

Where We Go From Here

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In 1926, a group of exiled Russian anarchists published 'The Organisational Platform of Libertarian Communists'. It was born out of their tragic experiences during the Russian Revolution – the spring of workers' and peasants' self-management and its bloody replacement by the winter of famine and bureaucratic Party dictatorship.

It was the determined hope of Makhno, Arshinov et al, that such a disaster should not reoccur. To this end the collectively wrote what became known as 'The Platform'. It draws on the lessons of the Russian anarchist movement – its failures to build up a working class presence sizeable and effective enough to counteract the tendency of the Bolsheviks and other political groups to substitute themselves for the working class. It contains a rough program of organisational tasks for anarchists – in short, how we can be effective.

'Anarcho-Bolshevism'

Since shortly after its publication, however, the Platform has been buried under the more glamorous revolutionary textbooks. It's authors, for the pains, were labelled 'Anarcho-Bolsheviks' (so a new political term was invented!) by some of the more celebrated anarchist personalities such as Alexander Berkman and Errico Malatesta.

This was because the authors and sympathisers of the Platform pinpointed the failure of the Russian anarchist movement in its disorganisation, lack of national coordination, and thus theoretical and practical confusion. In other words – ineffectiveness.

To remedy this, the Platformists proposed a formal organisation, a 'General Union of Anarchists'. To be effective, yet still run in an anti-authoritarian way, it would stick to several strict principles.

Theoretical and Tactical Unity

There should be agreement among members on theory, which „represents the force which directs the activity of persons and organisations along a determined path towards a determined goal“ [p. 15]. In the same way, tactics used by separate members and groups within the organisation should be uniform – a common tactical line.

The Platformists rightly recognised that the absence of this leads to lots of diverse people saying different things, yet using the same label to describe themselves. This leads to a lot of argument, no agreement, and no united or continuous activity.

This has been the sad history of the post-war British anarchist movement. It was to put an end to this mess that AWA (then ORA) was formed, though we obviously still recognise the need for healthy internal debate about theory and tactics.

Collective Responsibility

Moreover, the principle of collective responsibility was demanded by the need to be effective. Each individual was to be accountable to everyone else, thus guarding against the possibility of someone doing something irresponsible (e.g. endangering other comrades, or giving the wrong impression of the organisation to workers) without being answerable for such an action.

Federalist Equality

Berkman, Goldman, and others found the concept [of collective responsibility] foreign to their over-individualistic taste. It meant that everyone being as far as possible equal inside the organisation, the absence of political 'stars'.

They said that having an 'executive committee' (proposed by the Platform) would be using authoritarian methods, which would ultimately result in an exploitative state-capitalist society like Stalinist Russia.

They ignored the inclusion of another fundamental organisational principle accepted in the pamphlet – federalism. „Anarchism has always denied centralised organisation... [which] relies on the diminution of the critical spirit, initiative and independence of each individual and on the blind submission of the masses to the centre“ [p.15].

It does not so much matter what an elected body is called, as what its powers are, and whether the membership of an organisation, factory or neighbourhood council has direct control over it. This is what the Platform's critics did not seem to understand.

It is noteworthy that the pamphlet's writers were workers. Arshinov, for instance, was a metal worker. Only the reactions of the 'celebrated' anarchists are recorded in history books, not those of rank-and-file libertarians who knew what it was really like to struggle daily against capitalism at the workplace and at home.

The Platform itself was neglected for years after the deaths of Makhno and the other authors, until our French comrades reprinted it in 1972.

The Ignored Parts

During the arguments about it [The Platform] in 1926, most of the pamphlet was in fact ignored. The first two sections of it, as well as on organisation, are useful reading for people generally unfamiliar with anarchism.

They deal with the nature of capitalism, the State, and class struggle. What sort of general action is needed to smash capitalism is outlined, as are the problems of the actual creation of libertarian communism – the realisation of the principle „from each according to ability, to each according to need“.

None of this can be divorced from the methods we use now to achieve that goal – a society based on need, not profit (or the maintenance of a ruling bureaucracy as in Russia or China).

Relevance for Today

We do not treat the Platform as gospel truth. It's language often bears the dated mark of the 1920s; and it needs to be developed, expanded, and tested in action. AWA is now striving to do exactly that. But this pamphlet is well worth reading for those who want to grasp the main principles of organisational revolutionary anarchism.

The full names of some of its authors may now be forgotten, but the struggle to which they dedicated their lives continues, and what they had to say still has relevance for us all.

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