

Platformism in Latin America

The Uruguayan example

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The Federacion Anarquista Uruguaya (FAU): crisis, armed struggle and dictatorship, 1967–1985. Texts by Juan Carlos Mechoso, Jaime Prieto, Hugo Cores and others translated and edited by Paul Sharkey. 50 pages. Kate Sharpley Library. £3.00

The longest existing and perhaps strongest Platformist organisation in Latin America is the Federacion Anarquista Uruguaya (FAU) of Uruguay. This pamphlet describes a key period in its existence, one that was marked by the death of a large number of its militants shot down or tortured to death by the dictatorship that had emerged in Uruguay. Just as important, it sketches out the direction that the FAU took in its accommodation to Stalinism, towards the politics of a broad front and indeed to the development of a political party.

The forerunner to the Anarchist Federation – The Libertarian Communist Discussion Group – was founded in 1985–6 in an attempt to renew the short lived tradition of Platformism that had developed in Britain in the early 1970s – the Organisation of Revolutionary Anarchists succeeded by the Anarchist Workers Association and then the Libertarian Communist Group and the Anarchist Communist Association. The evolution of the LCDG into the Anarchist Communist Federation which then became today's Anarchist Federation involved a critique of Platformism. The current of Platformism within international anarchism is based on The Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, the 1926 text drafted by Russian and Ukrainian and Polish anarchists in 1926 in an attempt to understand why the Russian and Ukrainian anarchist movements met with failure in the Russian Revolution of 1917. For us three main theses developed in the Platform and supported by Platformism remain relevant for the Anarchist Federation of today. They can be summed up as Federalism, Collective Responsibility, and Tactical and Theoretical Unity, which should be seen as the building blocks of a specific anarchist communist organisation, something else that was insisted upon by the Platform. However the Anarchist Federation was clear that its political positions could not be solely based on insights gained in the 1920s, and in tandem with this was aware of the need to incorporate other theoretical gains and innovations developed in the decades since 1926. In addition the AF was critical of the practice and theoretical evolution of at least some of the groups and organisations that were or are part of the actually existing Platformist current.

The Uruguayan experience documented in this pamphlet illustrates the trajectory that one such Platformist group took.

Unlike other countries in South America, Uruguay was known as a stronghold of bourgeois democracy and social reform. Under its President Battle y Ordonez, a whole raft of legislation was introduced in the mid 1910s. He separated Church from State, banned crucifixes in hospitals, removed references to God and the Bible from public oaths, gave widespread rights to unions and political parties and organisations, brought in the eight hour day and universal suffrage, introduced unemployment benefits, legalised divorce, created more high schools, promised and practised no residency laws against exiled anarchists and other radicals, opened universities to women, and led a campaign to take away the control of industry and land from foreign capitalists (the British capitalists had huge influence in Uruguay) and nationalised private monopolies. This disoriented some elements within the fairly strong anarchist movement in Uruguay.

Between 1948 and 1954 the working class in Uruguay was comparatively well off, with good conditions and pay, in a country presided over by a ruling class with a liberal outlook. This all changed between 1955 and 1959 with an increasing cost of living. Inflation began to rise sharply and strike waves broke out. A wage freeze was introduced, The Army broke strikes and emergency laws were introduced. The excuse for this was the supposed threat from the leftist guerillas of the Tupamaros, but in reality to repress the agitation in the workplaces.

Bordaberry came to power in 1971 and gave increasing powers to the Army in the fight against the Tupamaros. In 1973 political parties were banned, congress was closed down, public meetings were banned and constitutional rights were suspended. The employers dropped their liberal outlook and banned the National Workers' Convention (CNT) which federated many unions, when it called a general strike. Wages were driven down by 35% and inflation rose by 80%. The FAU was set up in 1956. Militants within it like Juan Carlos Mechoso began to agitate for the creation of a specific anarchist organization as opposed to the anarcho-syndicalists who thought that work in the unions was enough to bring out radical social change. At first the FAU had been an alliance of different anarchist currents, from the anarcho-syndicalists on one hand, through those who believed in setting up anarchist communities in the here and now, traditional anarchist communists on to the group around Mechoso, Gerardo Gatti and Leon Duarte.

Controversy had already arisen in the international movement over the increasingly reformist ideas of Rudolf Rocker. One of the pioneers of anarcho-syndicalism, he had taken a principled stand against the First World War and was interned in England as a result. However by 1945, after his support for the Allies in WW2, Rocker began to reject class-based notions of anarchism, moving in an increasingly liberal direction. In this he had the support of other German anarchists like Augustin Souchy, and elements within the Spanish CNT in exile like Abad de Santillan. Nevertheless, it was people like Souchy who adopted a critical approach to the Cuban Revolution, along with the Cuban anarchists themselves, who directly experienced repression from the Castro regime. Within the FAU itself there was intense debate over the Castro regime between 1961 and 1965 with Mechoso, Gatti and co. supporting the Cuban regime. This led to a split in the FAU in late 1963 with the Gatti/Duarte/Mechoso faction retaining the FAU name and symbols, affirming the class struggle nature of anarchism, but also giving critical support to Cuba. The FAU now began to incorporate elements from different currents of Marxism, calling for a synthesis between Marxism and anarchism, whilst referring to Poulantzas and Althusser, and later Gramsci. It increasingly broke with the anarcho-syndicalists by moving from the need for a specific anarchist organization to talk of a Party. It set up the Student-Worker Resistance (ROE), which was meant to be a broad class struggle front, and began to seek out alliances with the Tupamaros and other leftists. As a result many students influenced by 'revolutionary Marxism' began to

join the ROE, accelerating the move away from anarchism. The writings of Che Guevara became popular and influential within this broad movement. The FAU established its own armed wing, OPR-33, in the late 1960s.

There was an increasing spiral of repression and counter-attack by the FAU/OPR-33, and many militants lost their lives in gun battles. By 1974 the US security forces launched Operation Condor in collaboration with the dictatorships now reigning in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile and Paraguay. Uruguayan and Argentinian security forces worked in tandem to kidnap FAU militants and many were imprisoned in a torture camp, where after many months of terrible agonies, they were murdered. Gatti, Duarte and Alberto Mechoso (Juan Carlos's brother) were among those murdered.

OPR-33 was seen as to be firmly under the control of the FAU and was meant to relate its actions to the workers movement in Uruguay itself. However, in the final analysis its actions had the same effect as those armed groups influenced by Castroism. FAU/OPR-33 lost a large number of militants. At the same time Gatti had pioneered the setting up of the People's Victory Party (PVP) whilst in exile in Buenos Aires in 1975, along with Ruben Prieto, Pablo Anzalone and others. The PVP was a a heterodox mixture of anarchism and Castroism/Guevarism.

The deaths of Gatti and co accelerated the move of the PVP away from anarchism. It participated in the creation of the Broad Front-Frente Amplio- a coalition of over a dozen political groupings as well as unions and community groups and in 1980 began to take part in its electoral activities and today is just another leftist parliamentarian party.

What was left of the FAU re-established its structures in 1986 after the fall of the dictatorship. It remains active in work in the unions and the neighbourhoods. As one French observer noted: "The FAU, like a number of other organisations, fell headlong into the political cracks opened up by the Cuban revolution and backed it for years, even if it had become plain that that revolution was turning into a bureaucratic dictatorship and even after Cuban anarchists had been rounded up and executed...The FAU eventually distanced itself from that betrayed revolution and withdrew its support from it, though it does not appear to mean that it is prepared to risk blunt criticism of the current Cuban regime". This observer notes a sympathy from the leftist FARC guerillas in Colombia and the Guevarist MRTA in Peru, putting the anti-imperialism of the FAU down as underpinning this sympathy "which is very probably bound up with a lack of critical information about such authoritarian movements".

The pamphlet raises a number of key questions

1. Why did a reformist current develop within the international anarcho-sindicalist movement in the post-World War Two situation?
2. Why has Platformism as a current been prone to moving towards leftism? (uncritical support for Castroism, evolving into silence on the Cuban situation and unwillingness to openly attack the regime there, support for fronts with leftists like the ROE)
3. Why has Platformism been prone to a temptation towards the development of political parties and towards electoralism? (The PVP in Uruguay, the electoral adventure of the Federation Communiste Libertaire of France in 1956 etc)

These questions need to be looked at, examined, considered and debated in the present period. We need to learn from our mistakes, learn from them in a coherent way, and incorporate them into a theory and practice that is informed by an analysis strengthened by a satisfactory answer

to these questions. We need to strive for unity of all the libertarian forces, recognising our similarities and fighting for collective and unitary practice at both an international and regional level. At the same time we have to recognise our differences, and encourage a debate that can overcome these differences if possible

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