Anarchist Social Organization

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The rise of the right and the incapacity of the institutional left to offer an alternative is pressing the crucial question for our time: what is our strategy in pre-revolutionary times? The revolutionary left is fixated on the ruptures and revolutions of history, and this has done little to prepare us for the present. In the United States there are no nation-wide social movements to draw upon in forging a new social force. Resistance remains largely fragmented, and more often than not abstracted from the struggles of daily life and carried out by a semi-professional activist subculture. The challenge then is where to begin, or more specifically how to move beyond the knowledge, experiences, and groups of the past two decades towards a broader social movement?

There are some experiences we can draw on however from the heyday of the anarchist movement, where similarly radicals in a hostile environment began to discuss and craft strategic interventions. An overlooked and scarcely known debate within anarchism was between so-called dualism and unitary positions on organization.[1] That framing for the disagreement largely comes from the dualists who were supporters of specific anarchist political organizations independent from the workers organizations of their day. This was contrasted against the anti-*political organization* anarchists in the libertarian unions who proposed a model of workers organizations that were both a politicized-organization and union.

The portrayal of anarchosyndicalists as inherently against political organization and as advocating unions exclusively of anarchists is a straw man. If anything the orthodoxy supported political organizations including: Pierre Bresnard, former head of the International Workers Association (IWA-AIT), the Spanish CNT (through its affinity groups, specific organizations around publications, and the FAI), along with others in the various revolutionary unions of the IWA-AIT. A more balanced picture of the movement would be (at least) a four way division within IWA-AIT organizations including: class struggle syndicalism that downplayed anarchism and revolution (both with defenders and detractors of political organization), the dominant position of revolutionary unionism influenced by anarchism but striving for one big union of the class, political anarchists focused on insurrectionism and intellectual activities, and a fourth position that is likely unfamiliar to most readers.

That position I will call the *anarchist social organization* for lack of a better term. Elements of this position have existed and persisted throughout the history of the syndicalist movement, but found its core within the revolutionary workers organizations of South America at the turn of the century. In Argentina and Uruguay in particular a powerful immigrant movement of anarchists dominated the labor movement for decades, setting up the first unions and consolidating a politics in an environment where reformist attempts at unions lacked a context enabling them to thrive.[2] This tendency spread across Latin America from Argentina to Mexico, at its zenith influenced syndicalist currents in Europe and Asia as well. It's progress was checked by a combination of shifting context and political reaction that favored nationalist and reformist oppositions. Both

[1] This debate was mirrored in the councilists in the aftermath of the aborted German Revolution of 1919 with the splits in the AUD vs. AUD-E. They adopted the term unitary organization to pick out a group that rejected political organization, and is similar to the approach I will lay out with the exception that they rejected organizing around the daily lives of workers, which differentiated them from the FAU at the time until later when the AUD was in decline and the AUDE moved closer to anarchosyndicalism and the KAPD organized in the AUD moved closer to pure political organizations. Unitary organization it should be said is confusing as those anarchists who are called unitary organizationalists by the dualists repeatedly polemicized supports of unitary organization in their writings, by which they meant people who supported a single united organization for all workers with all ideologies inside.

[2] Solidarity Federation. (1987). Revolutionary unionism in Latin America: The FORA in Argentina. ASP LONDON & DONCASTER libcom.org

Argentina and Uruguay underwent some of the world's first legalized labor regimes and populist reform schemes to contain the labor movement combined with dictatorships that selectively targeted the anarchist movement while supporting socialists and nationalists across the region. The anarchist movement of *el Río de la Plata* was dealt heavy blows by the 1930s and began to decline.

The theorists of Argentina's *Federación Obrera Regional Argentina* (FORA, Argentina Regional Workers' Federation) in particular laid out an alternative approach to politics that was highly influential. Argentina perhaps vied with Spain as the most powerful anarchist movement in the world and yet is scarcely known today. The FORA takes its name from an aspiration towards internationalism and one of the most thorough going anti-State and anti-nationalist currents in radical history. The FORA inspired sister unions throughout Latin America many with similar names such as FORU (Uruguay), FORP (Paraguay), FORCh (Chile) and unions in Peru, Colombia, and Bolivia just to name a few. They even won over the membership of established IWW locals in Mexico and Chile to their movement away from the IWW's neutral syndicalism.

The ideas of the FORA came to be known as *finalismo;* so named because in Spanish *fines* mean ends or goals, and the FORA made anarchist communism it's explicit aim as early as 1905. Finalismo was a rejection of traditional unions *and* political organizations in favor of the anarchist social organization.[3] In the unions, FORA saw a tendency to divert the working class into reforming and potentially reproducing capitalist work relations. Unions they argued are institutions that inherit too much of the capitalism we seek to abolish.[4] The capitalist division of labor reflected in industrial unions in particular could be a potential base for maintaining capitalist social relationships after the revolution, something that the FORA argued must be transformed.

> "We must not forget that the union is, as a result of capitalist economic organization, a social phenomenon born of the needs of its time. To retain its structure after the revolution would imply preserving the cause that determined it: capitalism."[5]

This critique they extended to apolitical revolutionary unions like the IWW and even with anarchosyndicalism itself, which was seen as arguing for using unions, vehicles of resistance that reflect capitalist society, as cells of the future structure of society. Their goal was to transform a society built to maintain class domination to one organized to meet human needs; something the existing industries poison.

> "Anarchosyndicalist theory, very similar to revolutionary unionism, is today confused by many who approach the workers movement, and even participate in it, because they consider that all anarchists who take part in unionism are automatically anaarchosyndicalists. Anarchosyndicalism is a theory that bases the construction of society after the emancipatory revolution in the same unions and professional associations of workers. The FORA expressively rejects anarchosyndicalism and main-

[3] Lopez Arango, E. Syndicalism and Anarchism. Translated by SN Nappalos. libcom.org

[4] Lopez Arango. E. (1942). Means of struggle – Excerpt from Doctrine, Tactics, and Ends of the Workers Movement, the first chapter of the 1942 Posthumous collection called Ideario. Published in Anarquismo en America Latina. (1990). ed. Ángel J. Cappelletti y Carlos M. Rama. Prólogo, edición y cronología, traducción: Ángel J. Cappelletti. libcom.org

[5] Lopez Arango, E. & de Santillan, DA. (1925). *El anarquismo en el movimiento obrero.* Pg. 32 www.portaloaca.com

> tains its conception that one cannot legislate the future of society after revolutionary change…"[6]

While participating in class struggle on a day to day basis, members of the FORA similarly rejected the ideology of class struggle. Class struggle as ideology was seen as reflecting a mechanistic worldview inherited from Marxism, that ultimately would reinforce the divisions derived from capitalism which would sustain obstacles to constructing communism after the revolution. Class and worker identity are too tied to capitalist relationships, they argued, and are better attacked than cultivated.[7]

The foristas were skeptical of political organizations separate from workers organizations, and believed they posed a danger. Such organizations would tend to over-value maintaining their political leadership against the long term goal of building anarchist communism.[8] The world of political anarchism was seen as drawing from intellectual and cultural philosophies abstracted from daily life, whereas the anarchist workers movement drew it's inspiration from connecting anarchist ethics to the lived struggles of the exploited.

> "Anarchism as a revolutionary political party is deprived of its main strength and its vital elements; anarchism is a social movement that will acquire the greater power of action and propaganda the more intimately it stays in its native environment."[9]

In their place, partisans of the FORA proposed a different type workers organization and role for anarchists. Emiliano Lopez Arango, the brilliant auto-didact and baker, emphasized that we should build organizations of workers aimed at achieving anarchist society, rather than organizations of anarchists-for-workers or organizations of anarchist-workers.

> "Against this philosophical or political anarchism we present our concept and our reality of the anarchist social movement, vast mass organizations that do not evade any problems of philosophical anarchism, and taking the man as he is, not just as supporter of an idea, but as a member of an exploited and oppressed human fraction… To create a union movement concordant with our ideas-the anarchist labor movement- it is not necessary to "cram" in the brain of the workers ideas that they do not understand or against those that guard routine precautions. The question is another…Anarchists must create an instrument of action that allows us to be a belligerent force acting in the struggle for the conquest of the future. The trade union movement can fill that high historic mission, but on condition that is inspired by anarchist ideas."[10]

This position has often been misunderstood or misrepresented as "anarchist unionism" i.e. trying to create ideologically pure groupings of workers. The workers of the FORA however held in little esteem the political anarchist movement, and did not believe in intellectuals imposing

[6] La FORA Anexo 208. Translation of the passage by SN Nappalos. Quoted in Lopez, Antonio. (1998). *La FORA en el movimiento obrero.* Tupac Ediciones. Pg. 73–74.

[7] Antilli, T. (1924). Lucha de clases y lucha social. libcom.org

[8] Lopez Arango, E. *Political leadership or ideological orientation of the workers movement.* libcom.org

[9] Lopez Arango, E. & de Santillan, DA. (1925). *El anarquismo en el movimiento obrero.* Pg. 77 www.portaloaca.com

[10] Ibid.

litmus tests for workers. Instead they built an organization which from 1905 onward took anarchist communism as its goal, and was constructed around anarchist ideals in its struggles and functioning.

There is a key difference between being an ideological organization doing organizing versus organizing with an anarchist orientation. The workers of the FORA tried to create the latter. Counterposed to raw economics and the ideology of class struggle, they emphasized a process of transformation and counter-power built through struggle but guided by values and ideas.[11] Against the idea that syndicalist unions were seeds of the future society, they proposed using struggles under capitalism as ways to train the exploited for revolutionary goals and a radical break with the structure of capitalism with revolution.[12]

In doing so they organized Argentina's working class under the leading light of anarchism until a series of repressive and recuperative forces overwhelmed them. The CNT would eventually follow FORA's suit some three decades later with its endorsement of the goal of creating libertarian communism, but it's vacillations on these issues (predicted by some foristas such as Manuel Azaretto)[13] would prove disastrous. CNT scored a contradictory initial victory, but floundered with how to move from an organization struggling within capitalism to a post-capitalist order.

Anarchist Social Organization Today

The insight of the FORA was its focus on how we achieve liberation. These organizing projects are centered in struggles around daily life. Working in these struggles aims at creating an environment where participants can co-develop in a specific environment guided by anarchist principles, goals, and tactics. Ideas develop within through a process of praxis where actions, ideas, and values interact and come together in strategy. These are particular weaknesses we have in recent anarchist and libertarian strategies in the US.

In both political organizations and organizing work, anarchists have failed to put themselves forward as an independent force with our own proposals. Anarchist ideology is kept outside the context of daily life and struggle; the place where it makes the most sense and has the most potential for positive contributions. Instead ideology has largely remained the property of political organizations, while anarchists do their organizing work too often as foot soldiers for reformist non-profits, bureaucratic unions, and neutral organizations hostile to their ideas. This is carried out without plans to advance our goals or independent projects that demonstrate their value.

Similarly, as I argued[14] against the debates over the structure of unions (craft vs. industrial), the divisions over dual vs unitary organization carry important lessons but displace more fundamental issues. At stake is what role our ideas play in the day-to-day work of struggle in pre-revolutionary times. The foristas were correct in seeing a positive role of our vision when combined with a practice of contesting daily life under capitalism, while constantly agitating for

[11] Lopez Arango, E. The resistance to capitalism. libcom.org

[12] Ibid. Means of struggle

[13] Azaretto, M. (1939). Slippery Slopes: the anarchists in Spain. Translated in May-June 2014 from the Spanish original by Manuel Azaretto, Las Pendientes Resbaladizas (Los anarquistas en España), Editorial Germinal, Montevideo, 1939. libcom.org

[14] Nappalos, SN. (2015). Dismantling our divisions: craft, industry, and a new society. iwwmiami.wordpress.com

a fundamental transformation. Many dualists miss these points when they seek to impose an artificial division between where and how we agitate by organizational form.

Still these issues don't preclude political organizations playing a positive role for example with crafting strategy, helping anarchists develop their ideas together and coordinate, etc. There has been an emphasis in political thought to speak in generalities, about forms and structures, and thereby missing the contextual and historical aspects of these sorts of debates. More important than the structure of an organization is where it stands in the specific context and work on its time, and how it manages to make its work living in the daily struggles of the exploited. That can happen in different ways in a number of different projects.

Today such a strategy can be implemented within work already happening. For those who are members of existing organizations such as solidarity networks, unions, and community groups, militants should begin networking to find ways to formulate an anarchist program within their work, advance proposals to deepen anarchisms influence over the organizations and struggles, and move towards an anarchist social organization model of struggle. With experience and a growth of forces, we could contest the direction of such organizations or form new ones depending on the context.

The existing political organizations similarly can contribute to this work by advocating for anarchist social organizations, contribute to agitation within existing organizing projects, and collaborate on the creation of new projects. In some cases this may require locals of political groups themselves forming new organizing efforts alone. Ideally this would be carried out with other individuals and groups through a process of dialogue. There are at least three national anarchist organizations all of which benefit from having the capacity to influence the debate, and could intervene on the side of advancing anarchism as an explicit force within social movements. The alternative is for it to remain obscured, clumsily discussed, and largely hidden from view of the public.

Where there is sufficient interest and capacity, new groups should be formed. Workplace networks, tenants and community groups, solidarity networks, and unions can be created with small numbers of militants who wish to combine their political work in a cohesive social-political project. In the United States such a strategy has not even been attempted on any serious scale since perhaps the days of the Haymarket martyrs and their anarchosyndicalist IWMA. The unprecedented shift in the mood of the population brought on by the crisis of 2008 has made these sorts of experiments more feasible if not pressing. It is up to us to take up the challenge and experiment. Yet the primary work in front of us is to find ways to translate a combative revolutionary anarchism into concrete activities that can be implemented and coordinated by small numbers of dedicated militants, and allow us a bridge to the next phases of struggle.

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