

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



# Elements Old and New in Anarchism:

A Reply to Maria Isidine

Pjotr Arshinov

December 1928

Pjotr Arshinov  
Elements Old and New in Anarchism:  
A Reply to Maria Isidine  
December 1928

Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2020 from [http://www.nestormakhno.info/english/elements\\_arshinov.htm](http://www.nestormakhno.info/english/elements_arshinov.htm)  
*Delo Trouda* No.42–43 November/December 1928 pages 13–17.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**

Comrade Isidine counters our conception of a revolutionary anarchist organization with the old conception corresponding to an age when anarchists had no real organization, but, by means of mutual understanding, came to agreement upon goals and the means of achieving them.

In fact, the old party was confined to analogous ideas and was bereft of authentic organizational format; it corresponded above all to the birth of the anarchist movement, when its pioneers were groping their way forward, not having been tempered by the harsh experience of life.

Socialism too, in its day, had a difficult gestation. However, as the masses' social struggle evolved and became acute, all the tendencies that were vying to influence the outcome took on more precise political and organizational forms. Those tendencies which failed to keep in step with this evolution lagged far behind life. We Russian anarchists were especially sensible of this during the two revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Whereas, at their outset, we were in the forefront of the fighting, as soon

as the constructive phase began, we found ourselves sidelined beyond recovery and, ultimately, remote from the masses.

This was not the result of chance. Such an attitude flowed inescapably from our impotence, from the organizational point of view as well as from the vantage point of our ideological confusion. The current, of this decisive age, requires of us something more than a “party” devoid of organizational format and erected solely upon the notion of a beautiful idea. These times require that the anarchist movement, as a whole, supply answers to a whole host of issues of the utmost importance, whether relating to the social struggle or to communist construction. They require that we feel a responsibility towards our objectives. However, until such time as we have a real and significant organization, it is not going to be possible for us to supply those answers, nor to shoulder those responsibilities. Indeed, the consistently distinctive feature of our movement is that it does not have a unity of views on these fundamental issues. There are as many views as there are persons and groups.

Certain anarchist regard this situation as reflective of the multifariousness of anarchist thinking. Struggling labour has no idea what to make of this mixed bag, which strikes it as absurd. So, in order to rise above the morass of absurdity in which the anarchist movement has got bogged down, by loitering in the first stage of organization despite its numerical expansion, it is vital that a strenuous and decisive effort should be made. It must adopt the organizational formats for which it has long since been ripe; otherwise, it will lose its ability to hold its natural place in the fight for a new world. The urgent necessity of this new step is acknowledged by many comrades, the ones for whom the fate of libertarian communism is bound up with the fate of struggling labour. Comrade Isidine, if we understand her right, is not to be numbered among the anarchists of whom we spoke earlier, but she is not a participant in our movement

so because there is no overall organization offering precise guidance.

Comrade Isidine stresses one of the merits of the Platform, in that it has broached the principle of collective responsibility in the movement.

However, she thinks of this principle solely in terms of the **moral** responsibility. Whereas, in a large, organized movement, responsibility can only find expression in the form of an **organization's collective responsibility**.

A moral responsibility that does not accommodate organizational responsibility is bereft of all value in collective endeavours, and turns into a mere formality devoid of all content.

What we need, comrade Isidine tells us, is not so much an organization as a definite practical policy line and a hard and fast immediate program. But each of those is unthinkable in the absence of prior organization. If only to raise issues of the program and its implementation, there would have to be an organization in place that might undertake to struggle towards their resolution.

At present, the *Delo Truda* Group of Russian Anarchists Abroad has given that undertaking, and enjoys the support in this of several anarchist toilers' organizations in North America, and by comrades remaining in Russia.

In the pioneering work carried out by these organizations, there may well be certain errors and gaps. These must be pointed out and help given in the repairing of them, but there must be no lingering doubt as to the basis and principle upon which these organizations operate and struggle: the drafting of a definite program, a well-determined policy and tactical line for libertarian communism, creation of an organization representing and spearheading the whole anarchist movement. This is vitally necessary to it.

either; she takes part only in debate, in a critical way, and, to be sure, she helps its progress in doing so.

Let us now tackle the various critical points indicated by comrade Isidine. Everybody knows that any wholesome principle can, once denatured, serve a cause contrary to the one to which it was originally assigned.

In our ranks, this holds true for federalism. Sheltering behind that cover, lots of groups and certain individuals perpetrated acts, the results of which fell on the movement as a whole. All intervention in such cases came to nothing, because the perpetrators of these acts of infamy sought refuge in their autonomy, invoking the federalism that allowed them to do as they saw fit. Obviously, that was merely a crass misrepresentation of federalism. The same might be said of other principles, and especially, of the principle of organizing a General Union of Anarchists, should it fall into the clutches of witless or unscrupulous persons.

Comrade Isidine disagrees profoundly with the principle of majority. We, on the other hand, reckon that on this point debate is scarcely necessary. In practice, this matter has long been resolved. Almost always and almost everywhere, our movement's practical problems are resolved by majority vote. At the same time, the minority can cling to its own views, but does not obstruct the decision; generally, and of its own volition, it makes concessions. This is perfectly understandable as there cannot be any other way of resolving problems for organizations that engage in practical activity. There is, anyway, no alternative if one really wants to act.

In the event of differences of opinion between the majority and the minority being due to factors so important that neither side can give ground, a split comes about, regardless of the principles and positions espoused by the organization prior to that moment.

Nor do we agree with comrade Isidine when she says that the mouthpiece of an isolated group can work out a policy line

of its own, and that, in this way, according to her, the organ of the General Union of Anarchists should mirror all of the views and tendencies existing inside the union. In fact, the mouthpiece of a particular group is not the concern merely of its editorial team, but also of all who lend it material and ideological backing. Since, in spite of this, a well-determined policy line is needed by that, say, local organ, it is all the more essential for the mouthpiece of the Union which carries a lot more responsibilities with regard to the anarchist movement as a whole than that particular organ.

To be sure, the Union mouthpiece must afford the minority a platform for its views, for otherwise the latter would be denied its right of free expression; however, while allowing it to set out its point of view, the Union mouthpiece must simultaneously have its own well-defined policy line and not just mirror the motley views and states of mind arising within the Union. In order to illustrate the example of a decision made by the Union as a body, but not enjoying unanimous backing, comrade Isidine cites the Makhnovist movement, anarchists having been divided in their attitudes towards it. That example, though, rather underlines the argument in favour of the ongoing necessity of a libertarian communist organization. The differing views expressed then are explicable primarily in terms of many libertarians' utter ignorance of that movement during its development; many of them were later powerless to analyze it and adopt a policy line with regard to a movement as huge and original as the Makhnovists. They needed a solid organization. Had they had one at the time, it would have considered itself **obliged** to scrutinize that movement minutely and then, on the basis of that scrutiny, it would have laid down the stance of to be adopted with regard to it. Which would have served libertarian communism and the Makhnovist movement better than the chaotic, disorganized stance adopted by the anarchists with regard to the latter during its lifetime. The same goes for the problem of war.

It comes to pass that differences arise in organizations over such matters, and in such cases splits are frequently the outcome. However, there is the argument for taking it as a rule that in such situations, the point of departure should be, not the individual conscience and tactics of every single anarchist, but rather the essential import of the theory, policy and tactics of the Union as a body. Only thus will the movement be able to preserve its policy line and its liaison with the masses.

Organization and the principle of delegation are not such impediments to the display of initiative as comrade Isidine believes. Quite the contrary. All wholesome initiative will always enjoy the backing of organization; the principles spelled out are not designed to stifle initiative, but to replace the fitful activity of individuals operating randomly and occasionally with the consistent and organized work of a collective body. It could not be otherwise. A movement that survived only thanks to the initiative and creativity of various groups and individuals, and which had no specific overall activity would run out of steam and go into decline.

For that very reason one of the fundamental tasks of our movement consists of contriving the circumstances that allow every militant not merely to demonstrate initiative, but to seize upon and develop it, making it an asset to the entire movement.

Thus far, and for want of an overall organization, our movement has not had such circumstances, thanks to which every authentic militant might find an outlet for their energies. It is common knowledge that certain of the movement's militants have given up the fight and thrown in their lot with the Bolsheviks, simply because they were not able to find an outlet for their efforts in the anarchist ranks. Moreover, it is beyond the question that many revolutionary workers, who find themselves in the ranks of the Communist Party of the USSR, have no illusions left regarding Bolshevik rule and might switch their allegiances to anarchism, but do not do