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Our Revolutionary Program

Karl Blythe

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In my previous “Notes on Anarchist Organization,” I set out to lay the groundwork for a fresh analysis of the organizational problem in the anarchist movement. With the *Organizational Platform* and related materials as the starting point in my analysis, I briefly proposed ways of constructing or improving our organization in a practical way. Taking up where I left off before, I will now discuss some of these points more completely. I will then sketch out essentially what I view as the role of our organization and revolutionary program. As an additional note, I will make some clarifying remarks on the question of *federalism*, in reply to the comments made by “Javier” regarding my previous essay. As before, I will assume an overall familiarity with the subject by most readers, and for those unfamiliar I refer again to Alexandre Skirda’s work as an excellent starting point.

I concluded my “Notes” with some proposals on how to resolve the question of *ideological unity* in the course of devising our program, at the same time cultivating a revolutionary consciousness among our militants. This would also solve the problem of collective responsibility in a manner consistent with our anarchist principles (including that of fraternal revolutionary discipline, as pre-

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viously discussed). Beyond that, it also takes on in specific and practical terms an issue raised near the end of the *Platform*, where it states:

The General Union of Anarchists has a specific and concrete goal. For the sake of the success of the social revolution, **it must above all choose and absorb** from among the workers and peasants **the most revolutionary personnel most endowed with critical spirit.**

This point brings up not only the question of how to select such personnel, but again how they are to *internalize* the revolutionary consciousness necessary to make reality out of the principles of personal and collective responsibility in a libertarian organization.

The notion of “choosing and absorbing” from the masses the “most revolutionary personnel most endowed with critical spirit” clearly implies the need to carefully pick out and select the most capable individuals from among the popular masses. This is no simple matter of spouting off rhetoric to whoever will listen and hoping to win over the more advanced elements through propaganda. It is even more than simply a matter of choosing those who *appear* in their ideas to be closest to our thinking. Rather, it is a matter of grasping certain qualities (i.e. “critical spirit”) which make for a powerful revolutionary force when harnessed. In short, it is more a question of revolutionary instinct than of calculating where one stands on some theoretical political spectrum.

With that understanding of revolutionary potential in mind, I suggest that the best method of drawing out such characteristics is by ongoing thorough study of revolutionary history (that is when personal experience does not suffice). Therefore I believe it is crucial that this sort of material be put to use in elaborating our program—for the more that is understood of past revolutionary experience, the more we will understand our own struggle and the

a specifically anarchist organization. That requires a specifically anarchist “vanguard” group with a clear program to lead the struggle forward and lay groundwork for a revolutionary upheaval.

direction it must take. From the standpoint of organization, this means using such material in *ideologically training and preparing militants*, by means of study groups or individual study of certain fundamental materials as a prerequisite of membership in our organization. That would also help weed out would-be members who lack commitment or discipline, ensuring a higher degree of these qualities within the organization.

I should qualify this proposal in practical terms. The conditions we face (in the United States at least, that being my personal vantage point) require us to thoroughly explain our ideals and our program to the masses, often consisting of middle-class workers and young people domesticated and influenced by bourgeois materialism. Above all we wage the *ideological struggle*, in particular where significant democratic rights exist along with considerable economic prosperity (although in the U.S. these are increasingly being eroded). Unless the people in imperialist countries are made to understand the violent and exploitive role of the state and capitalism in other countries as well as at home, there is no real chance of a revolutionary upheaval (at least until the market fails and the working middle class finds itself in poverty, many signs of which are becoming imminent—and even then it will lack a *revolutionary consciousness*, being rooted entirely in material self-interest). That is why it is of utmost importance to instill in our ranks (and from there the masses) a complete understanding and internalization of our theoretical program.

In addressing the problem of organization, it is fitting to look back at actual revolutionary history as I have been saying. Specifically, the work of Nestor Makhno and the Makhnovist movement in the Russian Revolution, and the later writings of Makhno and Arshinov are fundamental in that respect. I highlight Makhno’s essay “On the 10th Anniversary of the Makhnovist Insurgent Movement in the Ukraine” (in *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays*) in which he clearly explained the organizational dilemma in the context of the Ukraine during the Russian Revolution:

... **for an active revolutionary vanguard**, this was a time of great strain, for **it required painstaking preparation of the uprising. Our Gulyai-Polye libertarian communist group was just such a vanguard**, and events led it to pose the question of whether it should assume complete responsibility for leading the movement....

Describing the disorganization and among the anarchists and resulting disconnect with the masses, he concludes:

We had furnished the best possible solution to this problem by organizing the insurrection directly and paying no heed to the possible carping from our fellow-believers regarding this **vanguardist stance which they saw as ill suited to anarchist teachings**. Thus in practice we ... concentrated instead on seeing the struggle through to complete victory.

He then explains more generally:

... this required that revolutionary anarchism, if it sought to ... fulfill its active task in contemporary revolutions, face up to immense demands of an organizational nature whether in the **training of its personnel** or in **defining its dynamic role in the early days of the revolution** when the toiling masses were still groping their way.

Note the last point regarding the “training of personnel” and defining anarchism’s “dynamic role in the early days of the revolution.” This is, of course, exactly what Makhno and others sought to achieve in the *Platform*, albeit with some inevitable limitations, and it is the same question we must “face up to” presently. Aside

It then quotes the journal *Ideas* on the “proprieties of trade union federalism”:

The so-called higher committees ought to be bound by the accords of the trade union organization. The unions dispose and the committees see to it that the dispositions are implemented. That is what federalism is, whatever else is done is dictatorship....

A little later we read of CNT leaders’ efforts to expel the Friends of Durruti, and of the Friends’ response. According to the preface—“No one ever joined the CNT, the Confederation. All CNT members belonged to local unions and federations and sovereignty resided in these.” It then quotes the Friends directly:

We can only be expelled from the confederal organization by the assemblies of the unions. Local and comarcial plenums are not empowered to expel any comrade. We invite the committees to raise the matter of the ‘Friends of Durruti’ in the assemblies, which is where the organization’s sovereignty resides.

Again the confederal principle that each trade union is an independent organization and the federation is nothing but a conglomeration of these independent unions.

That approach has some place in syndicalist structures when it comes to economic problems of a technical nature; but in terms of political or “anti”-political direction, there should be no question but that the source of leadership is the entire membership (i.e. “one man, one vote”) and *not the affiliated organizations*. Of course, the confederal approach is to be expected in a trade union federation, which is in part why trade unions are insufficient as revolutionary organizations. Not that they ought to be abandoned as a form of working-class organization—simply that it is not “sufficient unto itself” to bring about the revolution, and certainly does not compose

ary role. I failed to specify with examples, however, which may have caused confusion, for Javier writes: “it is not a matter of middlemans which are to be avoided but of operational and political flexibility and creating intermediary stances of coordination.” Of course, I take no issue with this idea, which is more or less identical to my own views. When I speak of component organizations’ autonomy and of indirect representation, I am referring to the practices of some syndicalist federations. The prime example of this would be the French CGT. To quote Skirda (*Facing the Enemy* p. 69):

Voting there [in Congress] was on the basis of mandates, not in proportion with the membership of each body or affiliated organization, but by grouping—**this was a rejection of the democratism sought by the reformists who accounted for a majority of the membership numerically but controlled only a minority of the organizations represented.**

In other words, the CGT was not a union but a confederation of independent unions, and federal organs were set up not to represent the members but rather the affiliated organizations. This confederal approach is clearly anti-democratic and in my view inconsistent with libertarian principles *except insofar as the affiliated organizations are not accountable to the confederation*—i.e. unless they are *autonomous*. The issue also comes up, ironically, in the debate within CNT-FAI during the Spanish Civil War. To quote the preface to Agustín Guillamón’s work on *The Friends of Durruti Group: 1937–1939*:

The dalliance of the organizations’ higher committees with politicians and their pursuit of a unified and disciplined policy as an aid to them ... had led to certain unwelcome changes in the practices of those organizations.

from that, I highlight the above quotations by way of bringing up to additional points relevant to our program which I have not yet discussed.

First—regarding “vanguardism.” This is a notion that is often denounced as authoritarian, mainly due to its Marxist-Leninist connotations. The assumption by many anarchists is that a “revolutionary vanguard” necessarily aims to conquer state power and wield it dictatorially, as is typically the case with Marxist-Leninist parties. However, they fail to consider that this is only the case if the aim of the revolution itself is to seize state power—which is not the case in anarchism. Now, there are some Marxists who claim that anarchism in fact is not revolutionary at all, because they believe a revolution must always culminate in seizing of state power. We anarchists have always argued that the social revolution will only be complete when the state is abolished, and therefore we aim not to conquer state power but to *completely overthrow the state* without reconstructing it. All of this is well-known by anarchists—they would not be *anarchists* otherwise. Yet somehow many anarchists fail to recognize that likewise *a revolutionary vanguard need not aim to seize state power*. On the contrary, any anarchist group which takes upon itself the responsibility for leading and instigating a revolutionary upheaval is acting as a vanguard. Not only is this compatible with anarchist teachings, *it is the very essence of revolutionary anarchism*.

As anarchists, we are *everywhere and always in revolt against authority*. That is why, as Makhno wrote in “Our Organization” (in *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays*), anarchism “is inherently revolutionary and can adopt only revolutionary modes of struggle against its enemies.” Or as it was put by the syndicalist Fernand Pelloutier, the anarchists are “rebels around the clock, men truly godless, masterless and nationless, irreducible enemies of every despotism, moral and material...” (qtd. in A. Skirda, *Facing the Enemy* p. 66). In other words, we are always in the frontline of the revolution, leading on the class struggle. It is for this exact

reason that we are usually a minority and are accused of being anti-democratic or even dictatorial for seeking to “impose our beliefs” on the masses (i.e. for upholding our ideals even though we are outnumbered).

This position is by its nature “vanguardist,” in the sense that we march ahead of the masses and prepare the revolution while the workers are still “groping their way.” This is explained in the *Platform* as well. For instance, in defining the role of the anarchists it states: “anarchism should become the guiding light of the social revolution.... The spearhead position of anarchist ideas in the revolution means *anarchist theoretical direction of events*” in a non-statist way. In the final paragraphs we read: “As regards the workers’ trades and revolutionary organizations in the towns, the General Union of Anarchists will have to escalate all its efforts so as to become their spearhead and theoretical mentor.” And of course the closing words:

Emanating from the heart of the masses of the toilers, the General Union of Anarchists takes part in all aspects of their life, always and everywhere bringing the spirit of organization.... **Only thus can it fulfill its role**, its theoretical and historic mission in the toilers’ social revolution **and become the organized instigation of their process of emancipation.**

Thus despite the different words used (i.e. “spearhead,” “mentor” or “instigator”), one can clearly sense the notion of a vanguard in the *Platform* (some translations even use the word “vanguard” in place of “instigator,” although Skirda points out the translation is inaccurate). That said, there is some difference between the role ascribed to the “General Union of Anarchists” by the *Platform*, and Makhno’s description of the role of the Gulyai-Polye group in the Makhnovist insurgent movement, bringing me to my other point.

Second—regarding insurrectionism. Referring back to Makhno’s writings, we can gather in addition to “vanguardism”

nizations within federations. This is probably due in part to my own lack of clarity by not including specific examples to illustrate my views. I will therefore explain my views in more specific terms below.

Regarding centralism, Javier writes: “Centralism means moving the center of gravity of decision making from the base, that is the whole organization, to higher more reduced bodies...” as is typical of Marxist parties. The assumption is that “centralism” is always bureaucratic and top-down. Fine, we can accept this definition given on a historical basis. It is also only natural that “freedom of speech, unity of action” is, as Javier says, merely a statement of intention, as is also the case with the *Platform*. But the question is *how to apply stated intentions in practice*. The intention with democratic centralism is to apply this principle to the party structure, in the sense that decisions democratically reached by the organization are carried out by members with the strictest discipline.

The problem is not with the term “centralist” (a purely semantic issue), but with the fact that leadership is *actually* centered in “higher more reduced bodies” and directives bureaucratically issued down to the base. In short, the “democratic” aspect is a façade, or at least that is the usual case as with Bolshevism proper. Yet even many Marxists have attacked this tendency as conflicting with the *principle* of democratic centralism, proposing other forms more directly democratic and focused at the base level (i.e. a non-hierarchical format). My point is not that we should adopt the slogan of democratic centralism, but that we should take the best aspects of this organizational principle (not its typical applications) together with the best aspects of federalism—which as I see it would be more precise than simply speaking of “federalism,” given the confusion surrounding the term.

In my “Notes” I stated: “many anarchist federations have resorted instead to systems of indirect representation said to assure greater autonomy to component organizations,” which ought to be avoided and the latter reduced as far as possible to an intermedi-

should be constructed on the basis of a firmly-grounded practice by local militants, and our program should not be strictly defined in terms of some “manifesto” or “platform” (although such documents may be helpful as point of reference), but should rather be the living expression of our general and day-to-day activity, subject to ongoing revision and refinement until our fundamental goal is achieved. In that sense, the informal approach that is favored by insurrectionists can be a healthy weight against bureaucratic tendencies arising as we overhaul our ranks.

Stepping back, I believe that the best starting point for such an approach is in forming study groups to read and discuss revolutionary theory and history, with a view to internalizing through personal understanding our anarchist ideals, and setting out with a clear sense of our practical program. As I have already said, this is not a new idea—its inspiration can be found in the studies organized by the Gulyai-Polye anarchist group and Makhno himself (see A. Skirda, *Nestor Makhno—Anarchy’s Cossack* ch. 4–5, in particular pp. 22–4 and p. 30), not to mention many other anarchist groups. However, its systematic use in this regard has not been applied fully or consistently enough for the most part. Furthermore, this approach is more inclined towards informal personal interaction, as opposed to a “committee” style of interaction that contributes to bureaucratic trends and a certain lifelessness stemming from pointless formalism.

I will now wrap up with my reply to the comments by “Javier” on federalism, in regard to my “Notes.” In his comments he remarked that I “missed the point” on federalism, which to him is “one of the biggest misunderstandings common in anarchism.” He then quoted a paragraph from the *Platform* summing up their view of federalism, and followed with an explanation of the confusion over this notion stemming partly from the differing interpretations among the different anarchist currents. All of that is perfectly on the mark in my opinion. However, there is some confusion in turn about “democratic centralism” and the issue of autonomous orga-

ertain characteristics of insurrectionism, specifically where he speaks of “organizing the insurrection directly,” which is fitting enough for an anarchist. What strikes me as more important is how to apply this particular example with all of its lessons to the conditions of a country like the United States. Now, it seems to me out of the question to speak of armed struggle in the present conditions, both for moral and strategic reasons. Even so, it is well worth examining the possible applications of insurrectionist ideas. This is important, in part because our anarchist principles require that we “adopt only revolutionary modes of struggle” (implying that we disregard bourgeois legality in favor of *militant direct action* by the working class), and in part out of recognition of the extraordinary place of Italian insurrectionism in the anarchist movement.

Out of all the historical currents of thought and action to spring from anarchism, the two meriting the most distinction for their practical contributions to the movement are *syndicalism and insurrectionism* (I do not include “Platformism” because its chief contributions have been theoretical, there being no outstanding examples of its practical achievements until recent times). The former, while it deserves credit for firmly establishing anarchism as a credible working-class movement, must also be criticized by anarchists on the grounds that it has consistently devolved into reformist tendencies typical among labor unions. The possible exception to this is in the Spanish Revolution—and there it must be said that syndicalism (vis-à-vis the CNT-FAI) played as much a role in holding back the revolution as in advancing it, for much the same reasons that it has elsewhere stopped short at limited reforms. In short, it is clear that revolutionary syndicalism is in no way “sufficient unto itself” as was believed by its original anarchist exponents.

As for insurrectionism, although comparatively recent as a specific theory, its essential ideas are rooted in elementary anarchist teachings, seeing as anarchism itself was born of insurrectional tendencies in particular coming out of the French Revolution (and

in fact going back much earlier). Bakunin and other early anarchists (notably Malatesta, a leading Italian anarchist) espoused many ideas and methods that were essentially insurrectionist (although in later years Bakunin shifted towards a syndicalist approach foreshadowing the idea of the general strike, influenced by the First International). In addition, we can point to the remarkable record of insurrectionism—in Italy and Spain in the anti-fascist resistance, in carrying on anarchist resistance in Italy, as well as in insurrectionists’ steady stream of insightful analyses on international issues (in particular on the Middle East)—as proof of its continuing importance to revolutionary anarchism. In all of these regards, the outstanding commitment and extraordinary instinct for action on the ground clearly exemplify the profound revolutionary capacity of insurrectionism.

On the other hand, despite the theoretical insight of insurrectionist writings at a general level, insurrectionist groupings have never been able to apply these ideas beyond isolated actions, even at the height of their popularity in Italy. Now, it is possible that I am misinterpreting (I am no expert when it comes to the details of the post-World War Two anarchist movement in Italy), but it seems to me that one basic reason for this inability to generalize their groups’ activities in a broader way is the lack of a disciplined organization to coordinate their most effective methods and actions. Now, if only the basic idea of the *Organizational Platform* were applied to their movement, perhaps (there is no guarantee) such a generalization would take place, laying the basis for an organized revolutionary upheaval to occur. In that way, we would shortly find the best and most far-reaching insights of insurrectionist theory become reality.

Beyond that, I would again argue that the common preference among insurrectionists for armed struggle as a mode of action is out of touch with the objective and subjective conditions of a country like the United States (I will not address other countries’ situations). We have seen amply demonstrated how armed “guerrilla”

groups (if it is even fair to call them such) in the U.S. achieve nothing of value and only serve to discredit radicalism and alienate the people from revolutionary ideas. Even popular riots (such as in Seattle) fail to either make a significant impact in the struggle or to win over the broad layers of masses to the cause of rebellion. That is not surprising for anyone who is in touch with the popular mentality, and for that matter it should not be surprising that violence would be viewed distastefully by the masses (after all, anarchist theory deals largely with the institutional violence of the state). Remember also that it was similar activities that first led to anarchism’s discredit among the widespread public, and it was mainly the advent of syndicalism that revived it as a meaningful popular movement.

In light of those considerations, I believe it is of urgent necessity that we develop a *nonviolent* approach that is nonetheless *militant* in a revolutionary sense. Our methods must be strictly in keeping with the line of intransigent working-class militancy in a real sense of the term (i.e. “only revolutionary modes of struggle,” and also as expressed in the *Platform*), and at the same time must consist of nonviolent tactics capable of winning over the popular masses and of securing the moral high ground in the struggle. Despite the typical limitations of nonviolence and of the ideological shortcomings of pacifism, there is a rich history and a wealth of literature on the subject to start off from in devising a more complete strategy of militant nonviolence. Expanding on that notion, it is also worth studying the historical examples and possibilities of nonviolent insurrection.

All that said, I am personally inclined towards a more informal style of organizing and flexibility in our tactics and our practical program. The fundamental point in my opinion is not the need for an all-encompassing organization (which by itself would simply lead to bureaucracy), but rather the importance of a coherent direction for the movement as a whole, and for a consistent and coordinated practice within our ranks. Thus any larger organization