

The Platform: It's Not Just For Platformists Anymore

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"It is time for anarchism to leave the swamp of disorganization, to put an end to endless vacillations on the most important tactical and theoretical questions, to resolutely move towards a clearly recognized goal, and to operate an organized collective practice."

– **Organizational Platform of Libertarian Communists**, 1927

Much has been made over the last few years of renewed activity by anarchists inspired by the 1926 platform. Rather than engaged debate on the issue, discussion has tended to be polarized between defenders of the platform and unwavering opponents of platformism (and so-called organizational anarchism generally). Lost in this polarization is the fact that platformism offers some important insights into contemporary anarchist activity, insights that may be especially useful for non-platformists.

We should begin this discussion by saying that we are not platformists. We have never been platformists and, who knows, we may never be platformists. In fact, over the years we've had our own share of problems with the platform and many arguments with proponents of the platform.

Still, we support the recent emergence of platformist organizations in North America generally, and the activities of a specific platformist federation, NEFAC. We also think that platformist actions and ideas have much to offer anarchists in North America, both in terms of their critique of North American anarchist movements and in terms of their positive contributions to the struggle for an anarchist society.

Thus we write this short piece not as boosterism for those who agree with the platform, nor as a rebuttal to those who are opposed to the platform. Instead we write it as anarchists still grappling with the questions and challenges posed by the platform. We are encouraged by the possibilities raised by platformist organizing which builds anarchism outside of our limited circles and in connection with people's everyday lives and struggles under capitalism.

In our view, the burden is on critics of platformism to explain what is wrong with the emergence of anarchist organizations that through their ideas and activities might serve as a pole of attraction for anarchists. Non-platformists have many questions to answer.

Why not draw anarchists together to actively hash out common positions, strategies and tactics? Why not prefer that active engagement to the comfort of spinning out personal utopias,

criticizing from the sidelines or conversely setting aside political differences altogether? What is there to oppose in efforts “to rally all the militants of the organised anarchist movement?” Why oppose attempts to attract working class militants to anarchism?

The goal of developing anarchist perspectives within unions and other working class organizations is one that anarchists have neglected for far too long. And then many anarchists have the nerve to complain about the un-anarchistic character of the working class.

That some non-platformists have responded to platformist organizing dogmatically and reactively, criticizing a document to dismiss a movement, referring to broad generalizations about “organization” rather than specific organizational practices, suggests that some habits are tough to shake. Still it’s exactly the habits nurtured during times of lethargy, insularity and marginality that must be shaken off as people are beginning to seek alternatives to capitalist social relations. Not only thoughts of future societies but of real strategies for making it happen are needed.

To begin with, it seems obvious that the original Delo Truda concern with overcoming “the miserable state in which the anarchist movement vegetates” is one that must be shared by North American anarchists today, despite the encouraging upswing in anarchist activity recently (of which platformists have played a good part).

As anarchist movements grow the questions of organization and the relations of various anarchist activities to each other and to broader strategies and tactics for social change will only become more significant and pressing. If anarchists are to seize the opportunities presented by recent upsurges in anarchist activity and build anarchism in movements that have resonance in wider struggles, then we must face seriously the challenges of organization, of combining and coordinating our efforts effectively. We will be aided in this by drawing upon the lessons of past experiences and avoiding, as much as possible, past errors.

One of the glaring errors has been to avoid questions of organization and unity, leaving us woefully unprepared when struggles erupt. When movements are in low ebb and goals are less ambitious, such questions may appear less immediate and the impetus to break out of the protective shell of the subculture less pressing. This has been the situation in North America until very recently.

The changed circumstances in a time of growth for anarchism, and anti-capitalist activities more generally, require new practices suited to the changed dynamics of struggle. As struggles expand and develop, the question is not so much whether people will form organizations or not, but rather the types of organizations that will emerge. People trying to beat capitalism will certainly try to join forces with others to share resources, coordinate efforts and build strength. To stand on the sidelines in such matters is to leave the terrain open to authoritarian and/or reformist organizations to fill the breach.

When one looks at the history of anarchism, organizational perspectives and activities, far from being marginal elements, represent the core of anarchist endeavor. Attempts to suggest that organizational approaches represent some deviation from anarchism or the intrusion of un-anarchist ideas into anarchism are a strange attempt at historical revisionism. Of course, most anarchists are involved in some type of organization or another, whether an infoshop collective, publication team or affinity group.

Much of anarchist activity in North America, unfortunately, still corresponds with the Delo Truda description from 1926: “local organizations advocating contradictory theories and practices, having no perspectives for the future, nor of a continuity in militant work, and habitually disappearing, hardly leaving the slightest trace behind them.” Absence of durable anarchist or-

ganizations still contributes to a drift into passivity, demoralization, disinterest or a retreat into subculturalism.

Many of these short-lived organizations are built on the synthesist basis that platformists have been and remain so critical of. While we're not convinced that synthesist approaches must fail, in my experiences they do exhibit a tendency to be the "mechanical assembly of individuals" which the platformists suggested. Such groupings work relatively well as long as their level of activity doesn't rise above running a bookstore, infoshop or free school. Unfortunately, even in those cases disastrous rifts emerge when meaningful political questions are broached. A consensus based on not wanting to offend other members or declining controversial work because it threatens collective harmony are too often the default positions of synthesist type groups.

Platformists seek a substantial unity based on shared action and reflection. Platformism encourages a political and theoretical honesty. One can take a stand without having to compromise or soft peddle one's positions in order to keep the peace.

Discussion of unity perhaps requires some clarification. When platformists talk of theoretical or tactical unity they are not saying that everyone has to read the same things or agree on all points. Surely, however, there has to be some agreement on basic ideas. And these positions are only determined collectively, through open debate and discussion rooted in actual experience. Unity speaks to a focused sharing of resources and energies that brings currently limited anarchist forces together rather than dissipating and diluting our efforts.

Of course it's always easier to avoid the collective work, the lengthy debate and discussion, the development and revision of ideas through practice and finally the legwork of organizing that platformists take on. It's also easier to develop pure schemes in the comfort of one's apartment, rarely worrying oneself whether or not such beautiful fantasies "would inevitably disintegrate on encountering reality." Platformists, on the other hand, accept the shared responsibilities of building anarchist movements in connection with those who suffer the assaults of capitalism.

The anarchist organization is a place to come together and reflect on work being done. It offers the opportunity to examine and refine one's practices and explore alternatives and options given the resources and experiences at hand.

It seems to us that the important thing about platformism isn't found in the specifics of a 1926 document but in the challenge that it puts before us to come together openly and seriously to develop anarchist strategies and practices in a way that is engaged in real class struggles against actually existing bosses, landlords and bureaucrats. Platformists have taken up the challenge of moving anarchism from its current status as social conscience or cultural critique. This is exhibited in the work being done by platformist groups in tenants' unions, workplaces, anti-poverty actions and fighting deportations to name only a few.

These actions, based upon serious debate and an estimation of the capacities to do the work properly, have moved the discussion of organization out of the clouds of speculation and brought it to the ground of everyday practice.

They have taken it from comfortable abstraction to practical reality based on the experiences of people living under actually existing capitalism.

Of course, the platform is simply a "tactical and theoretical orientation" and platformist organization is the bringing together of those who would develop that orientation through their practice. Thus it is always open to re-appraisal as circumstances suggest.

It's important to keep in mind that the platform was only ever intended as a beginning, "as the first step towards rallying libertarian forces." Far from being a fully fleshed out program of

action it provides only “the outlines, the skeleton of such a programme.” Its authors recognized its many gaps, oversights and inadequate treatments.

Part of anarchism’s growth must include a commitment to developing visions and practices that can build anarchist movements rather than just “scenes” or cliques. If platformism offers a starting point for this process then it makes a welcome and necessary contribution to anarchism in North America.

Anarchist hobbyism is not much better than the hobbyism of stamp collecting or bird watching. Hobbies offer their practitioners moments of freedom, self-expression and relief from the daily grind but they don’t do much to keep the shit from piling up. Anarchism can do better than that and must do better than that. This is what platformism recognizes and it attempts to take anarchism out of esoteric hobbyism.

Anarchism must move from the realm of speculation to the terrain of possibility. In giving a serious impetus to this movement, platformist organizations offer much to anarchist efforts in North American.

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