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Quiet Americans

What is the state of US and Canadian anarchism?

Anarchist Communist Federation

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1999

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archists who subscribe to the theory of “white-skin privilege”. These are challenging ideas, especially as BA is firmly in the class struggle mould, against cross-class alliances and against separatism. The libertarian municipalist agenda appears to be no more than a reformist strategy based on smaller political units than the state, and seems unlikely to strike any chord with the broader movement. The IWW, with a historical tradition to live up to, is the most consistent of the organisations and the only one capable of producing a regular paper, albeit without an overt anarchist agenda. Many class struggle anarchists, whether in the IWW or not, do refer to themselves as “wobbly” in recognition of the importance of radical workplace politics. A few anarchists, mostly in network organisations at present, seem interested in trying to work towards a new continent-wide federation, possibly based on anarchist communism, which is something the ACF would greatly welcome, though the foundation for this does not look at all steady. The ACF has a secretariat which is responsible for international contacts with anarchist groups and individuals. We welcome exchange of publications and ideas with anarchist organisations worldwide.

In the last year American anarchists have had the dissolving of Love and Rage, an upsurge in industrial action by workers, and continued state repression of members of Black Autonomy. So, what is going on, and what is the hope for anarchist organisation in America? In this article we attempt a round up of some of the current anarchist organisations in the United States and Canada, based both on contacts that the ACF has built in the last few years, and from anarchist press and internet sources.

Love and Rage

Bringing anarchists together on a continent wide basis in North America has always been an uphill struggle, never mind the formation of robust organisations such as federations, but the late 1980’s saw several convergences, firstly at the “Haymarket International Anarchist Gathering” in Chicago in 1986, followed by “Building the Movement Anarchist Gathering” in 1987 in Minneapolis, the “Anarchist Survival Gathering” in Toronto, Canada in 1988, and “Without Borders Anarchist Gathering” in San Francisco in 1989. Out of the Minneapolis gathering came an initiative known as the Mayday Network, involving several anarchist groups and the trotskyist Revolutionary Socialist League, some of who were embarking on a conversion to anarchism. At a subsequent conference in Chicago in November 1989, *Love and Rage* newspaper was launched, together with a new organisation with Statement of Principles, which become the Love and Rage network in 1991. Opponents from the beginning were wary of the involvement of the RSL, which in fact dissolved itself on the same weekend that L+R was founded, but the network was widely supported and groups not only in the US but also in Canada, Mexico and South America identified themselves with the network. L+R became the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation in 1993 in a attempt by some of the groups to

tighten up the loose network, resulting in the loss of some member groups. This point may be seen as the start of a decline — some features of this being uncritical support for the Zapatistas/ EZLN and a move away from anarchism as the key ideology. On the other hand, being a loose federation, and never really identifying itself as anarchist except in name, L+RRAF was pretty well open to all comers from the beginning and was happy to embrace a wide range of political views and religious beliefs. The situation came to a head publicly in June this year with the press release announcement,

“ [...] After more than 8 years of hard work, the Love and Rage Revolutionary Anarchist Federation voted to dissolve itself during a brief conference at Hunter College in New York City on Saturday, May 23, 1998. some participants in the conference spent the weekend laying the foundation for a new provisional organisation, the Fire By Night Organizing Committee. Members of another faction at the conference also announced their intention to launch a journal and a new organization. Neither of those projects has a name yet.”

The press release went on to explain the dissolution in terms of non-agreement on whether anarchism had all the answers to their problems, on the theory of “white-skin privilege” and about practical work. It appears that the FBNOC (who sent out the above release) have taken what they see as a general anti-authoritarian position, which is accommodating of Maoism and Marxism in addition to anarchism. Maoism especially is being taken up by non-Marxists in the USA, and is also finding its way into prisoner support organisations like ABCF and Jericho '98 (see below). Another faction is purported to be taking a class-based anarchist position, and producing a dis-

In addition to the above, there are the magazines such as the anarcho-primitivist *Fifth Estate*, *Anarchy*, radical newspaper *Slingshot*, and *Profane Existence* — “making punk a threat again” (note the latest news is *Profane Existence* wound up in October 1998) . There are also various council communist groupings who produce useful propaganda such as Collective Action Notes, Red and Black Notes, and The Poor the Bad and the Angry, and we have also had intermittent contact with Los Angeles Workers Voice, who are sympathetic to the Communist Workers Organisation in Britain.

Conclusions

What can we conclude about the American scene? The politics seem very broad without much consensus, neither between groups nor within the ‘networks of collectives’ that are the preferred organisational form at present. The few coordinated continent-wide events are limited to the aptly named “gatherings”, rather than something which is able to be taken forward organisationally. Some activists appear to see anarchism as only one strand of their politics and seem happy to embrace what we see as authoritarian ideas, but which they see only as a different type of anti-authoritarianism. This is a resistance to “ideological purity” amongst many American radicals, who as a result are more willing to accept general leftist ideas. This is somewhat different to Britain, where most activists still generally oppose any flavour of Marxism or Maoism, though support of national liberation struggles is still prevalent. On the other hand, local and regional activism is widely supported, for example against globalisation and capitalist trade agreements like MAI, something which may well find a resonance outside of the US. Race is also clearly a major issue, and European class struggle anarchists clearly need to understand how they are viewed by groups such as Black Autonomy and by other an-

has also organised a US speaking tour for Sam Mbah, member of the Awareness League in Nigeria and co-author of the book *African Anarchism*, published in 1997. He will speak in several cities during November 1998 to “enrich anarchism and anarchist principles with an African perspective, and help to carve a place for Africa with the framework of the worldwide anarchist movement”. Interestingly, the debates which occurred within the RSL shortly before their rejection of orthodox Trotskyism and involvement in the early Love and Rage, are also credited (in *African Anarchism*) with influencing the similar transformation in the Awareness League, which was formerly a leftist coalition but is now part of the IWA.

Libertarian Municipalists

Moving on to the libertarian municipalists, their 2nd International/Interpolis Conference is due to take place in the state of Vermont in August 27–29 1999. Hosted by the Institute of Social Ecology, billed as “The Politics of Social Ecology: Libertarian Municipalism — an anarchist agenda for the 21st Century”, and with Murray Bookchin expected to deliver the “keynote address”, it aims to build on the “theoretical framework” established at the first conference which took place in Lisbon, Portugal in August 1998, attended by 125 people. Though still academic in structure, delegates are asked to treat it as “a working conference [...] with the expectation of building a movement with others who share their commitment”, the stated aim of this movement being to build parallel institutional powers, via citizens assemblies, either by participation in local elections or by extra-legal means. The idea of social revolution would eventually be to take power in these municipalities. This reformist approach has already been strongly attacked by the IWA as being no more than replication of the bourgeois state, typified by Bookchin’s “ignoring of the meaning of workers’ struggle”.

cussion forum document entitled *Towards a fresh revolutionary anarchist group* but in spite of attempts to contact them at their Detroit address we have been unable to verify this (Note: this has now appeared on-line). According to the FB-NOC press release, this other faction calls for “a federation of collectives united around firm anarchist/anti-authoritarian politics and outlook, oriented to the working classes and most oppressed, and active in building Anti-Racist Action as an anti-authoritarian mass movement”. FBNOG criticise their sacrificing of practice and mass organising to ideological purity. It’s probably fair to say that for all its faults, most American anarchists were sad to see the end of L+R. One point in its favour was its managing to publish in both English and Spanish (though the *Mexican Amor y Rabia* group) and so reach a wider readership (and we have also found some on-line literature in Italian).

National Initiative

Around the time of the formation of L+RRAF, another national initiative was launched. The Network of Anarchist Collectives was to be a “facility for resource sharing, mutual aid, and communication” amongst anarchist collectives in US and Canada. From the outset, there were disagreements over whether the network should be restricted to “anarchist” collectives and even over what a collective should be; an agitational group trying to smash the state, or just a self-organised group of some kind? In spite of these broad disagreements, a mission statement and member policy were eventually formed, but then only three groups wanted to join: the Chicago A-Zone, Critical Mass Media (Syracuse) and the Toledo (Ohio) A-Zone.

NAC produced several issues of a magazine (*Dis*)*Connection*, and organised a few gatherings. The network is no longer op-

erating as such, though *(Dis)Connection* is soon to be restarted by some of the original members.

One other recent loss was the Demanarchie group in Quebec, Canada in March, which previously translated ACF pamphlets into French. Members of the group have since met with other Quebec anarchists to discuss the formation of a new organisation though we are waiting to hear the outcome. (we are now pleased to hear they have resurfaced as a new group, Emile Henry).

On a happier note, a New England anarchist-communist federation may be in the making. Boston-based *We Dare Be Free* newspaper was launched in the Spring 1998 and the authors are keen to promote class struggle politics on the East Coast. They have also begun an International Solidarity Campaign to support international anarchist struggles, notably against the repression of Italian anarchists, and literature distribution by Insurrection Mailorder. As well as covering news, the editors of *We Dare Be Free* have reprinted texts by Bakunin and Malatesta, which has also been the approach of a smaller local project by the Anarchist Voice of Cambridge. These and other anarchists along the East Coast (from Virginia up to Montreal, Canada) are attempting a wider linkage “in the spirit of NAC” by means of the Atlantic Anarchist Circle.

Active Resistance

In 1996 a new series of gatherings was begun under the name Active Resistance, “an anarchist gathering of organizers and activists to share and discuss strategies and tactics to build and support radical left movements against capitalism and the state”. The first AR continental conference was in Chicago in August 1996 which was attended by 750 people, the second in Toronto in August 1998. AR98 was hosted by Toronto Anarchists with some help from regional contacts. The 7 day

US Earth First and some members of IWW are supporters of the Food Not Bombs organisation which distributes free vegetarian food to the destitute. The more politically orientated *journal Libertarian Labor Review* — “Anarchosyndicalist Ideas and Discussion” presents an approach in favour of building the One Big Union in the USA, and has recently reported on a debate within the IWW (first printed in Australian magazine of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Network, *Rebel Worker*) about whether or not activities like Food Not Bombs are too marginal and detract from the main task of building unions. Certainly the FNB campaign is part of the wider ‘movement’ such as it exists, and has supporters who do not have class struggle politics.

Workers Solidarity Alliance

The American section of the IWA is known as the Workers Solidarity Alliance. Unlike the IWW, the WSA-IWA is not a union, but more like the Solidarity Federation in Britain, it is a propaganda organisation promoting anarcho-syndicalism, and supports workers struggles. Its most recent continental initiative is the I99 International Solidarity Conference which will be taking place in San Francisco on 1–5 June 1999. The conference will aim to bring together union activists under the banner “The working class and employing class have nothing in common, the working class should take over the economy, and the working class must organise into unions to fight the capitalist class”. Subjects for discussion are the stopping of factionalisation, combating the World Bank, connecting workers issues with those of the environment and poverty, and exploration of alternative forms of organising and cooperation. At its annual conference the IWW also endorsed the I-99 conference, which may strengthen links between the two organisations, which already exist especially in San Francisco itself. The WSA-IWA

highlighting the precariousness of his and BA's position, and their continued need for international solidarity.

The Wobblies

So far we have not considered the labour movement organisations. The largest of these, the Industrial Workers of the World, is currently experiencing a boom in membership (now several hundreds), which is indicative of a growth in industrial action by US workers in general over the last few years. Their monthly paper *Industrial Worker* reported in its October 1998 issue on the IWW General Assembly which was attended by 87 members, the largest meeting for many decades. General Secretary-Treasurer Fred Chase reported a more than doubling of membership since 1995 and an increase of one third in the last year alone. The assembly identified organising strategy as a key issue, especially as international sections are growing. The USA has seen some large scale industrial actions over the last couple of years, including a national strike of United Parcel Services workers, a plant shutdown at General Motors, construction workers striking and fighting police in New York City and a walkout/lockout at Detroit News and Free Press. Although much of the action was supported and orchestrated by the Teamsters, some of it has had a rank-and-file flavour, which has undoubtedly given a boost to organisations like the IWW, who have also taken the opportunity to critique the 'business unions'. Parallels between the US and UK are also apparent especially over privatisation of transport and welfare, and against casualisation. The IWW was extremely supportive of the Liverpool Dockers and is benefiting from strengthened international links as a result. Whilst the IWW is revolutionary syndicalist in a general sense and deliberately avoids ties with specific ideological groups, anarchism remains a strong current within it. It also has a loose linkage with the

event, which attracted 600–800 people, was mainly attended by “young punks/young people [...] aspiring towards anarchism”, though members of IWW and members of the AAC and other networks were also present. Part of the event involved a conference (not unlike Bradford Mayday 98) with 4 schools/core groups; “Building Revolutionary Movements, Art and Revolution, Community Organising, and Alternative Economics”. The AR98 organisers are due to produce a “zine” to bring together views and feedback about the event, but already one criticism has been that the groups were unable to discuss things in much depth since so many were coming across ideas for the first time. Informally however, links between organised anarchists are said to have been strengthened. Another view is that whilst events like AR98 are significant as gatherings, they are not as important to many people as local and regional actions, although the event as a whole has given people “energy, inspiration and ideas”. The next AR gathering is due to happen in Texas, early in 1999.

Another new initiative is calling itself the Heatwave communist-anarchist federation, which is based in Forth Worth/Dallas. Heatwave is calling for people to set up “Heatwave collectives” in other parts of the US, but apart from an internet web-site, we do not know much about them.

Prisoner Support

We have previously referred to the prisoner support organisations. One in particular, Raze The Walls! deserves a special mention, as the ACF has had good links with its members for quite some time. Unfortunately, RTW! Network dissolved in October 1997 over a messy disagreement over the support or otherwise of a prisoner, but the Georgia group maintained the name RTW! and in conjunction with Florida based Orlando Anarchist Black Cross-Support Group, they recently expanded

their remit to general issues by the launch of the magazine RTW! Quarterly at the end of 1997. The first issue reprinted Working Class Times, seemingly unaware of the rows carrying on in the UK between its authors and Class War (note, this is the old federation — CWF has been continued/relaunched by some of its ex-members) over the issue of whether there is a ruling class or just a middle class, but the second carried a consolidation of their own class based anarchist position. The discussion of class politics in the US in prisoner support circles must be seen in a positive light. However, even here the question of Maoism has raised its ugly head, with a report by Orlando in the April 1998 ABCF Update #19 about their meeting of the recently bailed former Black Panther Party leader Geronimo jija Pratt (who advocates the setting up of Black Militias) at the Jericho '98 prisoner support march in Washington DC. The report said, "Geronimo also added [...] that we should engage in ideological struggle based on the guidelines set forward by the late Mao-Tse Tung. We are in total agreement with this. The fact that Mao was not an anarchist means little to nothing to us, his theories on combating liberalism have been tested in practice and we feel it would be incorrect for us to not to integrate this in our practice. We also think its incorrect for people to refuse to learn from Mao because he wasn't an anarchist, while at the same time learning from the wisdom of Political Prisoners/Prisoners Of War who by and large are not anarchists". This statement is typical of the ideological mish-mash which we are hearing from the USA.

Black Autonomy

Black Autonomy Collective/Black Autonomy International is an anarchist influenced organisation based in Seattle, and produce the paper *Black Autonomy* edited by ex-BPP member Lorenzo Komboa Ervin. In their statement "Anarchism + Black

Revolution = New Black Autonomous Politics" printed in the Aug-Sept 1997 issue of the paper, the BAC attempted to reconcile class-struggle anarchism with the "super-oppression" of people of color, and a rejection of the "race nationalism" of black nationalism whilst "sharing many basic ideas with them". They continue, "So-called "white" people are a super-contrived nationality designed to help the capitalists keep the workers of color in their place and safeguard the status quo. So rather than see the "white" industrial working class as a potentially revolutionary class, instead we see it as an opportunistic, collaborationist body which must be redefined and reorganized if it is to constitute a reliable ally and have any ability of fighting in its own interest." Like the Black Panthers before it, BA believe in the turning of working class communities into dual power communes to enable a protracted struggle with capitalism. Though they criticise "euro-centric" anarchism, Black Autonomy, through Ervin, have attempted to make links with anarchists internationally by a series of speaking tours in Europe, and also in Australia where he was locked up and nearly deported for remarks made on TV. Back in the States, BA continue to involve themselves in promoting the "Copwatch" program, which patrols and documents police racism, and aims to try and prevent killings (by presence of cameras), to obtain releases from arrest, and to aid court cases. Most recently Ervin and 2 other BA members were arrested in May 1998 during a Copwatch protest in Chattanooga Tennessee, over 2 separate killings of black men by cops within one week. They blamed their arrests on a sell-out by the "Nation of Islam, NAACP, Black preachers and Operation PUSH, who made a secret deal with the cops and politicians". The Chattanooga 3 now face 6 months prison or a \$2000 fine, but Ervin has only just escaped sentencing under the Tennessee "3 Strikes and you're out" statute which would have meant an automatic prison sentence up to 5 years,