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Response to Leninism Without Lenin

W.E.B.

August 26, 2009

Editors' Note: The following article responds to Gustavo Rodriguez's "Leninism Without Lenin" / "Aproximaciones al Leninismo sin Lenin" in Utopian #7, which may be found on our website, www.utopianmag.com.

In reading Gustavo's article, "Leninism Without Lenin," I find it hard to get a handle on where he is going. Gustavo alludes to a number of real questions concerning Platformism/Specificism. In particular, he appears to regard it as equivalent to Leninism, i.e., the idea that a centralist party, the members of which consider themselves to be the vanguard of the working class and operating under laws of history, has as its self-appointed mission the supposed liberation of humanity while at the same time constituting the nucleus of a new centralist state. However, he never draws out the questions and makes a number of assertions without explanation. While he appears to dismiss anarcho-syndicalism as an alternative to Platformism/Specificism, he nevertheless never makes it clear to me exactly what is his position.

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In making a brief response, I will not discuss the Uruguayan or Latin American groups nor the encounter in Mexico and whatever role the Workers Solidarity Movement played—about all of which I know nothing or very little. However, being familiar with NEFAC, I will, writing as an individual, concentrate on Platformism/Specificism.

Gustavo dismisses the relevance of Platformism as a product of a specific historical period different from that of today. While it is true that the Platform was written as a correction to the failings of the anarchists in the Russian Revolution ninety years ago, Gustavo doesn't explain how today is different. On the contrary, I find it distressingly similar: (a) capitalism still exists with its crises and simultaneous accumulations of vast wealth amid mass misery; (b) the mass organisations of workers and oppressed people are still dominated by liberals and reformists who want merely to file gently the rough edges off a system increasingly out of control; (c) the Leninist/state capitalist tendencies are still around and strong and contending for political leadership with both the reformists and revolutionary anarchists.

My own view is that the Platform is still relevant, not necessarily literally, but as a guide as opposed to non-class struggle anarchism, anti-organisational anarchism, and anarchosyndicalism. My view also is that specificism is relevant insofar as it calls for a separate political organisation of anarchists as opposed to the One Big Union strategy of anarcho-syndicalism.

Gustavo discusses in passing some elements of platformist organisational principles which have been embraced by NEFAC. These are theoretical and tactical unity, collective responsibility and discipline. Gustavo mentions theoretical and tactical unity “as opposed to the autonomy of groups and collectives” with no further explanation. I assume he is for the latter.

My position is that a federation of groups and collectives is necessary and that theoretical and tactical unity is necessary within the federation. I see this as different from a Leninist or-

ganisation inasmuch as the goal is as much decentralisation as possible rather than holding centralism as something desirable in itself.

Gustavo mentions collective responsibility “as something distinct from individual responsibility.” True enough, but without further explanation, I have no idea what his view really is. My position is that an organisation must take responsibility for the political actions of its individual members. Without this, it loses its character as a distinct political group. Obviously individuals still must take responsibility for their own actions and to what degree groups bear responsibility is open to discussion.

Gustavo deals with the third point only as a “disciplined commitment to the sole program of transformation as the road to establish WORKERS POWER.” While scratching my head, I in fact see three distinct threads here: (a) discipline; (b) programme; (c) workers power. I’ll take up discipline first.

In a Leninist, or democratic centralist organisation, individual members are obligated to advocate and carry out the programme of the group, in practise decided more centrally than democratically. My own view is that a revolutionary anarchist organisation should have positions, but that members should be free to express their own ideas, if different, outside the group in an individual capacity. This still leaves questions open, such as what should happen if the anarchist organisation has members with majority and minority positions within a larger group, such as a union. In this case my view is that individual members with minority positions should not be obligated to speak and vote for proposals with which they disagree, but not argue or vote against them, either.

Gustavo doesn’t mention internal democracy except as part of NEFAC’s founding principles. I assume that he is for it. But in the context of the rest of his piece, does he believe that NEFAC practises it or does he think that it is incompatible with the Platform to which NEFAC looks for guidance? From my point

of view, I think that internal democracy is both absolutely necessary and inextricably linked to the vision that the world we want is founded on democracy—as direct as possible.

Gustavo also criticises Platformism/Specificism for stressing that anarchism requires a programme. Gustavo appears to be against having a sole programme which is in line with what I assume is his advocacy of the autonomy of groups and collectives. My position is that a programme is necessary and I only wish that anarchist groups had better formulated ones. NEFAC is no exception here. For example, the organisation has no position on the right of oppressed people to self-determination nor the method of making demands on the state which reflect the needs of working class and oppressed people. I believe NEFAC is capable of changing this. On the other hand I also see a strong tendency among a lot of anarchist groups to run away from the idea of having a programme at all, equating it with Leninism or Trotskyism. (Of course, not having an explicit programme doesn't mean having no programme. What will take its place in practice is most likely an adaptation to most peoples' existing illusions in capitalism and its bureaucracies.) My idea is quite different. Unlike, the Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists or independent Marxists, I don't advocate programmes which are seemingly carved in granite and reflect the cumulative workings of some Laws of History. We can learn from some of these non-anarchist groups, but at the same time we need to see our deep differences, which to begin with means we are for democracy and decentralisation and not for a new state.

And it's at this point that I get quite confused by Gustavo. Democracy and decentralisation, a federation of workers and oppressed peoples, or to use an old-fashioned term, a co-operative commonwealth, is in fact my view of workers power. This is not a state, and having an anarchist revolutionary programme holding this as a goal doesn't necessarily lead to a state, either. However, Gustavo seems to think the contrary. I await clarification.