

The Platform

Workers' Solidarity Movement

November 2000

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Anarchists are constantly thinking about how society is and how it could be. We strive towards the ideal of a free and democratic society. We know that, in order to get there, it will be necessary to tear down the present authoritarian system of government. Our struggle for freedom throws up many areas of controversy and debate. One of these has always been, and always will be, how do we get to a revolution? How do we organise for change? An important contribution to this debate was the Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists, a document which was written in 1926 by a group of exiled Russian and Ukrainian anarchists, and which still has much to offer to today's debates around the question of organisation.

The authors had participated in the Russian revolution and saw all their work, their hopes and dreams fail as an authoritarian Bolshevik state triumphed and destroyed real workers' power. They wrote the pamphlet in order to examine why the anarchist movement had failed to build on the success of the factory committees, where workers organising in their own workforces began to build a society based on both freedom and equality. In the first paragraph they state

“It is very significant that, in spite of the strength and incontestably positive character of libertarian ideas, and in spite of the facing up to the social revolution, and finally the heroism and innumerable sacrifices borne by the anarchists in the struggle for anarchist communism, the anarchist movement remains weak despite everything, and has appeared, very often, in the history of working class struggles as a small event, an episode, and not an important factor.”

This is strong stuff, a wake up call for the anarchist movement. It is a call that we still need to hear. Despite the virtual collapse of almost all other left wing tendencies, anarchism is still not in a position of strength. Even though the Trotskyist organisations have either evaporated into thin air, shrunk drastically in size or moved to social democracy, it is a sad fact, that were there a revolution tomorrow, they still would be in a better position to have their arguments heard and listened to than we would. This fact alone should give us pause for thought. We cannot be complacent, and rely on the hope that the obvious strength and rightness of our ideas will shine through and win the day. The world we live in is the product of struggles between competing ideas of how society should be organized. If the anarchist voice is weak and quiet, it won't be heard, and other arguments, other perspectives will win the day.

It is not my intention to go through The Platform with a fine-tooth comb. It was never intended to provide all the answers, in the introduction they make this clear

We have no doubts that there are gaps in the present platform. It has gaps, as do all new, practical steps of any importance. It is possible that certain important positions have been missed, or that others are inadequately treated, or that still others are too detailed or repetitive.

It was hoped, however, that it would form the beginning of a debate about how anarchists could escape from the doldrums they were in.

Instead I will look at some of the document's underlying principles, in particular the problems which they identify in anarchist organisations, which they describe as follows.

In all countries, the anarchist movement is advocated by several local organisations advocating contradictory theories and practices, leaving no perspectives for the future, nor of a continuity in militant work, and habitually disappearing hardly leaving the slightest trace behind them.

Their solution is the creation of certain type of anarchist organisation. Firstly the members of these organisations are in theoretical agreement with each other. Secondly they agree that if a certain type of work is prioritised, all should take part. Even today within the anarchist movement these are contentious ideas so it is worth exploring them in a little more detail.

The Platform's basic assumption is that there is a link between coherency and efficiency. Those who oppose the Platform argue that this link does not exist. To them efficiency has nothing to do with how coherent an organisation is, rather it is a function of size. This position argues that the Platform, in its search for theoretical agreement, excludes those not in absolute agreement, and thus will always be smaller than a looser organisation. As size is of more importance than theory, practically these organisations will not be as effective.

This debate takes us to the centre of one of the most important debates within anarchism. How does a revolutionary change of society occur? What can anarchists do to assist in the process of bringing such change about?

Capitalism is an organized economic system. Its authority is promoted by many voices, including the parliamentary political parties, the media and education system (to name but a few). A successful revolution depends on the rejection of those voices by the majority of people in society. Not only do we have to reject capitalism, but we also need to have a vision of an alternative society. What is needed is an understanding both that capitalism should be defeated and that it can be replaced. For an anarchist revolution there has to be the recognition that we alone have the power and the ability to create that new world.

The role of an anarchist organisation is to spread these ideas. Not only do we need to highlight the negative and injurious aspects of capitalism (which is obvious to many anyway), we also need to develop explanations of how the system operates. This is what is meant by theory, simply it is the answer to the question 'why are things as they are?'. And we need to do one more thing, we need to be able to put our theory into practice, our understanding of how things work will inform how we struggle.

Returning to the Platform, the key problem with anarchist organisations as they existed is that they were not only incapable of developing such an approach, but didn't even see it as necessary. Because there was no agreement on theoretical issues, they could not provide answers to the working class. They could agree that women's oppression was wrong, but not explain why women were oppressed. They could agree that World War One was going to lead to death and destruction, but not why it had occurred. Such agreement is important because without it cooperation on activity, agreement on what to do, is unlikely. This is how the Platform's authors described such an organisation

“Such an organisation having incorporated heterogeneous theoretical and practical elements, would only be a mechanical assembly of individuals each having a different conception of all the questions of the anarchist movement, an assembly which would inevitably disintegrate on encountering reality”

By a 'mechanical assembly of individuals' they mean a group of individuals meeting together, yet not united in mind or in action. This undermines the entire meaning of organisation, which is to maximise the strength of the individuals through co-operation with others. Where there is no agreement, there can be little co-operation. This absence of co-operation only becomes obvious when the group is forced to take a position on a particular issue, a particular event in the wider world.

At this point, two things happen. Either, the individuals within the group act on their own particular interpretation of events in isolation, which raises the question, what is the point of being in such an organisation? Alternatively the group can decide to ignore the event, thus preventing disagreement.

This has a number of unfortunate side effects for anarchist politics. Most seriously, it means that the anarchist interpretation of events still will not be heard. For no matter how large the organisation, if all within it are speaking with different voices, the resulting confusion will result in an unclear and weak anarchist message. Such an organisation can produce a weekly paper, but each issue will argue a different point of view, as the authors producing it change. Our ideas will not be convincing, because we ourselves are not convinced by them. The second side effect is that our ideas will not develop and grow in depth and complexity because they will never be challenged by those within our own organisation. It is only by attempting to reach agreement, by exchanging competing conceptions of society, that we will be forced to consider all alternatives. Unchallenged our ideas will stagnate.

Without agreement on what should be done, the anarchist organisation remains no more than a collection of individuals. The members of that organisation don't see themselves as having any collective identity. Too often the lifetimes of such groups are the lifetimes of those most active individuals. There is no sense of building a body of work that will stretch into the future. Considering that in these times the revolution is a long term prospect, such short term planning is a tragic waste of energy and effort.

Often the experience of anarchists is that they are energetic and committed activists, but fail to publicize the link between the work they do and the ideas they believe in. One example of this is the successful anti-Poll Tax Campaign in England, Scotland and Wales. Although many anarchists were extremely involved in the struggle against this unjust tax, when victory finally came, anarchists didn't come out of it, as might be expected, in a strengthened position. We need to ask ourselves why this is so.

It would seem to be because anarchists concentrated their efforts making arguments against the tax, and sidelined arguments in favour of anarchism. Furthermore, though many worked as individuals they couldn't give any sense that they were part of any bigger movement. They were seen as good heads, and that was all. In contrast, despite the WSM's extremely small size when a similar campaign – the Anti-Water Charges Campaign – ended, we had heightened the profile of anarchism in Ireland. We emphasised that our opposition to an unjust tax was linked to our opposition to an unjust society and our belief that a better society is possible.

Returning to the question of efficiency and size, organisations in the 'Platform' tradition agree that size is important and they all seek to grow so that they are in a position of importance in society. However, they emphasise that all the positive attributes of belonging to a larger organisation, the increased work that can be undertaken, the increased human potential that can be drawn on, are undermined if such an organisation is directionless. The key point is that it is not a case of choosing between size or coherency, rather we should aim for both.

The importance of the Platform is that it clearly highlights the serious problems caused by the disorganised nature of loosely based anarchist organisations. It exposes a problem, it highlights how fatal this flaw in anarchism can be, it emphasises the urgency with which we must deal with it and compels us to come up with some answers.

The Platform: What's in it?

General Section

This section outlines what they saw as the basic anarchist beliefs. They look at what is meant by class struggle, what is meant by anarchism and libertarian communism. They explain why they oppose the state and centralised authority. The role of the masses and of anarchists in the social struggle and social revolution is also explained. They criticise the Bolshevik strategy of obtaining control of the state. Finally they look at the relationship between anarchism and the trade unions.

The Constructive Section

This outlines how a future anarchist society would be organised, they look at how the factories would operate and how food would be produced. They warn that the revolution will have to be defended, and talk a little about how this might be done.

The Organisational Section

This is the shortest and most contentious section of The Platform. Here the authors sketch their idea of how an anarchist organisation should be structured. They call this the General Union of Anarchists.

By this they seem to mean one umbrella organisation, which is made up of different groups and individuals. Here we would disagree with them. We don't believe there will ever be one organisation which encompasses everything, neither do we see it as necessary. Instead we envisage the existence of a number of organisations, each internally unified, each co-operating with each other where possible. This is what we call the Anarchist movement, it is a much more amorphous and fluid entity than a General Union of Anarchists.

However, what we do agree on are the fundamental principles by which any anarchist organisation should operate.

- Theoretical Unity, that there is a commitment to come to agreement on theory. By theory they don't mean abstract musings on the meaning of life. By theory they mean the knowledge we have about how the world operates. Theory answers the question 'why?,' for example 'why is there poverty?' 'why haven't Labour Parties provided a fairer society?' and so on and so on. By theoretical unity they mean that members of the organisation must agree on a certain number of basics. There isn't much an organisation can do if half their members believe in class struggle and the other half in making polite appeals to politicians, or one in which some people believe union struggles are important and others think they are a waste of time. Of course, not everybody is going to agree with everybody else on every single point. If there was total agreement there would be no debate, and our politics would grow stale and sterile. Accepting this however, there is a common recognition that it is important to reach as much agreement as possible, and to translate this agreement into action, to work together, which brings us to ...
- Tactical Unity, that the members of the organisation agree to struggle together as an organisation, rather than struggle as individuals in opposition to each other. So for example in

Ireland, the WSM identified the anti-water charges campaign (see R&BR3 for more details) as an issue of great importance. Once it was prioritised, all of our members committed themselves to work for the campaign, where possible. The tactics and potential of the campaign were discussed at length at our meetings. It became the major focus of our activity.

- Collective Responsibility, by this they mean that each member will support the decisions made by the collective, and each member will be part of the collective decision making process. Without this, any decisions made will be paper decisions only. Through this the strength of all the individuals that make up the group is magnified and collectively applied. The Platform doesn't go into detail about how collective responsibility works in practice. There are issues it leaves untouched such as the question of people who oppose the majority view. We would argue that obviously people who oppose the view of the majority have a right to express their own views, however in doing so they must make clear that they don't represent the view of the organisation. If a group of people within the organisation oppose the majority decision they have the right to organise and distribute information so that their arguments can be heard within the organisation as a whole. Part of our anarchism is the belief that debate and disagreement, freedom and openness strengthens both the individual and the group to which she or he belongs.
- Federalism, which they define as "the free agreement of individuals and organisations to work collectively towards common objectives."

Platformist groups today

Anarchist organisations that have been influenced by the Platform are well aware that it is no Bible full of absolute truths. There is no grouping anywhere that would be so stupid to treat it as one. Anarchists have no need of such things. It is just one of the signposts pointing us in what we believe is the direction of making anarchism the most realistic and desirable alternative to both the present set-up and the authoritarian alternatives served up by most of the left.

Its ideas have been developed and modified in the light of experience over the years. Two other relatively well known documents are Towards A Fresh Revolution by the Friends of Durruti (which arose from the experience of the Spanish revolution) and the Manifesto of Libertarian Communism by Georges Fontenis (which arose from French experiences in the post-World War II years). The WSM stands in this tradition because it is the best one we have found, but it is a continually developing, modifying and growing one. We have no tablets carved in stone, and we don't want or need any.

Organisations which are influenced, to varying degrees, by this tradition can be found in countries where anarchism has sunk deep roots, like France (Libertarian Alternative), Switzerland (Libertarian Socialist Organisation) and Italy (Federation of Anarchist Communists); and also in countries where anarchism is a fairly new force, like the Lebanon (Al Badil al Taharouri) and South Africa (Workers Solidarity Federation). In the last year new translations of the Platform have appeared in Polish and Turkish.

In the English speaking world, however, many anarchists are either unaware of what is in the Platform, or are hostile to it. Why? The authors drew a distinction between real federalism, the

free agreement to work together in a spirit of free debate for agreed goals; and what they describe as “the right, above all, to manifest one’s ‘ego,’ without obligation to account for duties as regards the organisation.” As they point out, there is no point making decisions if members will not carry them out.

However, when they went on to talk about a General Union of Anarchists they found themselves under attack from prominent anarchists such as Voline, Fabbri, Malatesta and Camilo Berneri who accused them of trying to “Bolshevisise anarchism.” I believe that this criticism was wrong. On one hand Voline and his fellow thinkers were opposed because they saw no problem with organisations which were a pick ‘n’ mix of anarcho-syndicalism, anarchist-communism and individualism with all the incoherence and ineffectiveness that implies. On the other hand many anarchists saw the proposed General Union of Anarchists as some sort of monopoly organisation that would incorporate all anarchists. It is a fault of the authors that they did not say explicitly that the General Union would, as all anarchists should, work with others when it is in the interests of the class struggle.

Neither did they spell out that all the decisions, the policies and the direction of the organisation would be taken by the members after full and free debate. It should not have had to be spelled out when addressing other anarchists but seemingly it did, and the ‘Platform’ was misunderstood by many as a result of this omission. Further signs of authoritarianism were seen in the proposal for an executive committee. Maybe if they had called it a working collective or something similar the same threat would not have been seen.

The tasks of this executive committee were listed as

“the execution of decisions taken by the Union with which it is entrusted, the theoretical and organisational orientation of isolated organisations consistent with the theoretical positions and general tactical line of the Union, the monitoring of the general state of the movement, the maintenance of working and organisational links between all the organisations in the union, and with other organisations. The rights, responsibilities and practical tasks of the executive committee are fixed by the congress of the Union.”

The last sentence of the document talks about the aim of the Union to become the “organised vanguard of the emancipating process.” It appears that what is being talked about is winning the best militants, the most class conscious and revolutionary workers to the Union. But it is not clearly spelled out. A doubt could exist. Did they mean a more Leninist type of vanguard? When read as part of the entire pamphlet I don’t think so, but even if this is not the case it still does not invalidate the rest of the work. It would be very stupid to throw away the whole document because of one less than clear sentence.

Two arguments get used again and again against the Platform. Firstly we are told that it is Arshinov’s ‘Platform’ as if the other four authors were just dupes, but then it would be far less credible to throw the same accusation at Nestor Makhno. It is done because in 1934 Arshinov returned to Russia, where three years later he was murdered in Stalin’s purges. What Arshinov did eight years after helping to write the ‘Platform’ surely does no more to invalidate what was written in 1926 any more than Kropotkin’s support for Allied imperialism in the First World War invalidated all his previous anarchist writings.

The other reason is the experience in Britain where the Anarchist Workers Association in the 1970s and the Anarchist Workers Group of the early 1990s both claimed the ‘Platform’ as an

inspiration. Both groups — after very promising starts — declined, degenerated, died and then saw their remnants disappear into the Leninist milieu. This has been held up as some sort of proof that the basic ideas of the Platform inevitably lead to an abandonment of anarchism.

Of course, even the briefest look at the movement beyond the shores of Britain shows that this is clearly not the case at all. But what did go wrong with both the AWA and the AWG? After all, mistakes that are not understood can easily be repeated.

One factor shared by both organisations was that they were formed by people who were already anarchists and who saw the need for an alternative to the loose organisation and lack of theoretical clarity so prevalent in British anarchism. Or to put it simply: they saw a movement with great ideas but a very poor ability to promote them. They started off by concentrating too much on what was wrong with the movement; they lost sight of all that is sensible and inspiring, and increasingly only saw the problems.

In so far as there was regular internal education and discussion it tended to be about strategies and tactics. New members were recruited on the basis of activity in strikes and campaigns, and often had little understanding of basic anarchist ideas. These people had, however, come from a background where anarchists were presented as a group of clowns without two ideas to rub together or as dropouts, incapable of dealing with modern society and wishing for a return to living on the land. There were no formal educationals on the anarchist tradition but a fair few slagging off other anarchists.

At the last conference of the AWG one observer was shocked to discover that someone who had been in that organisation for over a year knew, by his own admission, virtually nothing about the biggest ever practical anarchist experiment — the Spanish revolution. Not surprisingly many of these new members came to believe that the AWG must be a radical departure from anarchism for it seemed radically different from what they had been told anarchism was. This, in turn, strengthened a feeling that there was little to learn from the anarchist tradition.

The result of this was that, as the anarchists got demoralised and drifted away, the remaining members felt they had to move ‘beyond anarchism.’ In both cases the surviving rumps ended up moving into authoritarian politics. We cannot be surprised when organisations where the majority of members have little understanding of anarchist ideas cease to be anarchist organisations. To expect anything else would be crazy.

The ideas of the Platform can aid anarchists to organise more effectively, but this is meaningless if we have not first ensured that those in the anarchist organisations have a good grasp of anarchist ideas, are confident enough to disagree and debate, and are united by the common cause of making anarchism a reality.

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