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# Towards Theory of Political Organisation for Our Time

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class alternative is not merely a matter of organising, or being proficient. There are objective forces that necessitate a strategy, and one that meets the reality of our time. The method for this is intermediate organising, which I explore in my companion article *Towards Political Organisation for Our Time: trajectories of struggle, the intermediate level, and political rapprochement.*[16]

[16] Nappalos, Scott. miamiautonomyandsolidarity.wordpress.com

hind ruling class interests, often against the working class, and are organised against the building self-activity of the class. Noticeably off the table are fighting mass organisations whose basis and activity are founded on the collective interest and activity of a class working autonomously. There is a glaring absence of organisations working to build up a class alternative of workers acting directly and collectively to build independent class power capable of breaking with capitalism.

Whatever struggles can emerge outside of these institutions find themselves facing significant repression, co-optation, and difficulty taking an organised and sustained path. The left is generally isolated both in practice and ideologically from the oppressed classes. Whatever exceptions there are remain localized, cordoned off, and contained at this time. This is not to dismiss out of hand the crucial work occurring in various NGOs, unions, academic circles, and revolutionary organisations. It is not difficult to see what would occur without a positive social force fighting back. Still it is important to ask harder questions about why the good work has systematically been retarded, and why the bureaucratized movements are so dominant.

This situation has meant that whatever solutions and responses the revolutionary left is developing at this time is largely internal to the left, and without sufficient practice to clarify our attempts. In the recent history of North America, this has generally been the case. This severing of theory from practice has contributed to our problems moving forward, building organised revolutionary forces capable of contributing to mass movements, and developing revolutionary consciousness, practice, and catalysts.

With the unions, the social democratic trends, and NGOs lining up behind an increasingly desperate attempt to save capitalism through populist-electoralism and state-interventionist measures, the necessity of an autonomous working class alternative is pressing. There is broadly speaking a crisis in the institutionalized left and its allied radical currents. The path to an autonomous working



# Contents

The most naked display of the embrace of playing the "cop within the movement" was shown in leaked emails from NGO staff in the Bay Area during the Oscar Grant trial. Advance the Struggle, a bay area revolutionary organisation, published an expose of sorts clearly demonstrating the way in which local NGO bureaucracies embraced a role of trying to work with local city and police authorities in diverting organising and anger surrounding the police brutality in favour of "voicing one's opinion" and "making music".[14] The Urban Peace Movement sent an email in which it revealed that they had "…been in preliminary conversation with some of our partners and allies up to this point including the Ella Baker Center, Youth UpRising, Oakland Rising, BWOPA, The Mayor's Office and the City of Oakland regarding these suggestions. Let's continue to be in dialog and hold each other close in the challenging days ahead".[15] Note that Oakland Rising is one of the groups represented in Organising Upgrade's Electoral Organising article, and the NGO staff proclaims "We don't believe in struggle, we believe in winning". The Urban Peace Movement staffer lays out the method that this grouping of state and NGO officials will use to contain coming agitation surrounding the immanent letting loose of Oscar Grant's murderer. Whatever critiques there are of symbolic protest violence, and I think there are, it is not random that the response of the NGO bureaucracy is to defend the state in this instance and to consciously "inoculate" and "create avenues of expression". The position of NGOs constitutively within capitalism reinforcing its social relationships, hierarchies, and distribution of power pushes radicals in these directions, often in contradiction to their self-conception and their language.

The issue is not whether these institutions do some good. Humanistically they do improve humanity and this should be supported. The problem is that these institutions consistently rally be-

[14] advancethestruggle.wordpress.com

[15] Ibid.

cess, takes up positions within the power structure, and actively attempts to bring masses into the system's means of settling disputes on its own terms. Despite the Maoist origin of this current of NGO staff, the ideology is much more clearly coming from the historical reformist communist currents such as euro-communism. This is clear for example in an interview with two organisers in Virginians for a New Majority who draw from Poulantzas who, perhaps unintentionally, became the theoretician for euro-communism's embrace of the capitalist social democratic state in Italy and Spain a generation ago.[12]

*"We believe that our strategic approach should draw from Poulantzas and create political space that neither builds a parallel state that leads to a complete replacement of the old with the new, nor simply elects new people to fill the existing state. By creating new structures and laws we seek to create fissures that increasingly alter the class, race and gender power disposition of the state. Examples of this may include efforts at democratizing the system – same day voter registration or mail in voting, felon voter registration (still an arduous process in Virginia and elsewhere in the south), others might work to eliminate structural obstacles that systematically disempower people of colour such as state-wide election of senators, non-proportional elections, or participatory budgeting. Others challenges could seek to democratize the economy through taxes on financial transactions or community control over banks or other flows of capital".*[13]

In so far as membership is engaged at all politically (beyond high sounding lectures), it is to mobilize with de facto support of capitalist social and political institutions even when under a red banner.

[12] From Aufheben #18 2010. *Reclaim the 'State Debate'*. libcom.org

[13] Organising Upgrade. *New Kids on the Historic Block*. organisingupgrade.com



*Political organisation is a collective answer to common problems. People organise based on a collective sense of need, and the perspectives and problems encountered in social groups crystallize into organisational forms and moments. This is a general historical trend; even without a theory, organisation emerges to meet concrete needs that cannot be solved except by building social forms to address them.*

# Part I: Trajectories of Struggle, the Intermediate Level, and Political Rapprochement

Political organisation is a collective answer to common problems. People organise based on a collective sense of need, and the perspectives and problems encountered in social groups crystallize into organisational forms and moments. This is a general historical trend; even without a theory, organisation emerges to meet concrete needs that cannot be solved except by building social forms to address them.

The end of the twentieth century was a time of transition. The regime of low-intensity warfare, the dismantling of the welfare state, and neo-liberal privatization schemes ultimately was running its course.[1] The final defeats were to be dolled out across the world in the eventual collapse of finance bubbles, widespread resistance to austerity, and the implosive of the economies of Latin America.[2] Before this was all but said and done, there was the gradual and later meteoric rise and fall of social movements against neoliberal reforms and the militarism leading to the afghan and Iraq wars. Revolutionaries played an active and disproportionate role in mobilizing the social actors in what would become the largest mobilizations of their kind.

[1] Midnight Notes Collective. *Work, Energy, War: 1973–1992.* Autonomedia, 2001.

[2] Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Structural Crises.* Originally published in New Left Review #62 March-April 2010. www.khukuritheory.net



revolutionary, but its role in functioning is not merely reformist but actually constitutive of capitalist power relationships. These radical leaders help reinforce and expand capitalism from inside the system even from a position of supposed opposition.

We see similar dynamics at a more local grass roots level as well. There is a long history of communist electioneering, but recently there has been an emergence of Maoist-inspired politics in NGO staff. Freedom Road Socialist Organisation (not the Midwest pro-Stalin split organised around the paper *Fight Back*) is the most characteristic organisation which has a high concentration of NGO and union staff. Freedom Road has a long history of electoralism dating back to Jesse Jackson's Presidential campaign,[8] which members of today's Freedom Road supported and helped organise. Recently, Freedom Road members have been instrumental in election work within NGOs including voter-turn out campaigns, endorsing Democratic Party candidates, and promoting electioneering as a revolutionary strategy both primarily and through voter organisations aiming for "new majorities".[9] This NGO-revolutionary unity has sought to organise and rally their organisations behind sections of capitalist power.[10] Organising Upgrade (a new media site that features NGO staff, Freedom Road members, and Maoist-inspired writings) is worth looking at for detailed insight into this new reformism-as-revolution ideology. For an in depth look at the theoretical justification for these electoralist adventures by the staff doing the work, it is definitely worth reading Organising Upgrade's "Fast Forum: Electoral Organising".[11] What is most interesting is the total conflation of mass movements and attempting to leverage either positions of power or shifts in policy. We see revolutionaries engaged in activity which objectively strengthens the electoral pro-

[8] That is by one of Freedom Road's predecessor organisations. See Jamala Roger's *A Rainbow Coalition a Second Time Around.* freedomroad.org

[9] Freedom Road. *The 2008 Electoral Dilemma.* www.freedomroad.org

[10] Freedom Road. *Savor the Victory, Get Right to Work.* www.freedomroad.org

[11] www.organisingupgrade.com

on positions of leadership, staff organiser positions, and structural reform on the system and union's own term kept these struggles contained by the existing bureaucracies. Just as Ron Carey's presidency was recuperated and contained, we repeat the experiences of communist reformism in the unions from another era. Walther Reuther was elected by a communist opposition on a union reform basis. Reuther would eventually become the opponent of the same opposition that led him to power, just as the union reform movement itself is an opposition to a revolutionary practice in the unions in our time.[5]

Perhaps another famous example is that of Van Jones. Van Jones was once an NGO staff-cum-Maoist in the Bay Area political grouping STORM (Standing Together to Organise a Revolutionary Movement) made up largely of the administrative staff of leftist led NGOs. While it is worth questioning Jones' radicalism (he seems more like a fellow traveller passing through, than a committed revolutionary), it is worth reflecting on the activist->NGO staff-> white house trajectory. As some have noted,[6] the institutions of power are filled with people who think or thought of themselves as radicals, but who function largely to serve and protect capitalism (or at least their progressive version of it). Van Jones' Green Capitalism is one such project, and we can look to Carl Davidson promotion of Progressives for Obama and similar reformist capitalist visions[7] as yet another. Whatever the revolutionary ideas or credentials of these particular people, there is a strong link between these ideas (which have strong currency on the left, in spite of their ties to the most major institutions of state power and capitalism) and the institutions (NGOs, progression electoral organisations, and unions). The politics may be on the surface

[5] See an interview with Stan Weir by Insane Dialectical Posse here www.flyingpicket.org as well as Weir's article on the Reuther-Meaney split at the Marxist Internet Archive www.marxists.org

[6] Weaver, Adam. *On Van Jones Resignation.* machete408.wordpress.com

[7] Davidson, Carl. *Mondragon Diaries.* zcommunications.org



Time has passed, and the limitations and deflation of the early 2000s anti-globalization and anti-war movements are becoming clearer to many revolutionaries. Though massive mobilizations occurred, little lasting organisation was built. This means that the militancy we witnessed in the streets had a very short shelf life, and much of the work can reasonably be said to have disappeared. Millions of people engaged in various forms of resistance to the wars, globalization, and the new forms of capital and state; however the left was not able to produce a sustained alternative that was able to engage, nurture, and develop that activity into a lasting movement against capitalism and the state. While seemingly militant direct action was relatively common, this militancy rarely led to further radicalization or the popularization of struggle. Power was built, but dissipated. The left had not developed the ability or perhaps the orientation to build movements, either mass movements or revolutionary ones.

As this decade draws to a close, many are having an increased reflectiveness about our methods, our organisations, and the history of our tendencies in light of these recent experiences. This is true of the left in general, but particularly the rise and deflation of revolutionary currents in social movements has pressed organisational questions on our practice. The ensuing world capitalist crisis (following the series of collapsing bubbles: financial, dot-com, accounting scandal, real estate, etc) is making the question of activity and organisation of revolutionaries more timely and crucial. At the same time there is renewed interest in organisation, there has not yet been an emergence of forces capable of acting on the crisis. These questions are particularly present for the currents of revolutionaries who recognize the need for organisation with: attempts to develop common strategy, a common understanding of the period, standards of accountability and contributions from members, and an orientation to the building of socialism that breaks with the state-capitalist and authoritarian practices of past and present state capitalist regimes.

This is a problem we were gifted by our predecessors. There is little knowledge that has been passed down on organisation during periods of low-points of struggle such as ours. Much of the well-known revolutionary organisational theory and history is based on the highest points of struggle. Consequently, there are serious disanalogies to the time we live in. Whatever can be said of Spain 1936–1939, Hungary 1956, Russia 1919, Uruguay in 1968 and the 1980s, etc., today there is certainly not the level of mass struggle, reactionary forces, revolutionary groupings, etc during such periods.

This isn't to say we can't learn from those situations. We can, and must. We need to expand the lessons we draw from, which at present is a fairly narrow pool. Still there is also a distinct lack of new theory being produced as a tool for understanding and acting in our time. It is particularly on the question of how we develop revolutionary organisations and how we build movements towards revolution in our conditions that we move into new territory. That is to say that there are historically and materially rooted questions of organisation, and that they vary depending on the period we are in. In other words, our problems are not general problems but problems rooted in our time, in our balance of forces, and in the development of the working class in world capitalism today.

These perspectives have been largely absent from discussion of revolutionary organisation in our time. There is anyway a gap between actually existing organisations discussing organisation, and a materially rooted discussion of organisation itself. Adopting such a perspective can help us break from our existing practices and move towards a different orientation to *the development of revolutionary organisation.* This article will suggest a methodology and political process for our time that can facilitate the development of organisation. This process is based on the concepts of political rapprochement, an intermediate organisation analysis, and a qualitative method to political militant development.



organise workplaces for labour peace in an era of ruling class cut backs and brutal assaults. The NGOs, often funded directly by major capitalists and the state, have taken up social service functions of the state and have centralized organising activity into a professional bureaucracy without building up popular organs of collective activity and power. This is the case even when NGOs have nominal revolutionary administrators and explicitly talk about their work in terms of building movement, or worse revolution.

When collective organisation and struggle does occur in these institutions, to what ends do they fight? Besides largely symbolic actions (perhaps resolutions passed against wars, symbolic strikes and marches), these institutions are firmly rooted within the bounds of the left-wing of the capitalist class. There are numerous examples that are worth spending a little time reflecting on.

The boring-from-within union reform movement has a section that comes out of revolutionary politics. Most prominently Solidarity (US) is active in union reform movements across the United States, and is one of the main driving forces behind Labour Notes, the labour reform publication with associated movements and conferences. Despite 80+ years of the failure of communist-led union reform movements to produce either reformed unions or communist practice, the basic tenets of reforming the unions through running slates, electioneering, and bureaucratic reform measures is unquestioned. Teamsters for a Democratic Union, which had many Solidarity organisers within, won control of the Teamsters for a period in the early 90s. Many laudable reforms were introduced, and there were strides made to increase organising and transparency in a notoriously corrupt union. Still, from a revolutionary perspective we should ask, what was built? Where is the mass movement of Teamsters organising combatively, and where is the revolutionary practice to emerge from this? In fact what we have is a social democratic practice of business unionism and liberal politics, but under revolutionary pretences. The union reform movement's emphasis

times social democrats outpace radicals we should question that relationship.

We can reasonably ask questions of the existing mass organisations (to the extent they actually function as mass organisations): (1) do they organise their members, engaging them in collective activity and struggle, and (2) if so, to what ends, and (3) to the extent this does happen, how much does it facilitating conditions for revolutionary transformation or create openings for developing militants of the left committed to social transformation? We might even add, to what extent does the left presence in the NGOs, unions, and liberal political machinery translate into an advance of revolutionary practice, theory, and organisation?

The overwhelming majority would answer no to the first. Instead activity is professionalized service activity, and is integrated into existing channels of struggle within the capitalist and state infrastructure. Nor do most NGOs and unions engage in collective struggle, opting instead for lobbying, attempting to elect representatives, and legalistic manoeuvring which can be called struggle only in the most vague and meaningless sense. While collective struggle leverages power based on the collective strength of social classes united in action, legalistic manoeuvring relies upon the skills and activity of a narrow class of professionals and decision making that stands outside the grasp of collectivities. It is possible to engage in collective pressuring of institutions of power, but this is different from believing that lobbying, candidate work, and filing lawsuits is itself collective struggle.

Due to the pitched antagonism presently towards any autonomous working class movement, there are contradictions. Some unions for example must fight for their survival in a hostile environment (particularly service sector unions), and in some instances must fight hard against bosses. Even if we're charitable in the content of these fights, any semblance of activity and organisation gets dropped following a contract period. The unions actively promote working together with the bosses, and



## Walking From Our Doorsteps

The theories that revolutionaries draw from today come from the periods in which the oppressed classes were in their most pitched battles. This is true of nearly all the different left tendencies; Leninists, anarcho-syndicalists, platformists, especifistas, dual-organisationalists, insurrectionists. The organised tendencies tend to draw on theories that promote high levels of unity on theory, strategy, tactics, and collective responsibility. Cadre organisation is constituted by unified cadre acting on a tight strategy, and implementing collective work in concert. Platformists take action to build revolutionary mass movements through organisation with unity from theory to tactics. Trotskyists believe there is a crisis of leadership in the working class, and the vanguard party's discipline and unity provide the solution to the crisis.

Whatever we may think of these theories, the problem is that now the left is in a different place. There is not the mass struggle that would ground the left's theories, develop leadership, and build the unity necessary for these theories. We are not platformists yet, but want to be platformists once we build praxis out of struggles and obtain a high level of unity. If the left is isolated from struggle in an era of bureaucratized mass organisations, any left leadership will be deformed and attempts to cement that leadership with a self-proclaimed vanguard will be an isolated and hollow vanguard.[3]

We can agree and learn from the high level of struggle and insights from the revolutionary past, but that does not answer the

[3] This essay is one piece of what has become four essays. The others will address the usefulness and problems of the organisational theories in use today, the first being a critique of attempts to recast democratic centralism away from its centralizing tendencies, the second as a critique of simply trying to implement theories from high periods of struggle without concepts of how we get to that level (specifically platformism, especifism, synthesism, and cadre organisation), and the last an analysis of the nature of our period.

question of what to do when the activity and balance of forces is different.

What we need then is to develop a praxis of how we build greater unity, functioning, and militancy in a period where it is often difficult to find and participate in mass struggle, where we our historical memory and practices have significant gaps, and where the existing radical left base is alienated from working class struggle. More often than not, we need to be able to catalyze and initiate struggle without artificially trying to be the struggle. We should not reject the lessons from historical struggles, but try to develop an organisational theory grounded in our specific conditions, and addressing the contradictions in our attempts to build organisation. This would actually allow us to expand our range of examples and lessons we draw from beyond a relatively narrow pool of historical high points.

One difficulty we face is that our time presents unique challenges to developing capable militants. We are in a period of low struggle marked by an absence of mass movements, and the dominance of bureaucratized institutional forms of the left. The revolutionary lefts' isolation from mass struggle creates a barrier to further developing organisation in theory and in practice. The effect is that political organisations today have an extremely difficult time developing militants.[4] The isolation of the left from practice has a causal force that despite the theoretical justification (from whatever school of thought) brings convergence towards populist manoeuvring. Organisations have an outward display of strategy and unity, but internally tolerate and facilitate dysfunctional stasis through refusing to deal with real problems. The lack of a practice

[4] Some mass organisations and intermediate organisations on the other hand are very good at developing leadership in militants. Still, in terms of developing consciousness, praxis, and revolutionary process we are roundly lacking. It is an open question, and should be called into question what the role of political organisations is in mass organisations given the often backwards and lopsided development of political organisations actually existing today.



fact the global organisation of production and the break down of the balance of forces, both proletarian and capitalist.[4]

The existing organs of the institutional left (the unions, the NGOs, and the liberal and social democratic political machinery) have not built up mass movements, but rather organisations with a service orientation towards the working and oppressed classes. Our goal is not to judge these movements merely evaluatively. As revolutionaries, we should seek to understand what potential there is for building and supporting the mass popular movements for the revolutionary transformations that can abolish capital and replace it with a classless society administered and organised by all for all. Setting aside questions of how much these institutions actually do to protect and expand life under capitalism (for which they also fail significantly); as revolutionaries who seek not just to win day-to-day struggles but also to transform the systemic causes of exploitation, we need to evaluate our role in these institutions, their role in capitalism, and the potential for transformation in mass movements.

The issue then is this. Whatever level of practice there is amongst the mass organisations is social democratic practice. Revolutionaries, for the very few who do have a level of activity in mass organisations, tend to have social democratic practice in these organisations. In actuality, this social democratic practice is probably the most advanced and progressive even compared to the tiny fractions of revolutionaries trying to build a mass practice. Revolutionary practice, because of the low level of struggle and isolation of the left from *direct rank-and-file struggle*, is in its infancy. There is a large gap between ideas and action, and in our time it is worth questioning the extent to which ideology does work. If radical ideology yields social democratic practice, and at

[4] There are too many places to look to here. For a start see Don Hammerquist's *Thinking and Acting in Real Time and a Real World.* threewayfight.blogspot.com and Karl Heinz Roth's *Global Crisis – Global Proletarianisation – Counterperspectives* www.wildcat-www.de

neo-fascist forces. In an era of ruling class assaults and austerity, it has been the right that has been most successful in responding to organising the oppressed classes. While the left is quite conscious of this, the left's isolated position makes a serious challenge more difficult and questionable.

At the same time no major progressive mass movements provide a counterweight to the ruling class assaults, restructuring, cuts, and collaborationist mass organisations. Unions are nearing a crisis with decades of attacks on the social compact which gave the unions a stable base in the American economy. As we reach new lows for unions in terms of position and power in major industries, many unions are choosing not to organise at all and others are attempting to launch of quixotic crusade for labour-management partnership while management prepares for total liquidation of the unions. Many environmental groups actively partner with major capitalist interests, and have become support bases for green consumerism.

The institutional left has largely sought to save capitalism as was done in the Great Depression, through a combination of state intervention and a social compact between capital and institutionalized forms of social organisation (unions and NGOs). Our time is however different and capital itself has evolved beyond the prior compositions. The New Deal era social welfare programs were based on a time when capitalism required a highly productive and predictable workforce, which was guaranteed by unions as mediators on the shop floor and social welfare programs in the community. No analogy exists in our time of international capital, the dismantling of the welfare state, and increasingly fractured state rule. It is unlikely that even if capital had the will to find such a solution, it would be able to solve the fundamental causes of this crisis which is not merely a lack of jobs or capital, but in



centred on working class self-activity in mass struggle throws up roadblocks to attempts to build further practice.

The prevalence of institutional forms of the left, particularly academia and the NGOs, combined with the low level of struggle translates into a de facto dominance even when these professional bureaucracies represent a numerical minority. This relationship manifests in the class, race, and gender politics of our organisations, and in the dominance of academia and NGO staff on revolutionary thinking. The ideological dominance of the bureaucracies contributes to reproducing existing intra-class and class relationships on the left. These institutions function to draw up a certain layer (largely a well-educated progressive one), and are characterized by extremely high turn-over due to poor working conditions and contradictions in the work. The structural isolation of the bureaucracies from the conditions and interests of the working class paired with the careerism and high turn-over endemic to the industries have a negative effect on the movement. Despite being a minority, these institutions have hegemony over the ideas of the movement, and the left often expresses the interests of these institutions. At times this represents an antagonistic or parasitic relationship of the bureaucracies to the rest of the working class. The left consequently tends to reflect the perspectives these institutions and related industries. Intellectuals or small groupings of leadership tend to dominate the thinking of organisations, and the base tends to either withdraw from participation in the life of the organisation or give paper consent to the ideas of a small minority without engaging them.

Likewise many left militants have either no intention of being active in mass movements or have difficulty finding struggles to engage in when they do have the intention. Again a small minority is rooted and immersed in struggle, while others instead use organisation solely as a social network or ideological field of intellectual battle. Unity can be artificial or non-existent, and often breaks down in the face of conflict, whether within the organisation, with

other political organisations, or in mass struggles. Members either have paper unity or unity is sacrificed to the question of numbers.

This illustrates the fundamental dynamic of the dominant approaches of political organisations of our time. Organisations vacillate between populism and purism. Populism, as I define it amongst the organised left, is an orientation to politics of numbers. It is a "people-ism" that uses a division between the people and elites (sometimes merely foreign elites as opposed to local ones) as one of the founding bases of building a movement. This orientation is in contrast to a class perspective, which attempts to understand and act on reality based on analysis of social categories from their class character and interests. Populism, and its emphasis on hazy "oppression" can have the effect of obscuring class, and thereby opens the door to the domination of populist organisation by bureaucracies and opportunists. Populism puts forward positions based primarily on trying to gain access to the largest venue of potential recruits. This is because the populist analysis argues that the primary thing holding back the tide of change is subjective conditions, and emphasizes influence and sway in the battle of ideas to move the broadest current to its positions. Therefore it assesses its strength and orients towards an ability to mobilize the greatest numbers for action. Populist politics then moves us towards liberal models of propaganda with obfuscated revolutionary content in its attempts to gain influence, positions of authority, and street-cred in mass movements. Populism pushes revolutionaries towards gaining access to mass media, and repackaging/marketing the content of revolutionary organisation for the sake of numbers. The basic populist move then is to try and put forward reformist ideology led by revolutionaries in a move to gain credibility and positions of influence amongst large swaths of people. There is a structural pressure then towards obfuscation, dishonesty, or perhaps better an honest move to reformism, social democracy, nationalism, etc.

This obsession with abstract influence and numbers obscures the real issues, which is what political work actually looks like



and much of the work can reasonably be said to have disappeared. Millions of people engaged in various forms of resistance to the wars, globalization, and the new forms of capital and state; however the left was not able to produce a sustained alternative that was able to engage, nurture, and develop that activity into a lasting movement against capitalism and the state. While seemingly militant direct action was relatively common, this militancy rarely led to further radicalization or the popularization of struggle. Power was built, but dissipated. The left had not developed the ability or perhaps the orientation to build movements, either mass movements or revolutionary ones.

The decline of the era of activist mobilizations was an interlude to a series of economic failures coming to a close. Capital had been able to delay escalating crises in previous decades through expansion of markets into new proletarianised workforces, seizing new assets and bringing them into the market via privatization schemes, austerity programs, and financialisation of markets with new financial "products" such as derivatives, currency trading, and the like. A series of bursting bubbles eventually brought us to the brink. Though people dispute the beginning or the trajectory, we can see a continuity of bubbles from the finance scandals of the 80s and 90s, the dot-com bubble, post-September 11 accounting scandals, and the real estate bubble. Resistance both by social movements in the developing and developed worlds forced the ruling class recompositions,[3] and likewise bred new resistance. The ensuing crisis has brought a new era of austerity, following previous austerities, and a culmination of decades of ruling class assaults on the basic living conditions of workers and oppressed classes across the globe.

Presently in an environment of austerity, the most politically significant and powerful mass movements in the US are movements from the right, often with organised tendencies of conscious

[3] Federici, Silvia & Montano, Mario. *Theses on the Mass Worker and Social Capital.* libcom.org

# Part III: The Nature of Our Period: looking to an autonomous working class alternative

The end of the twentieth century was a time of transition. The regime of low-intensity warfare, the dismantling of the welfare state, and neo-liberal privatization schemes ultimately was running its course.[1] The final defeats were to be dolled out across the world in the eventual collapse of finance bubbles, widespread resistance to austerity, and the implosive of the economies of Latin America.[2] Before this was all but said and done, there was the gradual and later meteoric rise and fall of social movements against neoliberal reforms and the militarism leading to the afghan and Iraq wars. Revolutionaries played an active and disproportionate role in mobilizing the social actors in what would become the largest mobilizations of their kind.

Time has passed, and the limitations and deflation of the early 2000s anti-globalization and anti-war movements are becoming clearer to many revolutionaries. Though massive mobilizations occurred, little lasting organisation was built. This means that the militancy we witnessed in the streets had a very short shelf life,

[1] Midnight Notes Collective. *Work, Energy, War: 1973–1992.* Autonomedia, 2001.

[2] Wallerstein, Immanuel. *Structural Crises.* Originally published in New Left Review #62 March-April 2010. www.khukuritheory.net



on the ground, social relationships which build consciousness, and the role of struggle in giving birth to transformative consciousness. Historically left populism often turns into right populism, and it is politically dangerous to ignore these tendencies. This isn't to say we ignore media and issues of quantity, but rather that there is a complex relationship between ideas and practice, and that over subjectivising the problem leads to populist practice. In the present time, issues of quality of militants are dominant because we do not have the objective strength necessary to build, sustain, and activate mass numbers. Without that qualitative baseline, quantative transformations will remain hollow and evaporate at critical moments.

Purism is the opposite; it is the imposition of artificial unity, the centralization of responsibilities, ideas, leadership, and activity into an exclusive minority, and a disciplinarian orientation to solving the problem of developing militants. Political sects attempt to impose this unity, but have difficulty doing so. The problem is that a lack of struggle and a lack of militants, makes their unity either static or constantly under threat of dissolving with the drastic unevenness in consciousness between activists. Purism attempts to guard against this through legislating unity. Despite the legitimate concern that exists about bureaucracy, a far greater danger at this time is populism, which can have these purist bureaucratic tendencies internally anyway and is widespread.

Taking a step back, we see that most revolutionary organisations in our time (ideology aside), function at a non-revolutionary level. That is, revolutionary organisations do not engage either in the collective theorizing or coordinated activity reflective of revolutionary unity. Without an active praxis immersed in struggle, building lessons and theory out of practice, and strategic coordinated organisational activities, revolutionary organisations are relegated to pseudo-mass organisations or theoretical societies. In fact most revolutionary organisations operate as *deformed intermediate organisations*; that is networks of conscious militants who share broad strategy with uneven political development and unity, but under

contradictory or false pretences. Small groupings within these organisations control the de facto political thinking and organisational life, while often taking a populist orientation towards the other membership to sustain membership beyond the handful of militants who do have unity. In fact they are deformed intermediate organisations because intermediate organisations (like organised tendencies in unions, caucuses, etc) come together out of mass struggle to unify the lessons and strength of tendencies in the mass struggle, and to advance its thinking. Most political organisations today are largely distant or institutionalized apart from mass struggle. The revolutionary organisations of today act like intermediate organisations in part because of populism, but also because of their inability to contribute to building movements.

As I've indicated before, I don't think it is random that we have these problems. Likewise, any solution of these practices, the position of mass movements, and the left's situation will not come solely from attempting to correct dysfunctional organisations or organisational building. There are two aspects of the problem: internal and external. Objectively, we must overcome the present state of affairs to fundamentally transform the political landscape. This cannot be done by will alone nor by waiting for struggle to fall into our laps. It is a dynamic then between the trajectories of struggle and the work we do to prepare for and facilitate these struggles emerging and expanding. Looking to the trajectories of struggle, we need to be conscious of the limitations and possibilities at present, and have a process of interpreting and responding to our objective reality. This requires moving past pressing for strategies and demands without attempts to assess, reflect, and develop based on the specificity of our time, place, and levels of struggle. Humility is called for in assessing the impact of organised revolutionaries on history, and today some internal concepts can help us contribute more fruitfully to the self-liberation of the working class.

There are three concepts, internally speaking, that help illuminate a method for moving forward. Specifically, we need a method



*we achieve it.* I attempt to address these questions in the article *Towards Theory of Organisation for Our Time.*[15]

[15] miamiautonomyandsolidarity.wordpress.com

The problem is where we are today. The people who are drawn to or recruited into the left do not have a cadre orientation. Much of the left emerges from academia, politicized subcultures, and the institutional forms of the left (unions, NGO, arms of the political parties). Generally militants at the mass level have a deeper understanding of practice than the activists the come into the left. The low level of experience and development in the left is a serious impediment to the development of strategy and a functional militancy. The commitment level is extremely low, people are footloose, and the discipline necessary to sustain the ideological, organisational, and even emotional work of a revolutionary movement is often absent. Worse, these problematic dynamics are rarely posed clearly, let alone sufficiently and consistently carried out.

The challenge then for a cadre organisation is how to achieve militancy and unity, while retaining sufficient strength to justify organisation. While unified strategy is crucial (and platformism was clear about this as well), we have to question what kind of strategy and at what level we are capable of given the abstraction from practice. People come to our organisation at a variety of levels, and we see large gaps between the consciousness, education (taken in a broad auto-didactic sense), and capabilities. If we are not at a very advanced level of unity, there are real methodological questions about how we deal with this unevenness of consciousness, commitment, and capabilities while remaining functioning democratic organisations. A cadre orientation doesn't automatically give us a method to bring up the level of the left to the unity and strategy we seek. In fact, attempts at building cadre (unlike BTR usually unconscious cadre orientations) in our time have tended to lead either to paper-unity populist organisation or sectarian micro-sects. None of this is inevitable, but *we need other tools to help us understand that transition to a functioning cadre organisation beyond merely theorizing the unity, tightness, and discipline that it would exhibit once*



*for developing militants and building organisation that moves beyond the present populism and purism. These concepts give us tools to understand how organisations change, a methodology for building organisation, and trajectories of struggle. At the same time these concepts guide our internal activities, they illuminate a way to understand and move forward objectively as well. They are: political rapprochement, the intermediate level, and a qualitative approach to the development of political militants and organisation.*

## Political Rapprochement

Rather than starting from the assumption of high levels of unity, political rapprochement is a process of developing greater levels of unity through common struggle. This is both a *methodology* for how revolutionaries should work with others as well as internally. The point of political rapprochement is to explore what unity we have, and based on that find where we can take action together. Taking action allows us to consciously build praxis; testing our theory, reflecting actively on the lessons and limitations in our experiences, and reformulating our theory. As our practice advances, we aim towards building greater unity as we find where are beliefs and methods worked and failed, converged and diverged.

Political rapprochement as I laid it out looks linear, but in fact it's dynamic. Rather than assuming a linear unity of resolutions and propositions, political rapprochement is about constructing political consciousness in struggle through active social relations. Political rapprochement is a conceptual model for a dynamic understanding of building of praxis, unified with a method of relating militants-to-militants and militants-to-organisations. This typically will not lead to a neat step-by-step unity or even be explicitly conscious. We should expect consciousness to evolve in bursts and contractions alongside the trajectory of struggle. Political consciousness and organisation is no different in this

regard from other forms of proletarian social organisation and struggle.

The method used by revolutionaries typically inverts this process. It starts with assumed unity and activity, and tries recruit into that. The false unity leads to tension, and organisational development lags in the gridlock.

Political rapprochement is a historical and material process that builds from where we are at, and requires *an active process of organisation building across time.* Another way to say this is that revolutionary organisation isn't proclaimed or written, but developed as a conscious movement of increasing unity.[5] That unity is the basis for expanding confrontations with the state and capital, again following the ebb and flow of the *mass mood* or fighting spirit of the working class. Seeing this, we can also understand how *existing organisations are reflections of the historical level and development of the movements they grew out of.* This allows us to learn from rather than judge or condemn organisations for their place in history. If we have moved away from building organisation based on marketing and selling revolutionary credentials to the people, then we can begin to see the way in which one part of our job is to try to understand the role of class, history, and struggle in producing and forming organisations.

## An Intermediate Level Analysis

The intermediate level is, as was mentioned before, a level of struggle between the mass level (common struggle for common in-

[5] Marx's *German Ideology* makes a related point, and the work of French Anarchist Communists apply the idea of communism as the living movement of the working class with anarchist communist organisation as an emergent historical pole. See also George Fontenis' *Manifesto of Libertarian Communism*, or the position papers of Alternative *Libertaire.*



theoretical development in line with the organisation. Strategically speaking, the cadre organisation attempts to work on only select areas to maximize the impact of cadre based on a strategic analysis. Bring the Ruckus has mandated organisational work, and has criteria for what the work looks like.

*"A cadre organisation seeks to participate in those grassroots (or "mass") struggles that it believes has the most revolutionary potential, based on the cadre's political analysis. At the national level, a cadre organisation develops and implements dual power strategies for its members nationwide to participate in. At a local level, the local cadre participates in grassroots struggles that fit within the national strategy, debates their effectiveness in local meetings, reports back to the national organisation, and seeks to move the grassroots struggle in a radical direction according to these discussions".*[14]

It is worth pointing out that democratic centralist organisation is not necessarily cadre, nor is cadre organisation necessarily democratic centralist. Cadre organisation is defined by its militants and its strategy, and generally speaking most present anarchist and democratic centralist organisations are more uneven in abilities and consciousness. What is most positive in the concept of cadre organisation is *the role of internal practice.* The theory of cadre organisations should push us to question our place in history, prioritizing activity, and developing militants to the level where they can do the work the organisation prioritizes. It is a collective and mass orientation, with strategy made from the bottom up, and for this reason I identify it within the broad libertarian communist tradition. Cadre organisation then gets much of it right, addressing the crucial lack of discussion around how we develop direction for revolutionary organisation. That being said, cadre organisation suffers from similar limitations to platformism and especifismo.

[14] *What is Cadre Organisation.* Bring the Ruckus. Accessed 9/25/10 bringtheruckus.org

with the revolutionary organisation, and revolutionaries being primarily committed to building libertarian practice in mass movements. What that looks like for us, and how we go about that is largely absent from these questions, and is I believe reflective of the differences in existing struggles between South America and ourselves. Like Platformism, especifismo should be a goal and part of the process of becoming revolutionaries, but is incomplete as a theory of our practice.

Another contribution to organisational theory is the concept of the cadre-organisation of Bring the Ruckus. To my knowledge there is not another organisation that has put forward the concept, or at least they're the first to put it forward so centrally so I will discuss BTR's conception alone.[13] That being said, BTR brought together existing left practices into the cadre concept, and it's less new than it is merely BTR's emphasizing of certain elements within. It is likely that the cadre organisation concept is a synthesis of New Left debates around cadre with a libertarian perspective, though this is only speculation based on BTR's drawing from 60s era left-Marxist currents and libertarian concepts.

Cadre organisation is similar to platformism and especifismo in that it emphasizes revolutionary organisational unity and a mass practice of revolutionary politics. BTR's account of cadre organisation emphasizes not just the organisational positions, but also the capabilities and activity of militants. Cadre organisation is marked by having highly developed and capable membership and aiming at a *unitary strategy*. Cadre organisation then has every member as a cadre, capable of organising in the mass movements and with

[13] Searching the literature will turn up "cadre organisation" as a discourse within Leninist, and often Maoist circles. In most cases, this does not differ from democratic centralism and Mao's notion of putting politics at the head of one's life. Lenin argued for paid professional revolutionaries as cadre, and this concept took on a life of it's own under Stalin and Mao's distinct interpretations of discipline, and professionalism of cadre. BTR however took the concept from a completely different angle, and so I separate it out as a distinct tendency.



terests) and revolutionary level (unity of theory and action).[6] Likewise the intermediate level shows us a methodology both for building the mass level and revolutionary level. Existing mass struggles are often very limited, and militants are spread out and diffuse. Building intermediate organisation allows us to concentrate militants *on a basis of strategy within the movements* and develop that layer to a higher level than if militants are simply isolated. Likewise revolutionary organisation would benefit from intermediate organisations since they provide a field for testing, developing, and integrating with mass struggle without the dominance or bureaucratic control of mass movements by political organisation. Miami Autonomy and Solidarity has developed this strategic orientation defined as attempting to move mass militants to the intermediate level (M->I) and revolutionaries into the intermediate level so as to be present in mass struggle (I->M or R->M depending how you interpret it). These categories are fluid though, as we've seen that most Rs are actually Is or even Ms. Part of this activity then must be "intermediate activity" organising contacts based on their practice towards the models rather than into neat organisations of pure-I, pure-M, or pure-R.

A few decades ago, some Haitian militants developed similar practices working at the point of production in factories. Committees and networks of militants would build structures outside the union that would strengthen and develop struggles. Often these structures would give birth to intermediate level militants (militants willing to fight for class struggle, not just their own struggles) and revolutionary militants. During the fall of Duvalier in Haiti, intermediate organisations of militants were instrumental in creating new mass worker and peasants' movement, and revolutionaries had a critical role. In the history of the United States, the IWW of-

[6] See Miami Autonomy & Solidarity's position paper on the intermediate level for a more in depth analysis of the logic of the intermediate level and its application to our present period.

ten functioned as a dual-mass organisation and an intermediate organisation. Other examples from the syndicalist movement share these features (British shop stewards movement, the early CNT, etc.),[7] and clandestine revolutionary worker networks played significant roles in various insurrections (Hungary, Poland, Uruguay, Russia in 1905).

Again there is a risk of interpreting this linearly. One should not conceive of this work as literally bringing mass militants to new intermediate organisations (though this is possible) formed as such. As discussed before, all organisations existing today are mixtures of mass, intermediate, and revolutionary with their composition changing as struggles change, militants' change them, and new forces emerge within them. An intermediate organisation approach then is as much about *what our political work looks like and prioritizes, as it is the location of struggle.* Intermediate organisation is as much an analysis of actually existing practices at the mass level, as a proposal for future work and organisations, and as a methodology for how to act as revolutionaries within these existing practices.

There is a practical and theoretical unity of political rapprochement, intermediate organisation, and militant organisation. That is to say that our work as organised militants is to be conscious of and function within the evolving dynamic between levels of struggle and organisation, clarifying and strengthening class power through rapprochement, and unifying militant organisation out of this non-linear evolving practice.

## Quality not Quantity

A qualitative method to militant organisation attempts to address where we are at in history, and the capacity of present po-

[7] See the section on unions in *Black Flame: the Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism* by Schmidt and van der Walt, AK Press 2009.



Especifismo emphasizes the need for social insertion (revolutionaries should organise as rank-and-file militants in mass movements), trying to build a libertarian character in these movements, organisational unity and discipline combined with a base-democratic federalist model.[12] The FAU, following the dictatorship, has something of a cadre orientation with a long probation period for joining the organisation in which the member studies the FAU's curriculum, builds practice in the mass movements, and develops unity with the organisation. Part of this is due to security concerns that are real following the dictatorship in Uruguay. While this method of internal practice is advanced and presents lessons for us, many who identify with especifismo in North America are unaware. It is also unclear who outside of the FAU who has this practice.

The political environmental and history of Uruguay is disanalogous to our circumstances for the same reasons as platformism. While especifismo is not an ideology of revolutionary times (it came out of the collapse of reaction, with an upsurge but not revolution), the level of left-immersion in struggle and organisation outpaces significantly our own. The process of radicalization of militants therefore will look significantly different for us, where we have fewer experiences to draw off. Especifismo puts forward the principled development of militants through engagement

the PVP, a libertarian-influenced social democratic party in the present ruling government. Old militants combined with new libertarian youth radicalized in the environment of crumbling old-left and crumbling dictatorship to found the new FAU.

[12] See the English translation of *Huerta Grande* by the-then-Marxist influenced FAU in 1972 under the dictatorship. www.anarkismo.net While this work prefigured the FAU's transformation in the Partido para Victoria del Pueblo (which eventually became a bizarre libertarian social democratic party), some concepts made it's way to the FAU re-founded under anarchist principles. Adam Weaver's article on especifismo for a good outline of especifista principles, though the historical account conflates a number of distinct time periods www.anarkismo.net

based on assumptions of how struggle would proceed, rather than experiences in living struggle.

At the least, we can see a high-functioning unity requires experience and high levels of struggle. Attaining that unity requires that people have the experience in struggle, abilities, and understanding necessary to build both the strategy and the unity, which is exactly what we are lacking. For these reasons much of the organisational theory to emerge from the platformist milieu has been relatively abstract and at the level of principles, or drawing from revolutionary periods. Ultimately platformism is a goal, an end point of revolutionary process. We need a bridge of theory and practice that can take us to the high level of unity necessary in revolutionary times. Platformism then is an important legacy in understanding revolutionary organisation, but is insufficient as a theory that can help us build a political capable and tight organisation in the present.

Especifismo is related to platformism in that all especifista organisations today are aware of, draw from, and are in dialogue with the platformist current. Especifismo is somewhat of a complicated affair due to conflicting histories in existence. Especifismo means simply specific-ism, or the idea of believing in the need for specific (political) organisation. In Uruguay (birth of especifismo) there was a traditional division between anarchists who only believed in mass anarcho-syndicalist organisation, and those who believed a political organisation was also necessary. Many if not most in North America trace especifismo to the Federacion Anarquista Uruguay founded in the 1950s. The real birth of especifismo as an explicit position of the FAU was in post-dictatorship Uruguay during the 1980s, when the FAU was re-founded, anarchism reproclaimed, and especifismo put forward as a lesson of the struggle.[11]

[11] The FAU was nearly exterminated during the dictatorship; though its decentralized nature helped it fare better than many left organisations. The majority of the leadership however turned to Anarcho-guevarism before being murdered. A split in the movement developed and a significant section of the FAU created



litical organisations. There is a low level both in capacity and in terms of numbers amongst revolutionaries in our time. This leads to a situation where groups will often find themselves with extreme unevenness in terms of experience, consciousness, capacity, willingness to fight, etc. The pressures both to grow and to maintain our revolutionary politics give birth to the twin problems of populism and bureaucratic micro-sects. Under pressure of repression and when people's interests, livelihoods, and freedom are at stake, we can only imagine what the populist functioning of organisations will yield. There is no formula to overcome this; however we need a strategy and a method of internally functioning that can facilitate the expansion of our capacity and development of our militants.

First we must recognize at this time that numerical growth would not translate into an expansion of capacity unless it was simultaneously numerical growth of well developed capable militants growing together in struggle. Given the low level of capacity existing today, rapid expansions would overextend the few militants we do have and lead to paper-tiger organisations, much like many of the NGO projects leftists have propagated with administrative positions of committed revolutionaries with passivity and disengagement by a serviced-membership base. Secondly, it is well within our capacity to strategize, target key activities and organisers, and use our resources to recruit and develop other militants. By prioritizing qualitative growth, and organising the life of our organisations to that qualitative transformation, we can build the foundations necessary for other more drastic shifts in quality and quantity.

How to recruit and develop militants is a process for which we must work, and build praxis. What little we do know is that militants do not arise out of the realm of intellectual debates, and we can't expect them to fall into our laps simply because we're doing good work. Struggle opens doors, but we need to be prepared for what is on the other side. This will take both immersing our inex-

perienced revolutionaries into struggle, have a collective process that allows people to make sense of their experience in struggle, and go beyond it through the collective experience of the group as a whole and the historical lessons we've retained. In theory, all groups are equally committed to ending the unevenness we see. What is missing however is having a dynamic process for working with militants, preparing them for struggle, working through their issues, and building upon that. Reading groups and business meetings are the de-facto political arenas where the unevenness can remain hidden or stagnate, without an organisational culture of challenging each other and drawing out each individual to find their contribution.

Loose group practice combined with a commitment to quantitative growth can mask the unevenness and the divisions that lie barely beneath the surface. Instead we need to develop a conscious internal practice of dialogue between contacts, militants, and the collective life of the organisation. This is necessarily a process and not a code, because the transformation from struggle to revolutionary is one that transforms both those struggling and the organisation attempting to understand and integrate the lessons of those struggles. Study sessions can hide those processes in their dominance by intellectuals and group dynamics, as well as not necessarily meeting the participants where they are at both in struggle and thought.

Political organisation then requires a number of levels of interaction and development, internal and external. The foundation of this is the 1-on-1 or small group interactions, which are the communicative body where the organisation and the individual contact can grow together, learn from struggle, and draw out the unity and disagreements which will build organisation. As that process unfolds, the organisation needs methods for integrating the militant, and having an internal organisation which is capable of assessing, analyzing, making commitments and taking risks, and ultimately responding to the work and perspectives of the contacts. This sets



The Platformists were dealing with a particular problem in history however. At that time there were mass Bolshevik, Socialist, and Anarchist revolutionary organisations and putting into practice anti-capitalist organisation of society. Platformism is a response to this situation, and calls for a unification of libertarian communists to combat those who co-opt and repress revolution, for advancing our ideas and practice, and creating a coherent current in the mass organisations to make libertarian ideology and practice living in popular practice (what Joseph K. of Solidarity Federation and a University of Sussex committee of occupying students call "massification"[9]). The absence of this unity and coherence was one factor that contributed to capitalists and reactionaries repressing and defeating revolution in a number of revolutionary insurrections. Platformism has become merely one name for a whole current. Dual organisationalism in Italy, the Friends of Durruti in Spain, Shifuism in China, etc., all drew similar conclusions *during revolutionary periods.*[10]

The correcting influence of platformism should be welcomed in the present environment lacking clear organised alternatives, but the limitations of straight applicability should be clear. Given the low level of development, the lack of mass organisations, and alienation of the left, platformism presents necessary lessons but is insufficient. It does not give us guidance for how we *develop* the unity necessary to have a high functioning revolutionary organisation. Strategic unity requires strategy. Building a grounded strategy today would requires a level of presence in struggle, learning lessons from such, and expanding confrontation with the state. Instead much of what passes for strategy is largely speculative and

[9] *From Mobilisation to Massification.* A pamphlet from a University of Sussex occupation. libcom.org

[10] See the Anarchist Communist Federation of Italy's article *Anarchist Communism: A question of class* and Adam Weaver's *Building a Revolutionary Movement: Why anarchist-communism* for a summary of the history of this current.

isational work. This step advanced the revolutionary libertarian movements. At the same time, the solutions found were limiting because of a historical gap between the present and the past. The worst examples of this manifest in a kind of "born again" revolutionaries, who repented for their past sins clarified by a new found ideology that answered past problems.[6]

Platformism was one such ideological contribution of Ukrainian, Russian, and later French revolutionaries based on experiences in the anarchist stronghold of Ukraine during the Russian revolution.[7] The platformists emphasized the development of revolutionary organisation rooted in and building mass organisation, but with a unity of theory, strategy, and tactics. Unlike democratic centralism, platformist organisation lacked the top-down higher bodies that could dictate organisational line to the base.[8] Platformism shows promise for rectifying the bureaucratizing tendencies in the Bolsheviks, and the at-times chaotic hamstringing disunity of the revolutionary mass movements and synthesist revolutionary organisations.

[6] The crassest example of this was Chris Day's *The Historical Failure of Anarchism* in the wake of the break up of the Love and Rage Anarchist Federation. Day attempts to rectify real problems encountered broadly in political organisation by attempting to fit left history into a neat narrative that follows traditions (Marxist and anarchist). History speaks for itself as to where that line of thinking leads you (apparently social democratic variants of Maoism). Similar moves are made by platformist attempts on occasion to rehabilitate the anarchist tradition via a narrative of lineage. The interesting question isn't who was right, but rather how do we answer contradictions in our practice in current conditions.

[7] A collection of writings on the platform is here anarchistplatform.wordpress.com/ The French and Italian traditions are particularly strong in this regard and Fontenis' *Manifesto of Libertarian Communism* should be considered. Barry Pateman's *A History of the French Anarchist Movement: 1917–1945* is a good historical resource for the debate around the platform, and its life beyond the Ukrainians.

[8] See the newest translation of the Organisational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists here www.anarkismo.net



up a democratic method for learning from struggle, integrating and developing members, and in fact a means of maintaining accountability to the class through its movements.

A qualitative method to militant organisation then is a strategy that prioritizes creating a means of dialogue between the organisation and contacts with emphasis on qualitative expansion utilizing multiple levels of interaction and development. This represents a significant departure from revolutionaries in recent times, and as such is a preliminary strategy that requires experimentation, reflection, and further development.

## Collective Accountability

Militant organisations have members who are highly committed, capable of arguing for shared positions, principled in disagreements, active in mass struggle, and engaged in critical reflection and praxis building. Everyone wants to get to having unified strategy, immersion in struggle, and well developed members. Any way you construe it, if we truly believe in the need for a deep transformation in social relationships and existence, it will take a significant degree of personal commitment. This can be underappreciated. Living in this world is traumatic and alienating. A political organisation should try to help alleviate that alienation which will inevitably be made harder by committing yourself to long term struggle. Still without that dedication to politics, we will be unable even to have a modest impact on history. The hobbyist orientation to politics of many activists is understandable, but it is stunting when brought into and fostered within revolutionary organisations.

Our organisations need to struggle hard to develop liberatory education that can make organisational unity a practice and not merely a position. This is a significant challenge. Commitment here too unfortunately raises its head. When conflicts arise and particularly when people's self- and material interests are on the line,

paper unities break down. Radicals are not good enough at developing and pushing people we work with. Too often there is pandering to others by inventing elaborate excuses for lack of commitment (generally in the form of populism) without having a means of developing commitment. We need to work to find a way to develop each other that fits our time, our needs, and our perspectives. Too often our educational attempts leave the working class out of the equation and it is only academically trained militants that advance.

Lastly we need to be steadfast in putting our money where our mouth is. All revolutionary militants need to be present in (or in actuality we need to be able to facilitate and make) mass struggle as direct participants whenever possible. While struggle is not always easy to catalyze or locate, we need to commit our resources to being active on the ground and not merely as outside cheerleaders, believers that direct action alone is sufficient, or arm-chair theorists. In fact in these times, it will unfortunately often be us who help build the initial steps in struggles. Our people need to become useful and competent in struggle, rather than merely trying to put a radical spin on it. The reproduction of the theorists-militant divide so prevalent in left circles that see themselves as theorizing the struggle in their publications and study circles is often a mirror of society's division between academics and workers, intellectual and manual workers. Alongside this we need to develop our ability to critical assess ourselves, analyze in historical and material terms our development, and adapt our ideas to new challenges and changing situations. These are skills which are learned, and need to be developed in all our contacts as well.

## Towards Regroupment

Having this orientation arms us with better tools to build a revolutionary practice. By situating ourselves in history, we can clarify our relationships to social forces and try to find a path that leads



which are heavily inspired by the synthesis, and join together people based on anarchism broadly conceived to include even individualists.

Synthesism thus groups revolutionaries based on the desire to organise actions/activities, organisational patriotism, or propaganda. This is the one place we do have a level of praxis; many have discussed the theory and experiences of limitations here. The legacy of sub-cultural scenes, activist networks, and protest politics were mainstays of the proto-synthesist milieu. Synthesis has a productive role to play in these contexts, especially in the anti-globalization and anti-war movements. Broad mass activities and upsurges brought people together, and advanced to rethinking direction. In some ways synthesist practice was the theoretical expression of the maturation of that milieu, and its attempt at finding a political solution to the limitations of pure action.

Groupings[4] that emerged from these milieus developed their critiques of the paralysation of synthesist organisations, lack of education and engagement of its membership, anti-strategic orientation, and its inability to adapt to changing conditions. This, on occasion, led people in North America to look to past ideologies for guidance beyond synthesism, whether it was in the form of Leninism, Maoism, platformism, especifismo, or cadre-organisation.[5]

There was a move that was made in the 1990s and 2000s. People studied history, worked with organisations abroad, and attempted to apply theory to the concrete problems they found in their organ-

[4] I've been told from some participants that in North America platformism was a response to the de facto synthesism of the protest movements of the late 90s, but I can't verify that personally. For one perspective, see the semi-official North East Federation of Anarchist Communist history entitled *We Learn as We Walk: looking back on 5 years of NEFAC* nefac.net

[5] The break up of the Love and Rage Anarchist Federation is the obvious example here which produced a new Maoist group (Fire by Night, which merged with Freedom Road Socialist Organisation later), a platformist organisation NEFAC, and a cadre libertarian organisation Bring the Ruckus, along with other less known initiatives. See the *Love & Rage Archive* for more www.loveandrage.org/

velop them. We need a praxis that helps us get from our place to those high points, and consequently need to widen our view of history to look at people who faced similar challenges we do. This article will look at a few of the theories from high points of struggle, attempt to extract lessons of these struggles, while showing how we need to find our own theory that lets us built to the high level of struggle and unity they assume.

The first theory we will look to is synthesism. Synthesism is not necessarily a theory from a high point of struggle so much as a broad current, but one that prompted the development of tighter theories of organisation in response to failures coming out of synthesism. Synthesism is an organisational theory and practice which in the US tends to be popular amongst lower case 'a' anarchists and activists (actually amongst the Marxist-Leninist left too this is a strong current in a social-democratic form). In fact, synthesism has never really existed as an explicit theory (outside of aberrations and historical footnotes like Faure[2]). No one calls himself or herself a synthesist, but in practice most libertarian organisations have a synthesist character. Synthesism groups together people who do not have a basic level of unity on strategy and often theory. The classic example are the "anarchist federations" (particularly in Europe though also in recent US history with the Social Revolutionary Anarchist Federation[3]) which allow for varying contradictory tendencies to all exist in the same organisation without any fundamental unity. One present example would be the French and Italian anarchist federations in the International Anarchist Federation,

[2] Sebastien Faure was a French anarchist who lived in the late 19th and early 20th century, and eventually became an opponent of Platformism. He, alongside Voline, argued instead for a "synthesism" of all anarchist tendencies (individualist, communist, etc) in one organisation.

[3] See the unpublished account of one participant on anarchistblackcat forums www.anarchistblackcat.org For an alternative view see Mike Hargis' account of these two organisations on the Anarcho-Syndicalist Review website www.syndicalist.org



us to deeper and deeper engagement. If revolutionaries can take up this challenge, we could see the emergence of a higher level of dialogue and thinking around organisations, and possibly build political rapprochement of the tendency that is engaged in struggle, building unity, and trying to develop praxis.

Most of the debate around this orientation will perhaps centre less on the analysis than on the implementation. What is the upshot of these conclusions? These tools provide a framework for beginning and continuing the work necessary to any future revolutionary organisation, rather than a specific proposal for unification.

In this time, we are witnessing a broad convergence on practices and concepts in organisations which began at different starting points and with different traditions. In the United States a number of groups are finding parallel limitations of existing national groups, and local groups. Our problems can't be solved by shotgun weddings of organisations, or by conferences and calls for unity.

Regroupment is necessary. This will take a collective struggle, both internal to the movement and in practice. The reasons are many. Populism, which is ubiquitous, has made often more internal division within organisations than between them. There is strong unevenness within organisations, and internally most organisations have people moving in different directions. This is made worse by the fact that groups tend to unify exclusively around identification with being a Marxist, a Leninist, an anarchist, a platformist, etc. Historical associations of traditions, strong as they may be, don't cut neatly across strategic and political lines (largely because at this time all traditions presence in struggle here is fairly low). These associations can mask underlying divisions as well as unities. At the same, we are witnessing distinct traditions converging on similar positions. Currents are unifying in strategy and practice from different theoretical and traditional starting points. For instance there is a reformist social democratic convergence amongst sections of Maoists, Trotskyists, and sections of the (now old) ex-New Left. Likewise left communists, councilists,

and anarchists share currents that increasingly have built common practice in a broad libertarian communist tendency. This isn't to suggest some kind of pan-leftism or fusion, but instead to try and pose the possibility of struggling around historical and materially rooted strategic, theoretical, and tactical orientations located in practice.

Whatever that would look like, it would have to involve a substantial transformation of existing orientations and forces, and as has be demonstrated above would require developing through mass and political work. Inevitably this would require conflict, splits, and rupture of existing organisations into distinct tendencies that at present battle only internally. This is actually to be welcomed, as it would clarify our directions, and alleviate some of the periodic internal paralysis. It should however be clear that this is precisely the work and aims we should have to overcome the present alienation and stasis. Increased reflection and experimentation with organising is indicative of potentials that, if nurtured and developed, could lead to the emergence of a new social revolutionary force in North America.

This is a risk, but it is a necessary risk we need to take to be able to have the resources and capabilities to prepare and intervene as ruptures open up new possibilities and new danger in this time of crisis. In such a time, organisational and ideological loyalties should be re-assessed in favor of the interests of the proletariat and the movement as a whole. The stakes are high enough that it has become worth it to experiment and break from our existing practices in favor of possibly creating a higher form of organisation than we have seen in decades in North America.



# Part II: We are not platformists, we strive to be

In recent times a number of ideological currents from the libertarian communist tradition have inspired a generation to organise, build and reproduce organisations, and struggle around a rethinking of their traditions and future. Much of this theory comes from the period of the greatest waves of proletarian and peasant struggles in the 20$^{th}$ century. That period produced theory of organisation based on the protagonists' position within high points of struggle, its successes and failures.

Coming back to our time, we find ourselves in a situation distinct from say the Friends of Durruti or the Makhnovschina. In our time there are no mass movements that provide a counter-power and pressing threat to capitalism and the state. No significant organisations of revolutionaries are immersed in and drawing from struggle, and no serious revolutionary fascist movements threaten the working class directly at this point.[1] That is to say that there is a serious disanalogy between our reality and that of the high points of revolution, and consequently difficulty in directly applying the theory of that time. While the lessons of those struggles are crucial to understand and build from, what we are missing is our own theory (that of low periods of struggle) that can illuminate not merely how you struggle in times of rupture, but how you grow and de-

[1] This isn't to discount the possibility of any revolutionary movement, right or left, arising in short order. With the crisis seemingly expanding and the political balance of forces tipping in reckless directions our present situation could rapidly shift.