become more popular in at least one of the regions of Ukraine. We need to be ready for the fact that the political situation in the country may be like in Afghanistan, Yemen or Somalia for a very long time, and nothing can guarantee the growth of the influence for anarchism, but the only chance for this is the refusal to flirt with some or another authorities/politicians as a «lesser evil», and a resolute and unconditional opposition to them all. Otherwise, the masses will increasingly perceive anarchists as strange and incomprehensible clowns which don't need to pay attention at all.

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