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Towards Mass Movements

Presentation on Intermediate Analysis

Pablo Barbanegra

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And so I think we're still in that process of building. So the question of how we build them and how we participate in the building up of movements so that they maintain an independent autonomous character, so that they don't become simply co-opted by you know, bureaucratic forces. It's a critical question and this is the type of question that we're trying to grapple with and we think that building up this intermediate level to do work at the mass level is perhaps the most strategic work that revolutionaries and members of anarchist political organizations can be doing today.

Pablo "Barbanegra" Avendaño (1983–2018) was Argentinian-American born and raised in Miami, FL. He became active in student organizing and occupy before joining Miami Autonomy and Solidarity, which would merge to form Black Rose/Rosa Negra. In 2013 he moved to Philadelphia and became active in struggles around police violence and joining Philly Socialists. Tragically in 2018 he was involved in a fatal bicycle accident while working for a food delivery app service. #RestInPower

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What we'd like people to consider is how this relationship is supposed to work and what we're saying is that, the um, kind of again, the purpose is to get people who are at the intermediate level to work at the mass level right, so we identify folks who are at this intermediate level then we should be trying to work together to get involved at the mass level and in mass organizations. I come back to the example of the union that I gave earlier. Which is you know, I identify teachers who are disillusioned with the union, that are disillusioned with the way things are working. Um so we're going to go and try to fight within the union but we're also open to working outside of the union if necessary.

For MAS we think that it's very important to try to get mass level militants to join the intermediary level or to kind of move up into that intermediary level and begin engaging other folks at the mass level, at the level of the mass organizations. Though, of course, the other one from intermediary to mass level is still important. So some examples of what we're talking about: workers networks, we see this often times in groups like IWW have played this role where there have been mass struggles at a particular workplace and for whatever reason, either because they were successful and they gained things or because the struggles were too prolonged, started falling out, but you still had folks who became radicalized through that process: what do you do with them? What can they do? So building up a network of militants across an industry, potentially, is one example of how that intermediary level might work. Again the teacher example I gave earlier, taking teachers who are members of the union and then fighting with them both inside and outside with teachers who have become more politicized is another example of an intermediate level.

So in a nutshell the intermediate level for us is the strategic sight for struggles today because again, we're facing a time period where class struggle in the united states even though recently there has been resurgences, there has been what we might call "moments", we're not in the time where we have "movements" yet perhaps.

side those who are actually engaged in struggle, we run the risk of becoming irrelevant. We run the risk of becoming, as it shows there, a head without a body, right? A theory group, a group that doesn't do much, talks a lot but doesn't get much done.

One thing to keep in mind is that these levels aren't static. So what is possible to a large extent will depend on what's happening at that current moment historically and we do have to keep that in mind. So again the intermediate level, the revolutionary level, and the mass level are always going to look different depending on where we're at historically, where the class struggle is at.

One thing we should do is try not to confuse the intermediary level for the mass level. Recognize that the intermediary level, we're talking about individuals who are starting to think more in the mid-term and long term, there are people who are actively involved in struggles, there are people who are looking to expand the struggles. They're starting to recognize the limitations of the mass organizations that they're involved with. So we shouldn't confuse that intermediary level for the mass level.

We have to also be careful with kind of becoming distracted by simply mobilizations, and starting to think that if we're able to mobilize lots of people we're actually doing something to build up the mass level, we may not be. And sometimes mass mobilizing can be very powerful but it can quickly disappear and we still have to ask ourselves what are we left with when that does happen. So we have to make sure that we're not just thinking in terms of mobilizations. This is not a question of numbers right, at least not only about numbers, it's a question about how are these mass struggles becoming more combative, how are they becoming radicalized? So a way that we find it useful to explain that distinction is massification vs. mobilization. And massification would be the kind of work that I'm talking about: which is deepening those struggles at the mass level and not just mobilizing a lot of people and having a lot of warm bodies, you know at a protest or at an event or something like that.

Below we present a transcribed talk by Pablo Barbanegra on the concept of "intermediary analysis." Pablo was a member of Miami Autonomy and Solidarity (MAS) which was one of the several groups that merged to found Black Rose/Rosa as a national political organization in 2014. While MAS did not originate the concept of the intermediate or intermediary level (which is used interchangeably as Pablo does within the talk below), the group contributed to developing the analysis and arguing for the level as a strategic site of struggle for the time period. While some of the political context has shifted since this was talk was presented in 2012, this piece provides context, definition, and the arguments around it's strategic importance.

The following is an audio transcription of a presentation by Pablo at the Los Angeles Anarchist Bookfair on September 8, 2012.

Hi, well, thank you guys for coming and definitely thank the organizers of the LA anarchist bookfair for inviting me here. It's a real honor to be present here and be part of the LA anarchist scene and what you guys are doing.

Today, what I wanted to discuss a bit is, I'm a member of a specific anarchist political organization, like [event MC] said. And the organization I'm a part of — Miami Autonomy & Solidarity — has been together since 2008. Many of us came together after a long time of being involved in social movement work. I started off doing student organizing. And then some kind of paid organizing, community organizing, but after a while of doing that kind of stuff, you know, I kept on running into certain walls, right, certain walls with bureaucracy, certain walls with you know, the idea of where the executive directors of some of the organizations wanted to go. You know, all the limits that exist in trying to work in that world. So I was introduced by a couple of comrades to this idea of especifismo, which is a tradition that originates in South America, starts largely in Uruguay, and has spread out to several different coun-

tries in Latin America — Chile, Argentina — definitely has made its way around the continent, and it definitely emerges out of their particular situations dealing with dictatorship and repression and, you know, anarchists for a long period of time, you know, suffering from that kind of repression dealing with competing tendencies and all those challenges and sort of coming back in the 1990s and trying to regroup and once again become a social force in the social movements that exist.

So those ideas kind of inspired me to start thinking about: well, what can we do as anarchists to ensure that we don't just become just a subculture, just a hobby, you know, just like a lifestyle, or a personal interest, but to actually have an impact and effect on social movements and to build with them and to grow with them. That was the purpose of forming a group like Miami Autonomy and Solidarity and taking that approach; but one of the things that we are starting to see as we formed this organization is that the context of the United States and of course of a city like Miami, which is renowned for its kind of reactionary, right-wing politics, makes it very difficult to operate like a specific anarchist organization. Whereas in some other parts of the world or even some other parts of the country, you have infrastructures of what we might call the left where people can plug into. You have a stronger history of mass movements and that memory of strong social movements is there. In Miami, that's largely non-existent, right? So we have to really think hard about how are we as anarchists going to begin to play a role in the almost either really small or non-exist mass organizations in Miami. How do we begin to work so we can have an impact and start to spread around more libertarian ideas, anarchist ideas, and become relevant again to the class struggle.

Part of what we've been thinking about for the past couple of years, since I'd say 2010–11, we've been thinking hard about how to do that. One of the things that we've identified where we're at and we think this is also relevant to many parts of the United States: there exists a layer which we recognize as the intermedi-

From the Intermediate Towards Mass Movements

Part of the goal or purpose of the intermediary level is for us to be able to build connections to broaden the dialogue to become pretty much a force multiplier because we need to be able to do that if we hope anarchism to once again become a relevant ideology, a relevant you know a relevant approach to revolution. If we're not able to do that, if we're not able to broaden these conversations to become a force multiplier, we become disconnected and often times wither away and die out. So that's why that's relevant and important.

So at the intermediary level, activists and militants that we meet, we get to know them, we build relations, and we learn to struggle together. I think a big part of building mass movements and building this type of work is about building relations. So we always have to be conscious of how we build relationships with other militants. And again, I feel like if we are going to be able to attract working class people to anarchism again, it's critical that we build relationships over a period of time so that when struggles do erupt, when things start to heat up, people see us as individuals who can be trusted, who are disciplined, who they can count on, and who they know are going to fight with them side by side when times get hard.

In order for popular class movements, they're going to be those responsible for really making a social revolution, the revolutionary organization needs to be able to connect and engage with the mass level and the intermediary level. This is an important point. Without mass level work, without mass organizations, revolutionary organizations or intermediary organizations pretty much are useless. If we cannot connect, if we cannot build relations, if we cannot, you know, activate militants in these struggles, if we cannot help push for our points of view and also grow — have our views grow along-

we operate and what we're doing at the short term level and mid term level.

Ok, now when we think about the intermediary level, it can also serve as a kind of autonomous force within social movements, one that can build mass level organizations or activate militants within the mass level or militants in mass organizations. To kind of put that into more concrete terms: I'm a member of a union, right? My union, politically speaking, is very conservative, sometimes downright reactionary. So in that space, sometimes our activity is going to be quite limited because when we try to push for certain things in the union there could be very serious repercussions to our jobs, to our livelihood. So we may not be in the type of space where we can push for what we'd like to see in the midterm and the long term. But the intermediary level, can operate independently, from that mass organization while still engaging people at the mass level. So in my case, what I'm currently trying to work on as a teacher is: I'm a member of my union, right, I'm a member of my union because I feel like even though I feel like the union for the most part, the leadership is pretty whack, they suck, you know, they don't back us up; at the same time there's people who joined that union who want to fight. So I'm going to try to find those people and group up with those people so that together we can start building up a tendency and start pushing within our union and we can do this both within and outside of the union. So where the union is limited by, say, legal questions these autonomous organizations, if they're powerful enough, if they're large enough, can potentially either push those contradictions to the forefront, right, and show them to the union membership — that ok, our union has these limits, we need to break beyond them — or simply act where the union or where the mass level organization would not be able to act.

ate layer (and I'll explain what that is in a second). Just to give a little back story or you know theory, or sorry, an explanation of how many anarchists have been involved in mass movement work tend to think about how to go about carrying out that work. We tend to think about there's a revolutionary level, and then there's a mass level right? And as far as these two levels are concerned, we tend to express within the especificist tradition and other traditions that run concurrent with that particular tendency, we tend to think that anarchists have to be involved in both levels. So there's a need for revolutionary anarchist organizations; but we also need mass movements and these two things have to go together. Right? You can't just have a revolutionary organization without any mass movements and mass movements without revolutionary organizations who are in there working, agitating, you know, creating propaganda and kind of growing side by side with these movements, at times they can take many different directions — directions which we might feel are going to take us to that level of social revolution and eventually something like an anarchist communist society. So we begin from that point.

What I'm going to talk about today is looking a little bit at the nature of the period that we're in, and then thinking about some of the objectives that we would like to carry out and bring into effect, talk a little bit about the different levels that we see existing, and talk about why the intermediate level might be the most strategic site of struggle for movements in North America today. And then we can have some discussion about what people's experiences have been with things like that [asking if] this kind of analysis and proposal makes sense? We can talk about that stuff after the presentation.

The Nature of the Period

What's the nature of the period? If we're going to categorize the nature of the period in the United States, we are currently living through what we might describe as a period of low level of mass struggle and militancy, right? We don't exist, we don't live in a time where there are burgeoning social movements, where there is this very sharp class struggle that can be exhibited. So this is the condition that I think we are dealing with in the United States and especially in a city like Miami, where I live. In regards to mass movements, the mass movements that do exist during this time period, we find that either at times they are non-existent (again Miami is a good example of that) or they are highly bureaucratized mass organizations, right? So here we have a picture of course of SEIU, Obama, kind of one hand washes the other. Critiques of the non-profit industry have been something that have been put out with more and more force lately and that's definitely a good development. But we still haven't overcome that yet; we're still dealing with this issue of non-profit bureaucratized struggles, struggles that are largely co-opted or cooperativist, that work with capital instead of trying to overturn it. So often times the level of consciousness is also there. It's also like a funny, you know, kind of portrayal of the left in these times you know, everybody will talk shit about how the system sucks and, you know, lesser of two evils, but at the end of the day, you know, we're still going to vote for them; we're still going to support that, and that's what we have to do, right, to stay connected with the mass movements again that largely are either non-existent or very bureaucratized.

As far as the left and many revolutionary traditions, I think that definitely anarchists will fall within this: there seems to be a disconnect in terms of being able to influence, being able to have an ongoing dialogue and discussion with mass movements or mass organizations. Often times the activities of anarchists and revolution-

who are in revolutionary organizations tend to be on an ideological level, on a theoretical level, on a strategic level, and usually on a tactical level. So that's the people we're talking about. But again, in that revolutionary level, you're gonna have a variety of tendencies, you're gonna have anarchists, you're gonna have, you know, socialists, you're going to have all types of different groups. So that's what the revolutionary level is referring to. It just refers to that higher kind of level of commitment to coherent theoretical positions, coherent strategic positions and tactical coordination.

Ok. Now when it comes to the revolutionary level, the revolutionary level is going to try to push for these kind of longer term goals. So for the revolutionary level, it's important that we start looking again at this intermediary level in order to start to build towards that longer term struggle and start engaging folks in those conversations about not just the changes that we want today but the changes they'd like to see in the future. So the revolutionary level can meet within the same intermediary level organization. So what this is basically talking about is that as revolutionaries, right, the revolutionaries that may be of different tendencies may still be able to fight together, may still be able to work together at this intermediary level, where they would not be able to work together at the revolutionary level because of significant differences in the way that you — how these social struggles should be formed; how the revolution should come about. So this becomes a space for that kind of activity to happen as well, which we think that is important, that is necessary. And that's something that, you know, needs to be happening amongst revolutionaries of different stripes.

Alright, so why is the intermediate level a strategic focus for our revolutionary tendency at this time? It goes back to this issue that there's this disconnect between long term and short term, right? There's a lot of disconnect between what revolutionaries are advocating for in the long term and then what's actually happening in the short term. We want to be able to bridge that gap, we want to be able to close that gap between our long term visions and how

know, certain securities at work, for the most part mass level organizations at this point are not discussing a longer term strategy, are not at the point where they're talking revolution yet. So this is where we find ourselves in this moment.

Alright, now, when it comes to the intermediate level, we find people that tend to be more committed to struggles and are unified around a certain set of objectives. They may not have theoretical unity with each other. That means that they may not all seek the revolution in the same way; they may not all see it ultimately happening in the same way; but at least they have currently some unity around these short term and mid term strategies.

Now in the intermediary level, you could have multiple intermediary level groupings or organizations within a mass organization, right? Again, like I said, a good example would be unions. In a union you can find people of all stripes. So what are the kind of purposes for something like the intermediary level: to work on short term objectives as well as medium term objectives. And this can be struggling around wages; struggling around some job site grievances. It could be longer term, it could be related to bringing together people of different industries, right? So like for example, you have a workplace you're organizing in; maybe that struggle is successful, maybe it died down. What do you do with those people? Where do those militants go? They've just engaged in a struggle which has altered their consciousness and made them feel more empowered. They recognize that: alright this is limited, I need to go further. Where do they go? Do they go straight into a revolutionary organization? Maybe, maybe not. So the intermediate level can serve as a space where people can develop themselves further as they're going along that process and trying to figure themselves out.

Now the revolutionary level, right, is, it's a level where, when we say it's a "high" level, it doesn't mean that it's in a hierarchy above the mass level. It's simply that the level of unity required to exist within a revolutionary organization is usually higher. So people

aries seems to be very disconnected from the daily lives of struggle of average people; you know, working class people.

Thinking Strategically

Alright, so as class struggle revolutionary anarchists which is how MAS sees itself, our objectives are to at some point work towards this point where we will have something like a social revolution initiated by the popular classes, by the working classes, by those most oppressed in a capitalist, in an imperialist system. So we definitely think that if a revolution is to happen and if something like anarchist communism is ever something that we might see or work towards, then we need to start thinking strategically. We need to start thinking strategically about how we do our work, how we come to have an influence, how we come to play a larger role, in mass struggles or mass organizations. So the primary goal of revolutionary organizations in the short, medium and long-term is to contribute to building an autonomous, self-managed, libertarian revolutionary consciousness, capacity and power of these movements so that they can create that revolution in the long term.

Most of us have the analysis that revolution of this sort isn't going to happen overnight, it's a long term struggle. Most of us will probably — I don't like to say this, I don't like to think about this — but we may not even see it within our lifetime. So we have to be committed to a long term struggle to keep on pushing and in order to do that we definitely need to be strategic.

So we think that in these moments where mass organizations are in the state that they're in, class struggle is in the state that it's in, we need to figure out a way in which again anarchists and anarchism can become relevant within these mass struggles and mass movements. What MAS is going to propose is that instead of just thinking about there's a revolutionary level and there's a mass level and that revolutionaries should be working within the mass

level, we might even have to just start thinking about: how do we build up a mass level, right? And if mass organizations aren't in existence, then how do we do that? How do we as revolutionaries not become detached, disconnected, simply becoming a populist group, [or] a group that sits around just talking theory and not being able to create an action that actually challenges capitalism or being involved in struggles that actually challenge capitalism?

The Mass, Intermediary and Revolutionary Levels

So this intermediary level, it's not necessarily a new analysis. If we look at the history of many different revolutionary groups, they've come to similar conclusions, they've identified that we see not only a mass level and a revolutionary level; but there's also what I'd describe as an intermediary level and the intermediary level is basically the level where people are definitely more conscious, they're more militant; but they many not necessarily be united around a particular set of beliefs or ideology. But they are capable of working together for mid-term and short-term goals. So we see that largely as an intermediate level. And we want to be able to develop this level more, so that this level can in turn help to build up mass movements and build them up in a direction where you know, they're not going to become bureaucratized or they're going to try to fight those tendencies that are trying to co-opt them. So that little graphic is supposed to kind of show the complexity and interplay that exists between mass level, intermediate level and the revolutionary level. Of course reality is messy and, you know, we find that there are revolutionaries in the mass level, there are revolutionaries in the intermediate level, there are people who are from the mass level in the intermediate level. It's not necessarily kind of like a clean-cut situation.

Now, each level exists regardless, right, of whether there's an organization there. So the mass level exists, whether the mass level is organized is a different story, right? Same think with the intermediate and revolutionary level. These levels exist. There are people who are thinking about these things; there are people who are trying to fight for certain needs; but they may not be organized themselves yet. So it's important to draw that distinction between that and try to unify the level with organization. So the level as a theoretical concept definitely is full of a lot of gray areas and one thing I'd like to point out is that this is more of an analysis at this point that we are trying to develop into a practice and that is part of the reason that I am doing this talk today; because I want to hear what people to think about this and to see if folks have experience with this and are thinking about this on the same terms because we're still developing a strong practice that can either prove or disprove this analysis.

So the mass level, right, is the broadest level. At the mass level, usually it can include people from all types of backgrounds, all types of ideological backgrounds, right? You have people who are thinking very much within the system, Republican/Democrat, and you also have people who are thinking outside of it as well maybe in a more radical direction. So mass level organizations are open to anybody in those sectors, anybody who is trying to fight around particular needs usually can be part of a mass organization. A good example of this, of course historically, has been labor unions. Labor unions for the most part, members did not have to belong to a specific party. Again, you can be a democrat, you can be a republican, you can be no party affiliation, you can be an anarchist, a communist, it didn't matter. But the whole point of the mass level is that you're fighting around these struggles that affect your day to day life, it could be wages, it could be anything of this sort.

Now at this time, the mass level, is mostly associated with these very short term objectives. When we look at mass organizations, we're usually talking about short term objectives: a wage raise, you