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Anti-Capitalism and Organization

An Interview with Jeff Shantz

Upping the Anti

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That we have recently seen an important radicalization can be registered in the rising appeal and relative rejuvenation of anti-capitalist politics and perspectives, particularly in the anti-globalization and anti-war movements. While there has been a notable downturn in the last couple of years, associated with both the “war on terrorism” (at home and abroad) and the contradictions of these movements themselves, the fate of this anti-capitalist radicalization is not a foregone conclusion. Many people would agree that whether or not the movements extend their reach and deepen their roots will depend in part on their ability to organize. But how?

For much of the twentieth century, the most common and influential (though never monolithic), answer to this question was one or another version of the vanguard party. The virtue of Leninism, and the basis for its widespread appeal to revolutionaries around the world, was that it provided a relatively coherent (if seriously flawed) set of answers to the fundamental questions of how to or-

ganize for revolutionary social change. It addressed the role of organization, the problem of (uneven) political consciousness, the nature of leadership and democracy, and the basic tasks of revolutionary movements.

For a variety of reasons, notably the degeneration and eclipse of state socialism and the shortcomings of the surviving sectarian left, many in the current generation of anti-capitalists seem to have concluded that “the party’s over” and have begun to search for alternative forms of organization and politics. From the renewal of anarchist and council-communist ideas, to experimentation with new federative and de-centralized forms in social movements, anti-capitalists have been attempting to overcome the dangers of vanguardism (elitism, authoritarianism, substitutionalism) while trying to provide answers to the questions and problems posed by organizing for radical social change.

For some, revolutionary parties or cadre organizations are done for, and a “movement of movements” coordinated (but not led or directed) by activist networks should take their place. Others maintain that revolutionary organizing on a principled political and even programmatic basis, whatever its concrete form, is essential in order to sustain and go beyond resistance, deepen analysis, and synthesize experiences and insights into shared political strategies and visions for transformative social change.

Organizational questions are always political questions. As such, they should reflect our understanding of what we are fighting for and how we propose to do it. There is a tendency to idealize particular organizational forms or “models” without asking tough questions about their political basis. While there is little agreement about these questions, the way forward lies in principled discussion, debate, and experimentation, not in uncritically repeating formulas and phrases, whether of dogmatic Leninist “party-building” or of trendy anti-authoritarian “movement-ism.”

In the spirit of providing a forum for these important debates and discussions, we have asked several people from different traditions and perspectives to suggest ways in which some of these questions can be grappled with. It is our hope that we can provide an ongoing space for the kind of debate that can help to clarify what is at stake and give form to different options for moving forward.

Jeff Shantz is a member of Punching Out-NEFAC (North-eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists) and lives in Toronto. This interview was conducted electronically and is based on Jeff 's article “Platformism’ and Organization” submitted to ‘Upping the Anti’ in March 2005.

UTA: To begin with, maybe you could outline your general perspective on why there is a need for revolutionary organization?

Jeff Shantz: NEFAC members believe that achieving a classless, stateless and non-hierarchical society (that is, anarchy) requires a social revolution, which will only emerge through autonomous social movements and the revolutionary self-activity of the working class.

This distinguishes us from some versions of social anarchism, which, drawing most notably on the works of Kropotkin, for example, view the development towards anarchy as an ongoing trend within human social development that requires little effort by anarchists beyond the propaganda of anarchist ideas.

While we draw upon the diverse histories, movements and theorists of anarchism, NEFAC is inspired most significantly by the tradition within anarchist communism known as “platformism.”

The platformist tradition emerged following the Russian Revolution through the efforts of a group of Russian and Ukrainian anarchists in exile who sought to analyze why the anarchists had fared so badly during the revolution in comparison with the Bolsheviks.

Their conclusion was that despite their vastly better social and political analysis the anarchists lacked effective organizations.

In order that anarchists not make the same mistake in future generations, the Dielo Truda group wrote a position paper, The Organizational Platform for a General Union of Anarchists, in which they laid out some points that might serve as a guide in developing effective revolutionary organizations.

More than 75 years after it was written and a decade after the fall of the U.S.S.R. the platform has enjoyed a stunning revival. From Ireland and Lebanon to South Africa and Canada, a number of groups have taken up the platform. At a time when anarchist movements are growing, the platform – which was only ever intended as an outline for action – has provided a useful starting point for anarchists looking “to rally all the militants of the organized anarchist movement.”

Unlike the original platformists, who focused their energies on gathering the majority of anarchists to their perspective, NEFAC has been more concerned with moving beyond activist circles and building a real grounding in working class communities and organizations.

Obviously, however, we remain a small force and have no illusions about our success in doing this up to now. It remains a long and ongoing process.

UTA: How do you, as a relatively small revolutionary organization, relate to these broader movements, whether particular social movements and community struggles, or the workers’ movement more generally?

JS: In order to most effectively direct our limited resources, NEFAC has decided as a federation to focus on three primary areas of struggle: anti-racism and anti-fascism, anti-poverty struggles, and workplace organizing. Regarding the first area, we are involved not just in street scraps with fascists, but in trying to work against the US/Canada border enforcement, and in stopping the increasing detention of migrants. Our anti-poverty work in several cities has

our particular organization is worthwhile only in as much as it contributes to that larger goal.

UTA: Do you have any final thoughts?

JS: Much of anarchist activity in North America is still characterized by this description from Delo Truda in 1926: “local organizations advocating contradictory theories and practices, having no perspectives for the future, nor of a continuity in militant work, and habitually disappearing, hardly leaving the slightest trace behind them.” Many of these short lived projects are based on the ‘synthesist’ model – a mish-mash of ideas and practices – of which platformists have always been wary. Such groupings work relatively well if the task remains at the level of running a bookstore or free school (both worthy projects in themselves). Yet, the absence of durable anarchist organizations, rooted in working class organizations and communities, still contributes to demoralization or a retreat into subculturalism.

As anarchist movements face possibilities of growth, as happened after Seattle in 1999, questions of organization and the relation of various anarchist activities to each other and to broader movements for social change will only become more pressing and significant.

As PJ Lilley and I have suggested elsewhere: “If anarchists are to seize the opportunities presented by recent upsurges in anarchist activity and build anarchism in movements that have resonance in wider struggles, then we must face seriously the challenges of organization, of combining and coordinating our efforts effectively. We will be aided in this by drawing upon the lessons of past experiences and avoiding, as much as possible, past errors.”

tives out there. Thus we do focus on developing agitational materials like our [English] theoretical magazine “The Northeastern Anarchist” and our newspaper “Strike!”

There are many important lessons from anarchist history that we need to learn, revive and share. At the same time, the work we have put into building rank-and-file workers’ committees, flying squads, precarious workers’ networks and tenant/base unions shows that, despite our numbers, we can make real material contributions to building the capacities of our class for struggle. These interventions are not made in a vanguardist way to build our organization or recruit members but in a principled way to help build class-wide resources and win material gains.

This gets at your larger question around contradictions or tensions. First, I think it is mistaken to speak of a “pure” or “essential” movement that is somehow free from or untouched by revolutionary organizations.

Movements are made up of diverse organizations and involve participation from people who are also active in a variety of organizations, including revolutionary ones. This includes both formal organizations and, often more significantly, the informal organizations, including cliques, social networks and friendship groups that often operate behind the scenes to impact movements dramatically. The interplay of perspectives and practices that participants bring to movements shapes their emergence and development. The question then is how people approach their involvement in specific movements.

It is clearly a mistake to approach movements either as recruitment grounds (as more formal organizations often do) or as social clubs (as is more typical for informal groups). For us the key is to be involved in a principled way that prioritizes building working class strength in our communities, neighbourhoods and workplaces rather than building our specific organization. Developing

dug us into tenants unions and other community-based organizations, as well as contributing to campaigns aimed at winning what we realize to be very limited demands from the state, such as the Raise the Rates campaign spearheaded by the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty in Ontario.

It is in labour struggles that we have really been innovators, doing things that are quite atypical for many North American anarchist organizations. Indeed the goal of developing anarchist perspectives within unions and other workplace organizations is one that contemporary North American anarchists have generally neglected.

Unlike left groups that have focused their energies on running opposition slates in union elections or forming opposition caucuses, NEFAC unionists work to develop rank-and-file organization and militance. We take the position that regardless of the union leadership, until we build a militant and mobilized rank-and-file movement, across locals and workplaces, the real power of organized labour will remain unrealized.

A few of the efforts our members have been involved in include flying squads -rapid-response networks of union members prepared to take direct solidarity actions and alternative or minority unions like the Downtown Workers Union in Montpelier, Vermont which organizes service workers citywide. In Toronto, Punching Out has been active in forming an autonomous flying squad to coordinate strike support and help build workers’ self-organization and solidarity.

The flying squad is autonomous from all official union structures and is open to rank-and-file workers who hold no union position or workers in unorganized workplaces or who are unemployed. The flying squad supports direct action against bosses of all types. Based on these examples, NEFAC members in Peterborough and Montreal have recently taken part in developing flying squad networks in their cities.

The Precarious Workers Network coalescing in Montreal is primarily organizing among unorganized and unemployed workers.

UTA: How does this work relate to your attempt to build an “effective revolutionary organization”? What are the principles on which you organize as such?

JS: The anarchist organization is a place to come together to reflect on, revise and advance work being done. It offers the opportunity to examine and refine one’s practices and develop alternatives through the sharing of resources and the evaluation of experiences from different collectives in different areas of our region.

NEFAC’s commitment to local autonomy means that collectives have the final say on which of these struggles they will involve themselves in and what sorts of activities they will take up. At the same time, we are a federation and we do discuss, debate and plan federation-wide initiatives. Our cohesion as a federation is based on “theoretical and tactical unity” and in order to develop this in a vital way, in addition to federal campaigns, we also prepare position papers on our areas of intervention, which are reviewed and accepted (or not) by the federation as a whole.

As a platformist organization NEFAC seeks a substantive, rather than symbolic, unity based on shared action and reflection. By “theoretical and tactical unity” we mean a focused sharing of resources and energies that brings otherwise limited anarchist forces together rather than dissipating our efforts. Theoretical and tactical unity in no way implies that members have to read the same sources or agree on all points. While there has to be some agreement on basic ideas, these positions are only determined collectively, through open debate and discussion, rooted in actual practice.

As a federation, we meet twice a year for federal congresses, which serve as the highest decision-making body in NEFAC. These congresses are open to all NEFAC members and supporters and decisions on federation-wide projects are taken on the basis of major-

ity vote by members/collectives with supporters having indicative votes.

Between congresses, federal decisions are made in a democratic manner through our Federation Council consisting of one delegate per collective. Delegates are responsible for bringing proposals to their collective for discussion and vote. If a majority of collectives agrees to the proposal, it passes. Once a decision is taken by the federation as a whole, it is expected that members and collectives will responsibly carry out those decisions.

UTA: What do you see as the role of revolutionaries/revolutionary organizations in relation to broader community struggles, social movements, and the workers’ movement more generally?

JS: We are not a vanguardist or substitutionist organization, but we do believe that a successful revolution will be preceded by organizations capable of radicalizing mass movements and community struggles while opposing reformist or authoritarian tendencies. We provide a venue in which militants can analyze experiences and put ideas into practice while making anarchist communist ideas relevant.

As an active minority within the working class, we work to provide a rallying point, through example and ideas, in struggles against capital and the state as well as standing against authoritarian ideologies or practices in working class organizations. We remain small and certainly have no illusions about “leading” the anarchist movement, let alone the working class more broadly. We try to maintain relationships of solidarity and mutual aid with anarchists who take different strategic and tactical approaches.

UTA: What do you see as the potential contradictions or tensions that can/do arise between building revolutionary organizations and “movement building”? How can these tensions be negotiated and overcome?

JS: Given the marginalized position of anarchist and communist ideas within the working class in North America at this point in time we do have to spend a fair bit of effort getting our perspec-