

Time to Be Constructive

Workers' Solidarity Movement

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In the left from *Ashes to Phoenix?* it was argued that the left as it had come to be known has collapsed. The new left that is arising from the ashes carries much of the baggage and many of the mistakes of its predecessors. It is without clear direction, knowing it wants to build something new, but not sure what this will be or how to do it. It bases itself on a hodgepodge of different traditions or on none. These criticisms are easy to make, what is more difficult is to pinpoint a way forwards.

This article indicates the direction that needs to be taken. There is a current within the left that stands out in its opposition to the division of revolutionary organisations into leaders and led. This current is anarchism. However new organisation(s) should not be built on the basis of a turn to the past. Rather it must be recognised that previous anarchist movements have also failed, and not just for objective reasons. None of them are adequate as models, so it is not a question of constructing international versions of the CNT, the Friends of Durruti or any other group. Indeed any project that picks an organisation from history and says this is what we should be modelled on would seem to be more interested in historical re-enactment than revolution.

Anarchism put forward an accurate critique of the problems of Marxism as a whole. Anarchism also demonstrated methods of organisation based on mass democracy. This is its importance, as not only does it go some way to explaining why the left has failed but it also points the way to how it can succeed.

Anarchism crystallised around opposition to the idea that socialism could be introduced by a small elite on behalf of the minority. There are, were and probably will continue to be Marxists that claim Marx also opposed this idea but to do this is to deny the historical argument that took place at the end of the 1860's between the Marxists and the anarchists. It is also to ignore what Marxism has meant in the period since then.

To an extent the anarchist critique of Marxism can be portrayed as unsophisticated, not explaining where the authoritarian side of Marxism comes from in sufficient depth. Certainly in the English speaking countries, anarchism appears theoretically weak when compared to the vast body of work calling itself Marxist. But complexity or detail does not make an analysis correct, sometimes the simplest of ideas carry profound truths¹. And when the record of the anarchist organisations are compared with those of the Marxists one finds on those key issues of 20th century socialism, the state and role of the revolutionary organisation, the anarchists were consistently on the right side. The worst of the anarchist deviations, the power sharing with the bourgeois republicans in Spain falls into insignificance when compared with the damage done by social democracy or Stalin.

The strength of anarchism has been its belief in the ability of the working class to take its destiny into its own hands free of intermediaries. This and its uncompromising rejection of the state and politics of manipulation has left a legacy that can be sharply contrasted with that of other left currents. This makes it very different from both Leninism and social democracy, whose basic ideas are quite closely connected. Many of the old debates and the style they were carried out in are now irrelevant, it will take time before new, more positive debates become the norm.

For the left today, in a period where many believe social-democracy and the USSR have demonstrated that socialism cannot work, the demonstrations of self-management by anarchist inspired workers are of key importance. The Spanish revolution saw the democratic running of a large

¹ Indeed if volume and complexity of theory alone were the yardstick used Christianity or Islam! should be considered.

part of the economy and a sizeable military force by the working class². This provides us with an actual example of the non-utopian nature of self-management. In practice such forms also arose spontaneously in revolutions where anarchist ideas played no major part, including that of Hungary in 1956³. In the future it is to these examples we should look to for inspiration.

English speaking ‘Anarchism’

What the anarchist movement needs today is not a historical re-enactment of past glories. What’s more, in the English speaking countries at least, the anarchist movement, to be polite, leaves a lot to be desired. There is no real mass tradition of anarchism outside the pre-WWI USA. Even this was more of an example of anarchist ideas playing a major role within a wider movement than of an anarchist mass movement. There have been no real anarchist syndicalist⁴ unions or mass organisations. Individual anarchists like Emma Goldman may have been important figures but they represented isolated examples rather than movements.

In the inter-war years anarchism was nearly destroyed internationally by dictatorship, fascism and Leninism. Those countries where the tradition was weak, in particular the English speaking ones, saw a complete death of any understanding of anarchism and its re-interpretation by academics, among these George Woodcock. This re-interpretation attempted to rob anarchism of its base in class struggle and instead reduce it to a radical liberalism. This had (and continues to have) disastrous consequences for the growth of anarchism from the 60’s on in these countries.

One of the most harmful ideas introduced by these academics was the idea of anarchism as a code of personal conduct rather than one of collective struggle. This occurred partially by their inclusion of all pacifists from Tolstoy to Gandhi as anarchists and partially from a completely false understanding of the anarchist movement in Spain. The Spanish example was particularly absurd, anarchists were presented as moralists who would not drink coffee rather than as members of an organisation based on class struggle, over one million strong.. It’s true that anarchists do have a different sense of what is ‘right or wrong’ than that instilled in us by capitalist culture but this differs from their politics rather than the reverse.

Anarchism is different from Leninism and social democracy in that it understands that the means used to achieve a socialist revolution will determine the success or failure of that revolution. This was not true for the revolutions that brought capitalism to power, there it was possible for the new elite to emerge regardless of how it had got its backing. Socialism requires mass participation. As such it will not be granted by an elite but will have to prevent the emergence of elites. This can only be done if the mass of society is already acting on the basis that no new centres of rule can be allowed to emerge, that they themselves must plan, create and administer the new society.

² by anarchists, these accounted for the failure of anarchism to create an alternative, however much it could point at the possibility of that alternative.

³ It is important to recognise that none of these things were complete however, due to a situation of dual power with the state. However the period from after the revolution in 1936 to May 1937 saw most major decisions being made in a democratic fashion with the state only interfering at the national level.

⁴ These examples should have ended the debate over whether the working class could collectively run the economy. To the idealists where the idea is more important than the reality however we still receive the mantra of ‘trade union consciousness’ and ‘need for the state’.

The identification of anarchism with counter cultural movements (like punk rock and increasingly the 'crusty/new age traveller' scene) arises from this 'liberal' interpretation. In turn this image of anarchism as a personal code of conduct encourages the counter culture to attach the label anarchist to itself. This 'anarchism' is an often bizarre set of rules ranging from not eating at McDonalds to not getting a job. If anything it represents a hopeless rebellion against, and alienation from, life under modern capitalism. It is a self-imposed ghetto, its adherents see no hope of changing society. In fact the counter culture is often hostile to any attempt to address anyone outside the ghetto⁵, seeing this as selling out. However the counter culture is not entirely apolitical. A significant minority in Britain for instance will turn out for demonstrations and where physical confrontation with the state occur they often become the cannon fodder.

There are also significant areas within this counter culture where work is done which can give a positive example. Perhaps the best example of this is the squatting movement of the last couple of decades which saw huge numbers of people using direct action to solve homelessness by taking over empty buildings. Of course the bulk of these people were outside the counter culture, immigrant workers, the young homeless and those including young married people whose jobs could not cover the high rent in London and for whom council accommodation was unavailable or inadequate.

However the fact that so many of today's anarchists came to anarchism through this counter culture has repercussions for building new movements. To an extent they find it difficult to break with the anti-organisational parts of the counter culture. This response dovetails with that of activists who have had bad experience of revolutionary organisations. The counter culture also tends to see the way forward in winning over the ghetto rather than addressing mainstream society and getting involved in its institutions. Having identified the existing left as being only interested in theory and building the party organisation, they end up rejecting the need for both theory and organisation. In short, they attempt to create their own new ghetto to which they can win people.

Anarchism today

Whatever about the poor state of the anarchist movement in English speaking countries, a different, much stronger tradition is found almost everywhere else. Language limitations restrict our ability to comment in depth on many of these but there are anarchist organisations in most if not all European, Central American and Southern American countries. There are also organisations in some Asian and African countries. In some of these countries they are the biggest or only force on the revolutionary left.

This is an area that is not just holding its own but is indeed growing. This year the IWA welcomed its first African section, in the form of the Awareness League of Nigeria and has entered into discussion with two unions in Asia. Since the mid-70's anarcho-syndicalist unions have been re-built in Spain and the Swedish SAC has moved from reformism back to anarchist-syndicalism. Anarchists were the first sections of the left to resume activity in Eastern Europe, the first opposition march in Moscow since the late 20's was staged by anarchists on 28th May 1988 under the

⁵ The IWW in the USA was indeed a real union but it was explicitly not anarchist. Its politics although having much in common with anarchism (and despite the fact many anarchists were members) was more probably described as revolutionary syndicalist.

banner Freedom without Socialism is Privilege and Injustice. Socialism without Freedom is Slavery and Brutality, a quote from Bakunin. In the last year several anarchist groups have emerged in the republics of former Yugoslavia and some have started a process of co-operation against the war there. Central and Southern America have also seen groups re-emerge into public activity, in some countries, like Venezuela, the anarchists are the only national force on the left.

In a period where all other sections of the left have been in decline, anarchism has re-established itself and started to grow. This is all the more remarkable when you consider this growth has come about almost completely internally, no major resources were pumped in from the outside. Compare this with the Trotskyist groups who poured huge resources into Eastern Europe for relatively little return. This included sending members over to maintain a permanent presence in Moscow and the other capitals. Anyone reading the Trotskyist press would be aware of their constant appeals for funds to help in this work. This attempt to import Trotskyism in any of its varieties failed to make any significant impact. Anarchist groups, on the contrary, emerged from the countries of the East to make contact with us in the west. They were based on 'left dissidents' rediscovering a banned history, their membership coming from sections of society as far apart as intellectuals⁶ to punk fans and independent union activists.

So although the situation can seem very much isolated in any of the English speaking countries there is a very much larger and more together movement elsewhere. It is by no means perfect, it is dominated by syndicalism but it is a start. The question for us and the readers of this article is how to go about building mass anarchist movements in our countries. The beginnings of such a movement exist in almost all countries, anarchism has consistently attracted new blood and new influence.

Both the historical legacy of anarchism and the (related) fact that it is currently the only substantial anti-Leninist but revolutionary movement in existence lead to the conclusion that the best starting point for building a new left is anarchism. But what sort of anarchist movement is needed? The objective has to be kept in mind, to aid in the creation of a revolution that will found a future society without classes or the rule of a minority. It also has to be recognised that anarchism in the past has failed to fulfil this objective, most notably in Spain where it could have carried the revolution through, at least locally.

We must learn from the mistakes of the past. It is not enough to build large loose organisations formed on the basis of opposition to capitalism and an adherence to anarchism as an ideal. Experience has shown that these become paralysed when faced with an unforeseen set of circumstances as with the Spanish CNT, or effectively taken over by much smaller but more coherent forces as was the fate of many of the other syndicalist movements. At a key moment they are likely to falter and it at this point that authoritarians can step in and assume leadership over the revolution.

More importantly, the building of local groups with only with the intention of getting stuck in but no vision of becoming a mass movement, has little to offer when it comes to creating a libertarian revolution. Such groups and the networks that are constructed from time to time may start off vibrant but quickly lose a sense of purpose and cease to exist over time. In Britain in particular a large number of these have arisen over the last decade, and in Ireland we have had

⁶ A fair part of this view originates with a single study by a right wing bourgeoisie scholar in Spain based on one village at the time of a minor uprising in 1932. His work has since been shown as completely inaccurate. See *The Anarchists of Casas Viejas* by Jerome R. Mintz (1982) for a fuller discussion of this event and its subsequent falsification.

a few. They leave no real legacy, however; who can even remember the Dublin Anarchist Collective, Dundalk Libertarian Communist Group, Scottish Libertarian Federation or the Midlands Anarchist Network.

Some anarchists in Russia and Spain after the revolutions there attempted to identify why their movements were defeated by the authoritarian forces. Their conclusions were remarkably similar and apply to anarchism today in many countries.

Some of the Russian exiles formed a group in Paris that published a pamphlet⁷ based on their experiences that argued:

This contradiction between the positive and incontestable substance of libertarian ideas, and the miserable state in which the anarchist movement vegetates, has its explanation in a number of causes, of which the most important, the principal, is the absence of organisational principles and practices in the anarchist movement.

In all countries. the anarchist movement is represented by several local organisations 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.

A decade later in 1938 a second group, the Friends of Durruti composed of several thousand members of the Spanish CNT published a pamphlet⁸ explaining why the CNT had failed to complete the Spanish revolution. It was part of an attempt even at that late stage to turn the situation around:

We [the CNT] did not have a concrete program. We had no idea where we were going. We had lyricism aplenty; but when all is said and done, we did not know what to do with our masses of workers or how to give substance to the popular effusion which erupted inside our organisation. By not knowing what to do we handed the revolution on a platter to the bourgeoisie and the Marxists who support the farce of yesteryear

Although the Friends of Durruti were talking of the problems faced during an actual revolution their criticism is also relevant to today's situation. Lack of organisation prevents many anarchist groups from being effective and in the event of a revolution in the future will prevent them from leading it to success.

What is needed is an organisation with coherent ideas and a practice of democratic debate and decision making. One capable of dealing with crisis and making rapid decisions without

⁷ An example of this was the recent beating up of one of the more political and successful punk singers, Jello Biafra the lead singer of the Dead Kennedy's for 'selling out'. His leg was broken so badly that it was so swollen it could not be put in a cast.

⁸ There is an excellent interview with activists of KAS (Russian anarchists, using the name of the anarcho-syndicalist organisation suppressed by the Bolsheviks in 1918) in issue #5 of *Independent Politics*, Winter 1994 that describes the origins of these groups in more detail. The following quote describes the formation of one of the groups that came together from 12 cities in the late 80's to re-form KAS. In Moscow this was a student group called Obshchina, community or commune, which dates back to 1983. There was a group of people, friends, and in 1985-86 they had been the organising committee of the All Union Revolutionary Marxist Party. Later there was some evolution of ideas and by the time the Obshchina group was created in 1987 the main participants already knew that they stood for anarcho-syndicalism. This was mainly under the influence of Bakunin's critique of state socialism and Marxism. These people were mainly historians and had the possibility to read materials in the archives, which was closed to the general public.

relying on a 'leadership'. This is an easy statement to make, in practice it is not easy to create. All too often such attempts either succumb to authoritarianism or collapse into sectarianism and isolation. They become isolated in their own ghetto, interested in argument but no longer capable of or even interested in intervening in struggle.

Building an effective anarchist organisation is not something that can happen overnight. Even the initial formation of core politics takes a number of years. Then the process of winning people over to these politics and giving them the skills and knowledge required to play a full role in a revolutionary organisation takes a considerable amount of time. To maintain coherency and democracy the organisation can only grow slowly when small, even in ideal circumstances doubling perhaps every 6 months to a year. And in the course of that growth it is all too easy to lose sight of the goal and lapse into isolation, sectarianism and irrelevancy.

Even given the right theory, an organisation is dependant on the experience and commitment of its membership in order to put its ideas into practice and arrive at new sensible strategies. The commitment needed can only be maintained if the internal culture of an organisation is one in which debate is favoured and sectarianism is discouraged.

Obviously the political positions are also important but that discussion is beyond the scope of any one article. However it is possible to identify key areas of organisational practice that an anarchist organisation needs to be committed to in order to avoid the mistakes of the past, and grow in a consistent, coherent way. These are:

Theoretical and tactical unity

An organisation is strong only because it represents the collective efforts of many individuals. To maximise on this these efforts need to be completely collective, all members working towards a common goal with common tactics. This is not just in relation to revolution but in every area the organisation involves itself in. This has been called tactical unity.

Authoritarian organisations have tactical unity because commands are passed down from the leadership, unity only breaks down when disagreements arise within the leadership. These organisations may have a formal adherence to theoretical unity but usually this comprises of no more than the ability of the membership to repeat the utterings of the leadership⁹. This is not an option for anarchists, in order to achieve tactical unity there must be real theoretical unity. This requires unrelenting discussion, education and debate around all theoretical issues within the organisation with the goal of forging a set of clearly understood positions and the ability of all the membership to argue for and present new ones. Rather than parroting a party line there is needed an organisational understanding of how to see and interact with the rest of the world.

This practice not only gives the organisation real strength in its activities, but also gives it the ability to react in a crisis. The understanding developed and the experience of decision making are precisely the tools needed when it comes to aiding the creation of revolution and the establishment of a socialist society based on real democracy. The continuous interaction of the members with society brings the skills and practice of the organisation into the wider movement.

⁹ Although defeat at the hands of Franco's better equipped army, or by even stronger international intervention would have remained a possibility. There was little international support that could be called on. Obviously without spreading internationally the revolution could not have survived long.

We wish our ideas to lead, not because we have control of particular positions, but because of the superiority of our organisation's ideas.

Involvement in everyday life.

Too often revolutionaries see themselves as separate from and above everyday life. The working class is often talked of as a separate, foreign entity rather than the place where we live and interact on a daily basis. Activity is seen as the cart to be placed behind the horse of revolutionary theory. Some Marxists refer to this as a cornerstone of their organisation. They have expressed it as No revolutionary practice without revolutionary theory. Activity is thus seen at best, as the method by which new recruits are won¹⁰, at worst, something that is not as yet necessary.

If building a mass revolutionary organisation was simply a matter of having a good theory, perhaps there would be something in this approach, at least for authoritarian socialists. A few learned types go up the mountain for some years to consult the written word of the gods of socialism. They interpret this as a creed for new times, carve it in stone and return to the assembled masses on the plains below, ready to lead them to the promised land. This is still a popular approach to revolutionary organisation at the moment.

But a quick look at the history of the left demonstrates that the mass organisations have not been those with the best theory but those most able to interact with the mass of the population. The strength of Maoism or the Sandanistas to name two once popular movements, was hardly in their theoretical clarity. Rather it was in their ability to interact with a sizeable section of the population, despite the weakness of their political understanding.

Anarchists need to root their politics firmly in actual struggle, at whatever level it is occurring. Through this involvement, as serious activists, respect can be gained and so an audience won among the real 'vanguard', those actually involved in fighting at some level against the system. Theory, as far as possible, must be taken from experiences of struggle and tested by that experience. It must be presented so that it gains a wider and wider influence within the major movement.

Commitment

Too often anarchist groups are composed of a small core of people who do the vast bulk of the work and financing of the organisation and a much larger periphery who avoid this commitment. This is unacceptable and a recipe for disaster. Revolutionary organisations require a large commitment in both money and time if they are to grow. All individuals involved must be willing to make this commitment, there is little room for hobbyists.

The left is coming through a bleak time, one of defeat and retreat stretching back over a decade. It is all too easy to become demoralised. But it is part of a price that has to be paid for a century of following a variety of dead ends. The left may be largely comatose for the moment but the force that created it is as active as ever. Capitalism is incapable of fulfilling the needs of the people of the world, and so long as it exists it will throw up oppositional forces. In Ireland, issues such as the X-case and the service charges demonstrate how people will be forced to fight back, although

¹⁰ *Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists.*

these are not offensives and should not be portrayed as such. In Mexico the EZLN rising on New Years day exposes the same force.

The question for us is how to avoid the mistakes of those activists who went before us. Anarchism is weak at the moment, but the possibility remains open to build the organisations and confidence in the class that are required to win change. Revolutionary opportunities will arise, the task is to build the skills and confidence needed to seize them, and that work starts today.

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Retrieved on January 1, 2005 from www.cat.org.au
This is meant to be a companion article to "The Left: Ashes to Phoenix"

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