

Nine Years of the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation, 1989–1998

Wayne Price

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A new wave of radicalization is spreading around the world. Federations of anarchists are being organized in the U.S and Canada, and in other countries. The ‘platformist’ current within international anarchism, with its emphasis on the need for anarchists to organize themselves, is having worldwide effects. In these conditions, it is not surprising that there should be an interest in the last major attempt to build an anarchist federation in North America: the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation (L&R). Founded in 1989, it lasted to 1998, almost ten years, with branches in Mexico (Amor y Rabia) and in English-speaking Canada.

It came out of a very amorphous anarchist movement, whose main continental organization had been almost yearly ‘gatherings’. In various cities around the U.S. and Canada, anarchists would get together, attend workshops, talk with each other, eat vegetarian food, play together, engage in ‘pagan rites’, and then go home. Decisions were not made and lasting structures were not set up.

In this milieu, a minority began to call for the establishment of a continental anarchist newspaper. There were, of course, already a small number of anarchist periodicals, each expressing the views of the individual or small group which put it out. The idea was for a newspaper which reflected the views of a continental body of supporters, who existed to participate in putting it out and distributing it. The supporters of the ‘newspaper project’ soon realized that this implied some sort of organization.

People of various backgrounds and anarchist persuasions met to establish the Love and Rage Federation. A key role was played by a group from Minneapolis, Minnesota, calling itself the Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League (RABL or ‘rabble’). Another group came from the former Revolutionary Socialist League (RSL). This was a group which had evolved from Trotskyism to anarchism. The RSL (of which I was a member) had never regarded the state-capitalist Soviet Union as a ‘degenerated workers’ State, as did orthodox Trotskyism. It had interpreted Marxist orthodoxy in the most libertarian manner possible, such as emphasizing Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune, or Lenin’s State and Revolution. When this became impossible to continue, it moved toward anarchism. The RSL officially dissolved at the time of the founding of Love and

Rage; most ex-members leaving politics. Some of us became involved in the setting up of the L&R and its newspaper, which was also called 'Love and Rage'.

Love and Rage was distinguished from most of the anarchist movement in a few important ways. First, obviously, was the very idea that anarchists should form an organization, and, related to that, should put out a newspaper. These concepts were vigorously, not to say viciously, denounced by many in the anarchist movement. A relatively prominent anarcho-syndicalist came to the founding meeting only to denounce the very idea of founding an organization. The anarcho-primitivist Fifth Estate denounced L&R from the beginning. Many others agreed that it was wrong of anarchists to form organizations, or at least to form organizations beyond the local level. There was a widespread suspicion that the ex-members of the ex-RSL were really doing a Trotskyist 'entry', worming their way into the anarchist movement in order to emerge with a new and larger Leninist party. Considering the course of events, this was quite ironic. However, the issue of organization was never quite settled.

There was a constant tension in the federation over how far to go in unifying and coordinating it. A large minority broke off because they really wanted a loose 'network', not a more coordinated federation. Over time, this continued to be an issue. Due to its decentralized heritage, people were chosen for positions on the basis of geography, not politics. The continental committee which made decisions between conferences was picked this way. So was the smaller body which coordinated between that committee's meetings. Influential people were often left out of these bodies, in the hope that this would prevent the formation of a 'leadership', but instead (of course), the real leadership was kept informal and undemocratic.

Editorial decisions for the continental paper were not made by any politically responsible body, but by the production crew. This was composed of random people who volunteered and lived in the city where it was put out. At the same time, L&R was never a real federation, because it never had more than a few real local groups. Mostly it had about 200 members scattered throughout North America. There were a few significant collectives in a few cities, and many individuals who were willing to distribute the paper.

Besides being pro-organization, the other distinctive feature of the L&R was its left-wing focus. It was for the struggles of the oppressed. It supported national liberation struggles (although there was tension over attitudes towards the nationalist leadership of such struggles). It supported women's liberation, queer liberation, struggles of prisoners, of poor people, of youth, and of African-Americans. This may seem obvious, but much of the anarchist movement denounced this as too 'left'. The left was seen as old-hat and out dated. This was the explicit conception of the primitivists. Even among anarchists who were consciously leftist, such as anarcho-syndicalists, many were for workers' struggles but did not support national liberation wars or women's struggles. Too many of these rejected non-working class struggles as irrelevant diversions.

Aside from that, there was little theoretical agreement among L&R members and little effort to develop a theoretical program. Their theory, or program, was something vaguely called, 'revolutionary anarchism'. That is, we were anarchists who were 'for' revolution. This distinguished us from pacifist anarchists and reformist anarchists, but otherwise was not too specific. L&R was against capitalism, but would not commit itself to 'socialism', which was associated with State ownership.

There were different views on other issues, such as African-American liberation. A minority was for the Race Traitor program: racism was the main issue in the U.S.; everything else was secondary; white anarchist should not raise their views in the African-American community.

Other people had other views which also revolved around similar white-liberal guilt feelings. The problem was not so much this or that opinion on any particular topic but the lack of a serious attempt to study past theory and to develop it further. From the beginning there were people who regarded any attempt to root L&R in anarchist tradition as something 'cold'. There were no required readings for all members nor regular study classes. Even by the end, there were people who insisted that theory was something which they would develop out of their experience. Theory is, ultimately, nothing but the codification of many people's experience. But this approach meant constantly reinventing the wheel, and repeating previous generation's errors. However, it is not surprising that U.S. anarchists should have followed the empiricism and crude pragmatism of U.S. political culture.

The organization had an empirical 'laundry list' of good causes it was for (such as women's liberation, queer liberation, prison abolition, and so on). It tried to work out a better, more thorough and lengthy, program. For years, at the conferences, it discussed parts of an improved program. But this process was inconsistent. By the time L&R dissolved, the program was still unfinished. Ron Tabor, an ex-member of the old RSL, tried to do serious theoretical work. He sought to rethink the meaning of Marxism from an anarchist perspective. While his previous pamphlet, *A Look at Leninism*, was widely distributed, the organization stopped publishing his articles critiquing Marxism in the newspaper. People just weren't interested enough, they said.

Nevertheless, good work was done. A small number of real collectives existed and were tied together throughout North America. A real effort was made to support a Mexican group in producing a Spanish paper and literature.

We organized important U.S. support for the Zapatista rebellion (although politically this never went beyond being radical cheerleaders, instead of discussing the possibilities of a Mexican revolution). A continental anarchist paper was produced for nine years, on a more-or-less monthly basis. Some activities were done on a federation-wide basis, including participating in several national U.S. demonstrations.

However from the beginning there had been certain undemocratic aspects of what many members meant by 'revolutionary anarchism'. One was a widespread sympathy for Leninist-Stalinist movements of the '60s and '70s. Many members admired the Weatherpeople, the German Red Army Faction, the Black Liberation Army, and other groups who wanted to create revolutionary dictatorships over the mass of people. The very last L&R issue included a very favorable article about imprisoned members of the Weatherpeople, titled, *Enemies of the State*. It would have been better titled, *Enemies of This State, Friends of a New State*.

The other undemocratic weakness was the lack of interest in, or orientation to, the North American working class. At most there was a patronizing acceptance that some of us were interested in workers as workers. As an influential member told me, workers did not identify as workers. When a major student strike broke out in New York City public colleges, our members did excellent work in organizing and leading it ('leading' in a non-authoritarian way). But they sneered at the idea of orienting the student struggle toward the workers (who, at the time were also struggling against the city government over comparable issues).

Later, our Detroit members got involved in support work for the striking newspaper workers. Our people put out a flyer raising the general strike. L&R people in New York did not want to cover this in the continental paper. One member asked if the 'general strike' was a 'Trotskyist idea', so little did they know anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist history.

Ultimately, contempt for the workers, their organizations (unions), and their struggles, must be undemocratic. It leads to a view that a little group of young radicals, mostly college students and ex-students from the middle classes, can transform society by themselves — without going deep into the working class and the oppressed sections of society. This is consistent with an identification with radical Stalinism.

A final conflict broke out during the last two years of L&R. Chris Day, a founder and influential member (that is, a 'leader') had concluded that it was time to abandon anarchism. He told people informally that we had reached the limits of the anarchist 'milieu' and it was time to move on. He wrote a paper on *The Historical Failure of Anarchism*, emphasizing the programmatic weaknesses of anarchism. He declared that no revolution could succeed without a centralized, regular army and a revolutionary state. A group formed around him, particularly of people who had never had to choose between anarchism and authoritarian Marxism. Although they suddenly discovered the value of the international working class, their new-found Marxism was not of any of the libertarian or humanistic varieties (autonomes, council communism, CLR James, Eric Fromm, Hal Draper, etc.). It was Maoism — one of the most Stalinist, authoritarian, versions.

A small number of us began to resist, at first by writing counter documents. We were mostly, but not entirely, former members of the RSL, and were mostly older than the average member. What was upsetting and confusing to us was that most L&R members did not react to the dispute. They stayed out of it. This nonreaction was helped by the neo-Maoists' maneuver of rarely stating openly that they rejected anarchism. Instead the group talked around this. They made hints, and then denials, and then direct statements, and then withdraw the statements. If people wanted to ignore the issue, it was made easy for them. We, the group that said there was a crisis, were treated as troublemakers.

As we saw it, the issue was the rejection of anarchism for Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. We were accused of being dogmatic, not active enough, being troublemakers, wrong on any number of other issues, and so on. There is a myth in the present anarchists movement that L&R collapsed due to weakness over African-American liberation. This was never a major dispute inside the organization, although perhaps it should have been. It was raised at the last minute, the main supporter of Race Traitor politics blocking with the Maoist faction. But it was never the issue in the faction fight, that being anarchism versus Maoism.

Behind the fight and then collapse of Love and Rage was broader historical trends. About the same time that L&R dissolved, our Mexican section also came apart. The Quebecois network which had put out the anarchist *Demanarchie* also broke down. And the British group, the Class War Federation, also dissolved. While there were specific issues in each case, behind them all was the long lull in the broader movement. People were discouraged. In our case, anyway, people were looking for some alternative.

Marxism had been discredited by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the officially pro-market turn of the Chinese. But it still had the attraction of its history of revolutions and its vast amount of theoretical work, unlike anarchism. It was, and still is, a real pole of attraction for many. L&R had a brief meeting to formally dissolve the federation. The Maoist group, and those it had attracted, formed *Fire By Night*, for a short time. Soon they were to dissolve into the Leninist milieu. Our group has put out the anarchist journal, *The Utopian* (www.utopianmag.com). Otherwise individuals have continued to engage in the anarchist movement in various ways. Within two to three years of L&R dissolution, there was a large upturn in the anarchist movement, but

there was no continental anarchist federation to participate in it. Lessons of the Love and Rage Federation

When I think over my experiences in L&R (as well as earlier experiences), I reach the following three main conclusions:

1. There is a need to balance activism with theory. An activists' program needs to be based on a theory of the world, what causes oppression, what would liberation mean, what sectors of society can overturn oppression, and what can we do to help them to move toward liberation. Otherwise we are just actively jumping around. If anarchists are not to be outdone (once again) by the Marxists and other authoritarians, we have to know what we are doing. Not that every member of an anarchist federation has to fully agree with the same ideas, but there needs to be a core of members with a common approach. This does not mean that we can do nothing without a full-grown theory. Unlike the Marxists, we do not have a set of sacred books to learn from. But as we participate in struggles, anarchists should be simultaneously working on theory. There should be study groups, a common set of readings, and a lively theoretical journal.
2. There needs to be an orientation to the working class. This is not only for theoretical but for strategic reasons. There is no other oppressed group which has the potential ability to shut down capitalist society — and to start it up again. Only workers — as workers — can do this. No other grouping is oppressed at the heart of the process of production or has the self-interest to create a classless society. This was the insight of anarcho-syndicalism. Anarchists must continue to participate in and champion the struggles of women, queers, of oppressed races and nations. Their oppression is as real as that of workers. Their movements are as essential for liberation. But just as their issues must be raised in the class struggle, so the class struggle must be raised in them. This means participation in workplace concerns. We need to develop a serious and positive view of unions, and a set of tactics for dealing with them.
3. There is a need for a democratic organization of revolutionary anarchists — if we are not (once again) to be outorganized by the Marxists. There can be no abstractly preordained structure for such a democratic organization, except that it be democratic. Much depends on the circumstances. The principle is that it should be as decentralized and directly democratic as possible but as centralized and coordinated as is minimally necessary. This is not a party, which is an organization for taking power (by election, or by control of a revolution). This is an instrument for participation in popular struggles and for encouraging the people to take over themselves. An anarchist organization is part of the process of popular self-organization, not its opposite. But, as is said in the Organizational Platform of Libertarian Communists, it needs some personnel chosen by the membership. They should be elected on the basis of their politics, not their personalities or their location! s. I believe it is essential for such a democratic, programmatic body to be elected to oversee publications, and other literature, as well as to do a certain minimal amount of coordination and reacting to emergencies.

All these points are controversial among anarchists. But I have seen, all too often, the victory of the authoritarians, statist, and Marxists, over the anarchists and libertarian socialists. We have a chance to change that awful history, if we are prepared for it.

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