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Arriba los que luchan! Lessons in Struggle from Uruguayan Anarchists

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October 9, 2023

Juan Verala Luz reviews *Anarchist Popular Power: Dissident Labor and Armed Struggle in Uruguay 1956–1976*. This review began as opening remarks at a recent book launch for *Anarchist Popular Power*. You can read excerpts from the original statement in this report, and listen to it alongside a discussion with historian Troy Araiza Kokinis in a forthcoming *It's Going Down* podcast episode.

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Retrieved on 2023-10-28 from redblacknotes.com/2023/10/09/lessons-in-struggle-from-uruguayan-anarchists

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Compounding crises that neither capitalism nor the nation-state can solve have compelled many newcomer and veteran militants alike to (re-)engage in social movements across the world. In the United States, Occupy Wall Street's explosive expansion; mass mobilizations to secure Black lives against all instantiations of white supremacy; airport shutdowns to oppose xenophobic, anti-Muslim policies; direct confrontations with

anti-LGBTQ fascist footsoldiers; and more all signal the resurgence of collective struggle. Even more, hundreds of thousands have started and joined labor unions over the last several years. Insurgent strike waves before COVID-19 inspired everyday people to fight for more than the short end of the “deal” the decaying American empire and its grotesque elite offers in a post-shutdown world, growing the number of strikes over 50% since 2021. Tenant unions of, by, and for ourselves have coalesced into a multinational network, coordinating cross-regional campaigns to support shared struggles. And a forceful movement opposing police expansion in Atlanta’s Weelaunee Forest has spawned nationwide actions against Cop City’s partners and similar campaigns in other locales.

Despite our important inroads towards rebuilding robust, combative movements, we have still struggled to wrest major concessions. Momentary victories like a killer cop’s conviction and modest defense against pandemic layoffs offer temporary reprieves from these systems’ worst excesses, but business as usual typically returns once the mass heat in the streets simmers. Cycles of crisis, conflagration, and cooldown have compelled many to revisit and newly probe historical experiences and *compañeras* for strategic guidance.

One such inspiring case is the subject of Troy Andreas Araiza Kokinis’s brilliant first book *Anarchist Popular Power: Dissident Labor and Armed Struggle in Uruguay, 1956–76*: the Federación Anarquista Uruguaya, more commonly acronymed as the FAU. Over the last several years, editors at AK Press have worked with the UC San Diego and Santa Barbara faculty, service industry worker, and freelance sign painter to transform his doctoral dissertation into the first full-length English language history of this small but globally influential anarchist cadre and the widespread militancy they simultaneously took inspiration from and inspired. Araiza Kokinis weaves together archival research, including records clandestinely concealed during the dictatorship by FAU members (pp. 20, 120), a unique database of labor actions constructed from the Uruguayan

How, therefore, might we maximize the momentum of organizing our coworkers, neighbors, and communities towards a world without capital accumulation, state violence, and hierarchical coercion? How might we support everyday people to replace the terminal drudgery of domination with lives worth collectively living? Araiza Kokinis’s investigation of the FAU offers illuminating glimpses into the kinds of innovative engagement with, disciplined commitment to, long-term visions for, and steadfast confidence in everyday people’s capacities to control their shop floors, classrooms, neighborhoods, and lives, and the intersecting obstructions internal to our movements and foisted upon them by state and other forces that inhibit their realization. For that, I am sure many other revolutionaries will be as grateful as I am to him and our Uruguayan *compas* for sharing those sneak peeks.

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Here, Araiza Kokinis boldly—and with strong evidentiary basis (p. 226, 238–240)—proclaims the FAU’s effective interventions in popular struggles propelled international authorities to stamp out *el pueblo*’s growing revolutionary sympathies by imprisoning, torturing, disappearing, and assassinating dozens of its members and tens of thousands of others (p. 255). Although a version of the FAU persists today with continued involvement from some founding members (p. 263), internal political divisions paired with state harassment ultimately squashed the threat posed by it and the popular militancy it helped inspire.

In sum, then, Araiza Kokinis’s account makes clear the small anarchist outfit did not measure its success by numerical preponderance. When they helped found the CNT, the FAU understood the minority of autonomous unions’ push for systematic escalation faced forestalling by the two-thirds led by PCU obstructionists (p. 57). The organization’s yardstick did not even quite aim to measure the proliferation of its strategic analyses—though, to be certain, it extended far beyond its expected reach as when the FAU effectively swayed wider left factions to hastefully act against the ostensible democracy’s escalating “legal dictatorship” (pp. 82–83). Nor did it wrest its laurels on how it helped fellow workers and students win significant gains like when graphic artists (one of the FAU’s strongholds) successfully pressured their management to violate a state-sanctioned wage freeze (p. 86) that inspired factory workers (pp. 87, 142, 159) and healthcare workers (pp. 161–163), among others, to win similar pay raises and other benefits through mass coordinated (i.e., interunion and student-worker coalitional) struggles. Thus, the FAU consistently evaluated the degree to which *el pueblo* developed “revolutionary counter-subjectivities” by “accumulat[ing] experiences” through directly acting on its own behalf (pp. 121–122, 152). And as FAUista Augusto Andrés asserts, although Uruguay’s working class came within inches of making libertarian communism a possibility, “you only win when you make the revolution” (p. 257).

Communist Party’s (PCU) newspapers (p. 273, note 24), and militants’ memoirs, and conversations with surviving veterans spread across the River Plate region to bring us the story of the FAU’s and the Uruguayan working class’s tremendous journey from the verge of insurrection to government-sponsored military repression and dictatorship.

With approximately eighty core *militantes* (p. 4), the FAU charted its own anarchist path through a unique combination of political synthesis and trial-and-error that Araiza Kokinis’s close readings of the organization’s original texts unearth. *Especifismo*, its foremost contribution, argues that anarchists must simultaneously develop a shared politico-ideological vision and goals while advocating for their principles, strategies, and tactics within larger social movements. Like Peter Kropotkin (pp. 76–77), Mikhail Bakunin, Errico Malatesta, and other European forerunners to the “dual organizationalist” tradition, they insisted anarchists maintain specific “anarchist organizations” to effectively support mass organizations to create the popular power needed for social revolution. Neither hegemonic control of mass organizations—as in the PCU’s efforts to control labor unions—nor complete liquidation into them—as revolutionary and anarcho-syndicalists proposed—could transform everyday people’s subjectivity and instill the confidence needed to collectively run society (p. 76). For the FAU, conscientious action alone could unite *el pueblo* across disparate sectors and sectarian union affiliations. They in turn argued the anarchist organization and its constituent revolutionaries should help “massify the will to act” (p. 18) by independently encouraging their class kinfolk to struggle together on their own behalf.

Independence did not mean abstentionism from the struggles and currents of its day. Instead, FAU militants molded classical (European) anarchist thought with Marxism, Third-Worldism, and regional populism by engaging with its ideas and collaborating with their proponents. Araiza Kokinis details harrowing stories of how these comrades helped initiate and spread massive worker and

student resistance alongside their revolutionary co-conspirators against IMF-backed austerity and declining standards of living throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. For example, university students close to a FAU predecessor collaborated with anti-imperialists of all stripes in the neither Washington nor Moscow *tercerismo* movement (p. 39). FAU militants also impressively helped unite Uruguay's labor unions into the country's largest and longest-lasting confederation, the Convención Nacional de Trabajadores (CNT, pp. 52–55), and spearheaded the Tendencia Combativa among its unaligned unions to directly act against their bosses, state repression, and the PCU's counterinsurgent efforts to curry parliamentary favor (pp. 92–98). While the PCU-led majority repeatedly substituted the Tendencia's Fight Plans to maximally coordinate and escalate labor stoppages with halfhearted days of largely non-disruptive action (pp. 84–87, 126–129), the FAU's Worker-Student Resistance (ROE) spread the organic rebellion by uniting leftists of various stripes to organize unsanctioned and often anti-legal tactics among union and non-union peoples (pp. 110–116, 143–145).

Even the FAU's unique approach to armed struggle should be read as an amalgam of their forthright critical engagement in their historical moment. Like much of the emergent New Left in Latin America, the FAU recognized the necessity to defend against the intensifying threats of its domestic far-right, military and police forces, and their collusion (pp. 47–48). Whereas their infamous Marxist-Leninist compatriots in the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional – Tupamaros attempted to institute socialism through the barrels of guns by adapting Cuba's rural-based guerrilla *focos* for industrialized Uruguay, the anarchists' alternative strategy dubbed *Las Dos Patas* (two feet) placed its own paramilitary apparatus, Popular Revolutionary Organization-33 (OPR-33), in service of mass frontline resistance (pp. 122–124). Some armed cells nudged the needle in labor unions' favor during disputes by ransoming factory owners and their family members (pp. 159–160,

184–188), others expropriated funds from banks to fund militants and movements (pp. 72–73), and still others preemptively protected strikes against attacks and scabs (p. 119). Like the Spanish CNT's defense committees' pre-1936 “revolutionary gymnastics” (Guillamón, 2014) and modeled after the Iberian Anarchist Federation's tactical escalations amidst revolutionary upheaval (p. 116), OPR-33's interventions aimed to prepare *el pueblo* and themselves for insurrection.

Such explorations could easily drift into masculinist glorification or pacifist denunciations. Instead, Araiza Kokinis deliberately unveils the critical role women played in reconnaissance and other less visible contributions in the book's most intimate explorations. Set in the safehouse instrumental to one of the FAU's infamous ransoms, he elaborates how revolutionary women like its stewards weaponized their society's patriarchal expectations by feigning youthful romance and knitting on their porch to hide clandestine surveillance in plain sight (pp. 182, 187). Like recent work that unpacks Black women's bedrock contributions to the US's civil rights and Black Power movements (Bell, 2020; Cope, 2021; Nelson, 2013; Robnett, 1998; Spencer, 2017), he does not allow the full-time revolutionaries' gendered sacrifices to escape criticism. In one stirring account, pseudonymous FAU member Juliana recounts clinging to a memory of her only trip to one of the coastal country's beaches during her decade-long imprisonment (p. 184). Both men and women militants also recall heart-wrenching details of state agents' sexual torture to break women (pp. 190–191) in a precursor to the narrative's (and, in some respects, the FAU's) conclusion.

Set from the perspective of domestic and international state forces, declassified documents meticulously detail the Uruguayan military's coup and pilot participation alongside other Southern Cone dictatorships in Plan Cóndor. With implicit US backing, the latter joint operations sought to restore regional “law and order” and industrial productivity (p. 207) by dismantling transnational activist networks and their cross-border campaigns for liberation.