

Anarchist Solidarity

An exchange between Lilly Sarnoff and Alexander Berkman

Alexander Berkman and Lilly Sarnoff

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[Headed paper] The Anarchist Red Cross

Re-organized 1922 / Y. Fearer Sec'y-Treas / c.o. Freie Arbeiter Stimme / 48 Canal Street, N.Y.C./
FOR THE RELIEF OF ANARCHISTS IN PRISONS THE WORLD OVER [end of letter heading]
37 Lee Avenue, Brooklyn, New York.

June 28, 1924.

Dear Comrade B.

I received your two letters with the Statement. I will try to send that 2nd Bulletin this week. I cannot now write of other various news, but there are a few vital things to be written so I'll write them now without more ado.

First, most of the news you write here, are already know[n] to us. We not merely know – but are already actually in touch with them – such as “Annie”.¹ We had already sent her money when your letter came. To that comrade who is to visit Solevetsky² we also had already sent some money – only a smaller amount than to you. So it seems we are in touch with the same people you are...

Of course you know our stand – (this is in re: the withdrawing of the Russian comrades from the Joint Committee). It has always been and is still against working jointly. That is the reason, as you well know, that we always stipulate when we send money, that it is to go solely for the Anarchists, so that the money should not go through the Joint Committee. Anarchists and Social Rev.³ cannot work together. That meeting for June 6th was never held. The Social Rev. were to have called it and didn't – as they do but little work – and this thing fell through as many other things. The F. A. S.⁴ wanted to go in to work with them on that meeting and they refused – and that shows too – their spirit of co-operation.

Now there is another important matter that it seems must be thrashed out well, before any other work can go on between you and us (A. R. C.) You know our work. You know that we are trying to raise money in all ways that we can and use it for the sole purpose of helping Anarchist prisoners. You know too that we are not one – or a few – but a group – a group, which could – with proper help and co-operation expand and grow so that other groups in different parts of the country could be formed and co-operate together with us. However, whether you realize it or not, and I don't suppose you really do – (that in why we are explaining this) – you are really, instead of aiding us – hindering our work. This is how that happens. You send out letters to different people all over the country with YOUR NAME only – quite ignoring our (A. R. C.) existence – and ask for help. You being well known, people, send money to you (through the F. A. S.). Now if in those letters you spoke of us – that we were doing this work – with you – if you referred them to us, saying that we would send the money to you, since we are an organized body, working expressly for the purpose of helping the prisoners, a much different and better result would be. Now people send in money direct to you – and if they think of the Red Cross at all, it may be perhaps to wonder what we do – since you are collecting money for that purpose. I've tried to make this as clear as I could, and I believe you understand. If the R. C and you are

¹ Annie: possibly Anya Levin. ‘Anya,’ like ‘Annie,’ is a diminutive of Anna or Anne. Anya Levin was arrested in Warsaw in February 1924 as she got off the train with a suitcase full of anarchist literature. She was sentenced to a substantial jail term in Poland.

² Russian prison islands in the White Sea

³ Socialist Revolutionaries

⁴ Fraye Arbeter Shtime [or Freie Arbeiter Stimme], New York Yiddish-language anarchist paper

to continue to co-operate we must do this on a co-operating basis from BOTH sides – that you must recognize us – publicly – in your letters, appeals, etc. as well as merely to receive money from us to send to people, many of whom we are already in touch with.

I am trying not to make the matter seem worse than it is. This is how I have been authorised to write by the group, and as I see it. It is not quite right that while we are trying in all ways to collect money, that you send in appeals and letters in your own name, as if we had no existence at all. If I could read Jewish [ie Yiddish] – I would cut out the clippings of the F.A.S. for you – to see how bad that is – A. R. C. announcing their regular meetings etc. – and money being sent direct to you printed in the same other another page. Perhaps some comrades will send these clippings to you – or I believe you must have that paper yourself – and can look it over.

Now please consider this thoroughly, Comrade B. – What you think and how you wish to act. We shall wait for your reply to consider what next steps to take. Of course if, comradely, you wished to cooperate with us we believe that both the Red Cross and the ‘treasury’ holding the money to go for our imprisoned comrades would improve greatly. But we can work it out more fully later. Now, we will wait to hear your reply to this.

Fraternally,
Lillie Sarnoff

[Berkman’s reply]

Berlin, July 22, 1924

Dear Comrade Sarnoff:

Your letter of June 28 (written by you in the name of your Group) and copies of the Bulletin #2 received. This reply is to you as well as to the comrades of the Red Cross.

You know my position in regard to aid of the revolutionists imprisoned in Russia. As I said in the Statement recently issued by myself and Mratchny,⁵ I do NOT consider aid to imprisoned revolutionists in the light of political work. It is not necessary here to repeat all that I said in the Statement, a copy of which I sent you.

To me, in this connection, supplying bread to a Maria Spiridonova (who is a Left S.R.)⁶ is just as imperative as to aid A. Baron, (who is an Anarchist).⁷ It is not a question of the political views of the prisoners. It is enough for me that they are sincere revolutionists.

Concerning your remark that we cannot work with Left S.R.s, I may tell you that we – at least I – could also not work together with many of the ANARCHISTS who are in the prisons of the Bolsheviki. Yet I am willing to help them, as prisoners. Among the Anarchists in prison are many Individualists, Stirnerians, Universalists, Gordinists (who are worse than crazy) etc., etc.⁸ Some

⁵ Mark Mratchny (1892–1975), exiled Russian anarchist involved in the prisoner solidarity efforts. See the interview with him in Paul Avrich’s *Anarchist Voices*.

⁶ Maria Spiridonova (1884–1941), one of the most important figures in the Left Socialist Revolutionary Party. She is discussed in Emma Goldman’s ‘Heroic women of the Russian Revolution’ www.katesharpleylibrary.net

⁷ Aron Baron (1891–1937), anarchist, returned to Russia from exile in the United States in mid-1917. Imprisoned and exiled from 1920 until his execution in 1937. A biography of him by Nick Heath is at www.katesharpleylibrary.net

⁸ Individualists, Stirnerians, Universalists, Gordinists. For more on the various stands see Paul Avrich’s *The Russian Anarchists*

among them pure cranks who did us more harm than good in the Revolution. Yet even YOU send help to ALL Anarchists, not asking what their particular views and opinions are. Some of these “Anarchists” cannot even be considered as Anarchists in OUR sense, yet we are willing to help ALL of them. I can assure you that as a revolutionist I felt nearer to Spirdionova, Kamkov, or Trutovsky⁹ (I know them all personally and spent many days with them in Moscow) than to some of these Individualists and Stirnerians whom you are willing – and justly – to regard as Anarchists. In short, I would help Sophia Perovskaya and Zheliabov in prison, the same as I would help Baron or Maier-Rubinchik.¹⁰ (If you really wanted to carry your view out logically, you should aid ONLY Anarchists-Communists in prison, for the Universalists, for instance, are as far from us as the Left S.R.s and perhaps even further in point of ideas).

As a matter of fact, the Anarchists in the prisons of Russia SHARE the things they receive with the Left SRs, and the latter do the same. Among revolutionists in prison political distinctions are abolished so far as food etc. is concerned. You will therefore realise how stupid it is of that fellow in the N.Y. Izvestia who asked me whether I would also “work with Denikin and Wrangel to aid their prisoners”. We are speaking of revolutionists in prison, not of counter-revolutionists. To me the Left SRs ARE revolutionists, even if I disagree with their political views.

Well, you are at liberty to have your own opinion on the matter. That is why I call myself an Anarchist, leaving others free to act and think as they believe best. But at the same time I claim the right for myself to act as I think proper under given circumstances.

Now, you surprise me when you speak of cooperation. I have not noticed any on your part. Two years ago, when I started to publish my pamphlets on Russia, which I considered important to spread the truth about the Bolsheviki, I appealed to you and you – the Group – promised to cooperate. I have never heard another word from you or the Group about it. It was the lack of cooperation in that work that forced me to suspend the series which was to consist of ten or twelve different pamphlets.

As to the money you sent, I merely served for you as a medium through which you forwarded funds to Russia. The cooperation was on MY side.

You speak of letters that I send out in MY OWN NAME to get help for Russia. I claim the right to do so, of course. But as a matter of fact, all such work is done by the Joint Committee and in its name. It is only occasionally, to some personal friend (whom I can reach better than the Committee) that I send a personal letter. Such cases are very rare, because all that I did long ago, when I stood alone in this work, immediately after I left Russia. Already in Riga I sent out the first appeal, almost 5 years ago. And that also was NOT in my own name, but was signed by Shapiro and E.G.¹¹ as well as by myself.

I know that some people and groups and money directly here instead of to you. For instance, Volin¹² and his Group often receive funds for Russia. Some are also received by the Joint Com-

⁹ Boris Kamkov (1885–1938) was a leader of the Left Socialist-Revolutionary Party, and took part in the first Soviet government. After 1918 he was frequently imprisoned and was shot in 1938.

Vladimir Trutovsky (1889–1937) was an organizer of the Left Socialist-Revolutionary Party in 1917, belonged to its central committee, and held a cabinet post in the first Soviet government in 1917–1918. He spent most of the 1920s–1930s in exile before being shot in 1937.

¹⁰ Sophia Perovskaya (1853–1881) and Andrei Ivanovich Zheliabov (1851–1881) were both members of the Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will). Maier-Rubinchik: Yefim Borisovich Rubinchik-Meier (1892–1938), was a Russian anarcho-syndicalist.

¹¹ Berkman Refers to Russian anarchists Alexander Schapiro (1882–1946) and Emma Goldman (1869–1940).

¹² Volin (Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eikhensbaum, 1882–1945), Russian anarchist.

mittee, also by Kater and often also by R.Rocker.¹³ Sometimes also funds are sent directly to me. For instance an Italian Group of Chicago sent some recently. Also I recently received funds from the Freie Arb. Stimme, (for Russia) which the Stimme received from some St. Louis comrades, whom I even don't know. Nor do I know the Italian Group in Chicago, etc. In other words, people send funds AS THEY PLEASE. Most of those people and groups probably don't even know of your existence, or some of them may prefer to send funds to others, not to you. Surely that is not my fault.

I personally am indifferent as to where and how people send help to Russia. I am only interested in seeing that our prisoners should receive aid. HOW and BY WHOM is just the same, just so that they get it.

This is about all there it to be said on the subject. I have explained my position to you, and I hope that you clearly understand it.

Fraternally,
A.B.

¹³ Fritz Kater (1861–1945) and Rudolf Rocker (1873–1958) were both German-born anarchists involved (from Berlin) in solidarity efforts with anarchists in Russia. A short biography of Kater by Nick Heath is at www.katesharpleylibrary.net

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1924

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